All That Floats by Nishant Batsha

**DEVANAND SIMON** was twenty-five years old when the bodies fell from the sky. But that was weeks away. For now, he stood in the shade of the Beaumont Pavilion’s flattop awning, a few undergrads sitting on the Pavilion’s steps nearby, chatting, smoking, and talking among themselves. Devanand held a lit Camel between his fingers, its smoke floating back toward the math department. He took a puff and exhaled. His eyes followed the undergraduates as they got up and cut across the Brookings Quad, all moving as if their backpacks were burdened with extra weight, their shoulders slouched and their hips lacking any sway. All along the campus’s pathways the delicate pink-and-white cups of tulips stood open to breathe in the cool air, but blooming tulips could only mean one thing: the end of the academic year and the trials of final exams.

At the edge of this scene stood Devanand. He wore a white polo shirt and a black leather jacket with a pair of what once were blue stonewashed Levi’s that had achieved a uniform pale from too many washings—an outfit that had less to do with style and more with a set of clothes he wore out of daily routine. On his feet were a pair of white Adidas with black stripes, their bottoms ringed with brown from being worn around the city. His hair was tousled and uncombed, and his face clean-shaven but for the trimmed moustache that stretched just under his thin nose.

It was the end of April, but the temperature still held fast to memories of March. After two years in this city, Devanand had gotten used to the unpredictable climate. Someone once told him that St. Louis was a Southern city with a Northern exposure. He liked that: it was a tidy way of explaining both the city’s racial politics and its weather. Someone else said that it was the westernmost Eastern city. He liked that too, but had never been back East to confirm the correctness of the observation. Most people, he learned, simply called the city Midwestern. Those who came from the American coasts spat out the word, though he couldn’t quite grasp this vehement dislike.

He took another puff and felt the lightness and ease of completion. He had finished his exams a full day before his friends. With no intentions of going on to the PhD program, he only had to complete two of the four comprehensive exams to receive his MA. Two exams were more than enough. Their mixture of complex and functional analysis, multilinear algebra, and differential geometry had taken him nearly six hours to complete.

It was too bad, he thought, that his friends Richard and Xiaobo had to take another exam covering more of the material the next day. He would have loved it if the three of them could have gone over to the Loop and had a Budweiser at Blueberry Hill.

Tomorrow, he told himself. Tomorrow.

There would be plenty of celebration soon. And then there would be graduation. And then there would be a job. He hadn’t planned on staying in America after his MA, but he hadn’t ruled it out. The country was so big, and he’d only seen a small part of it.

He had been curious about California. The tech boom had sent a handful of his classmates—both in India and in St. Louis—to Silicon Valley to work for all sorts of semiconductor companies. He had received a few job offers after applying for a handful of positions, and now he was going to work for TechTel. The Mountain View–based semiconductor company was one of Silicon Valley’s largest and most profitable ventures. He’d be working with a team of mathematicians and electrical engineers to optimize semiconductor chipset design and manufacture. The mathematical challenge seemed exciting—what had started as a childhood fascination had now given him a job across the world.

Devanand was seven when he discovered his love of mathematics. Back then his mother neatly combed his silky black hair to the left, and he wore a school uniform of crisp navy half pants and a white collared shirt. He sat at his desk in the middle of his classroom, close to the window that looked out onto the school’s interior courtyard.

In front of the chalkboard stood a man who had failed his civil service exams and, without hope or prospect, went on to teach at the all-boys St. Senan’s School. The teacher, with his sunken eyes and inability to make small talk, had benefited from the largesse of his uncle, who happened to be the school’s headmaster. The teacher’s explanations were circuitous and meandering, and the only part of teaching he seemed to enjoy was instilling discipline by forcing unruly students to come to the front of the class, where he would hit the backs of their knuckles with his cedar ruler.

“First comes zero,” the teacher said, as he tried to explain the basics of addition. He stood facing the chalkboard and circled a large zero. “After zero comes,” his voice trailed off as he waited for an answer from his class.

Silence.

He turned around, red edging into his cheeks. “After zero comes!” he yelled.

“ONE!” the class yelled back.

He turned back around. “Yes, after zero comes one,” he said, his voice once again calm and collected.

He drew a plus sign next to the zero. Again, without turning around, he said, “Zero plus one equals one.” Next to the plus sign, he drew the number one, an equal sign, and another number one.

He continued on without stopping, drawing more numbers and symbols on the board. “Zero plus one equals one. One plus one equals two. Two plus two equals four. Four plus four equals eight.”

While the other boys looked out the window or doodled in the margins of their notebook, Devanand stared off into the distance, his eyes unfocused as they tried to scan the infinite number line. His mind was no longer in the dusty expanse of Delhi. The sounds of the bustle of the road that led up to Connaught Place no longer made up the din of background noise. All that existed were the numbers that kept going like the end of a prayer: forever and ever, amen.

He was soon brought back from infinity by his teacher rapping his ruler against Devanand’s desk.

“Daydreaming, again!” he yelled.

Still in the shock of his vision, he said nothing as the teacher led him by the collar to the front of the classroom to rap his knuckles with the cedar ruler. He barely felt the stinging pain on the backs of his hands, but instead stood there trying to figure out what he had seen. The world seemed to be saying to him: Here’s how it all works. He would never grow bored of the beauty of a never-ending number line. He relished it as a child and later found its pleasures elsewhere, such as in Euclid’s prime number theorem.

And math had been an easy way for a young and growing boy to best others. This desire was the result of an unfortunate holdover from British rule in the subcontinent: Indian education was more or less a competition to see who could memorize the most and apply that rote learning to test after test after test.

Devanand was able to come in first in some of these competitions, second in some, and third in others. He applied himself in mathematics and let himself slide, if only to seventh or eighth place, in his other subjects. This meant that he was never bound for the prestigious powder kegs of the Indian Institutes of Technology, but instead to the family alma mater: St. Stephen’s College at Delhi University. From there he kept on until he received a partial scholarship for a degree in applied mathematics at the Washington University in St. Louis. To Devanand, as to most of his classmates, America was unbelievably far away and filled with wealth and glamour—who wouldn’t want to go?

Now he would be moving out to California by the end of June. TechTel would pay for all his moving expenses. He saw himself spending one or two years out in California, at which point he imagined himself satisfied with the glitz and homesick enough to move back to Delhi. He smiled at the thought as he dropped the butt of his cigarette, stamping it out with a twist of his right foot.

He turned and walked across the Brookings Quad, where the hurried conversations of deadlines, papers, and exams fluttered by like hummingbirds. He then walked under a large Gothic archway reinforced with stone and lined in its interior with thin vaulting. The archway sat atop forty steps that led down to a long driveway that greeted all those who came to the campus.

He walked down the steps to the driveway and finally turned right onto Skinker Boulevard. As he walked down the street, the whoosh of cars rushing home to the suburbs of Clayton and Richmond Heights rustled through his hair. Across the street was Forest Park’s golf course. It would have been a fine evening to walk through the park: he could have gone up Art Hill and looked out over the rectangular lake with its fountain jets of water, the winding driveways and footpaths that abutted the lake, and the mismatched architecture of the mansions along the park’s north end.

First he wanted to relax and recover from the day with an evening cup of chai in his apartment. His walk home was only a thousand yards, but he rarely saw any other pedestrians—he always felt like no one took to the sidewalks in this city, and when he did see another walker, it felt like a wonderful surprise, something that had to be recognized with a smile and a silent nod to the other.

Devanand turned right onto Northwood. His apartment was a ground-floor studio in a three-story red-brick building with two small wings and a front door in the center. He had rented the studio sight unseen, just after he had been accepted into the program. The apartment had passed from MA student to MA student in the math department for at least the past ten years.

The furniture was passed on from tenant to tenant as well, each successor adding and subtracting items. By the time it was Devanand’s turn, the apartment featured a nightstand, bed, and futon couch. From other students, he purchased a folding card table with a gray fake-leather top (this doubled as the dining table), three honey-brown wooden folding chairs, a seven-inch television with a rabbit-ear antenna, and a digital clock radio.

After he got home and had his chai, he microwaved a shrimp Cup O’ Noodles. No one in Devanand’s family had been particularly fond of cooking. Back at home, his mother had relied on their housemaid, Dulari, to make most of the family’s meals.

In St. Louis Devanand painstakingly taught himself to cook by trying to reverse engineer the memories of Dulari’s meals. What came out was chewy rice, watery dal, and half-fried aloo and gobi. When the problem sets or exams became overwhelming, Devanand couldn’t help but retreat to the speed and ease of instant noodles—an entire meal in a cup. He even found the purchasing experience strangely comforting, from the fluorescent lights of the convenience store to the unchanging and always fully stocked shelves on which the instant noodles sat, to the bell that rang on the door every time someone walked in. Initially it all seemed so foreign—the anonymous corner store lacked the busybody familiarity of a general store in an Indian bazaar—but Devanand soon relaxed into the experience.

He opened his silverware drawer and pulled out a fork. Everything was always in its right place in his apartment, for when the stress of a deadline came, so too came the urge to procrastinate by organizing and putting things proper.

He sat at his table, next to a pile of pages upon pages of problem sets covered with scribbled notes. He wrapped the noodles around his fork and, when finished, held the cup up to his mouth to drink the salty broth. He threw the Styrofoam cup into his trash can and washed the fork before putting it into the dish rack.

It seemed less and less likely that he was going to take a walk to the park. Like a gambler convinced he can play just one round of blackjack, he thought he would lie down for only a minute.

The telephone woke him up at eleven in the evening. He rubbed the sleep and grogginess out of his eyes as he hustled across the studio to the telephone on the wall in the kitchen. He was still in the clothes he had worn that day.

“Hello! Devanand!” It was his mother, her voice straining to reach him through international telephone wires.

“Hi Ma,” he said, sleep escaping from his mouth.

“Were you sleeping?” she asked, a city morning filtering through the receiver from an open window behind her. The ring-ring of bicycle bells and the sharp beeps of auto rickshaws competed with the lilt of the paper wallahs and fruit wallahs selling their wares up and down the street. The sounds outside Devanand’s apartment were simply those of restless crickets. That the sounds of a city stretching its morning legs could travel the circumference of the world to reach his ear seemed wonderful.

“Just for a little bit, Ma.”

“Did you forget we were going to call you?” Her voice was now competing with the clanging of metal milk cans from the milkman on his bike. “How did your exams go?”

“Good. They went well. I’m done!” he replied, waking up a bit, his eyes losing their squint at the chance to share his day.

“Congratulations, beta!” she yelled into the receiver.

“Kya hai?” a deeper voice asked in the background.

“His exams went well!”

Then the receiver had been handed to his father. “Congratulations, beta! Shabash!”

“Thank you, thank you, but I don’t know if I passed them yet,” he said, though the boyish grin on his face said otherwise.

“Of course you passed them. Why wouldn’t you pass them? What’s next?”

“Just the graduation.”

“Well done! Master’s degree at twenty-five. Best never to drag out what’s on a deadline. My first editor told me that. Obvious advice, but always good to take.”

Devanand wrapped the curled telephone cord around his fingers and said nothing, forgetting that his smile did not transmit through the wires.

“God bless you, beta,” his father said, pausing before adding, “The travel agent finalized all of our plans yesterday.”

“Great! You arrive here on tenth May?”

“No, beta, eleventh May. Your graduation date is fourteenth May, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good, good.”

“How are you flying here?”

“We fly to London, London to Montreal. Montreal to St. Louis. Same way back, but we will be staying in Montreal for a few days.”

“Montreal? Canada? Why?”

“Things have cooled enough since the assassination that people are curious again about Khalistan. Well, they don’t want to know anything about the Khalistan movement—no one has the appetite to experience last October again. Dear God, Devanand, you were lucky to miss that. The night everything burned in this city.

“They seem to want to know about other Khalistans. Since I was flying out for your graduation, the Sunday magazine editor asked me to make a stop in Canada to get some of the reporting done on the old separatist movement in Quebec. They’re paying for all the flights. But I had to force the cheap bastards to pay for your mother and brother.”

“Wow, international reporting.”

“I’m happy to make the leap from covering MPs. This is a big joint-effort article. I’m doing some of the reporting and interviews. All those French classes back in my university days are finally proving useful. Not too many people on staff can parlez-vous français.”

“I always forget that you know French.”

“When I took the classes in college, I thought it would set me apart as a journalist. Little did I know that it would just make me *Le Monde’*s chief Delhi fixer.”

Devanand laughed automatically at a familiar story. “Everything set with the visas?”

“Yes, all set. No problem, everything was approved and we have the papers.”

“Good,” Devanand said, adding a reflexive, “Thank God.”

“Okay, beta, I have to go. Back to work. All this Chakravarty Committee nonsense is giving me a headache. What do I know about flexible interest rates? And yet, I have to ask these imbeciles in Parliament about their opinions. God bless you. Your mother wants to talk with you again.” The muffled sounds of a receiver handover were heard again.

“Hello?”

“Ma?”

“So when are you bringing home a blonde bahu for me? Will she be at your graduation?”

“Ma!”

“No blonde bahu? None in America?”

“No, not a single one over here,” he said, eyes rolling. “I’ll have to find one back in India.”

“Wait too long, and I will have to find one for you!”

“Hmm, hmm, that’s fine. I trust your opinion.”

“Areeey! If that’s the case, I’ll bring a few snaps with me to show you.”

“Okay, Ma,” he said, rolling his eyes again.

“Are you eating well?”

He looked at his trash can.

“Yes.”

“Not drinking too much?”

“No.” Celebration drinks were to be the next day.

“Your ma can always tell when you’re lying.”

He laughed.

“No laughing! If you can’t take care of yourself, find a good Christian girl who will.”

“By next week?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, Ma. I’ll meet you next week at the airport.”

“Yes, God bless you, beta.”

He laughed to himself as he put the phone down. When had marriage become a priority? When had a Christian anything become a priority? Devanand’s family had been Christian enough for Sunday school, church-affiliated private school, and services on Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter, but heaven forbid any of those conflicted with his mother’s book club.

He was raised a Nasrani, a Saint Thomas Christian, with a family that originally hailed from Kerala but were really from Delhi, the type that knew more English and Hindi than Malayalam. Both his mother’s and father’s families had lived in Delhi since well before partition, before the Muslims were replaced by the Punjabis, before the administrative city was transformed into a teeming metropolis. They were the type of people who made a living from manipulating words: newspaper editors, magazine-article writers, journalists, and lawyers.

His father, Iyob, had been an only child. To Devanand’s grandparents his father’s birth felt like nothing less than a manifestation of grace—a rainfall after years of the drought of childlessness. He had been named after the Book of Job, after the man whose faith persisted through doubt and suffering. Now, though he stood at six feet tall, he had the stooped back and permanently anxious look of a journalist.

His mother, Mariam, had four siblings and grew up in the posh confines of the Defence Colony neighborhood. A little over five feet tall and wisp thin, she could have easily been mistaken for part of the background had she not always been able to command attention with her voice, deep and with a raspy scratch, a sound that left her body seemingly disconnected from her size and shape. Banter came easily to her, gentle ribbings came easier, and the hum of a song was never far from her lips.

Iyob worked as a journalist on the national politics beat at the *Times* and Mariam stayed at home. She had once worked for Avaaz, a small women’s-empowerment outfit that organized women in Delhi’s expanding slums. She visited those slums weekly until Devanand was born. Then she moved to the administrative side of the organization. She left that a few years later when his brother, Dhaaniel, was born, leaving her more and more enmeshed in a life as defined by her four walls, her book club, and her friends.

Devanand’s upbringing was one of ease. He was born and raised in Delhi, near the Yamuna River in the Civil Lines neighborhood. When he discovered his love of mathematics, he discovered too that all he had to do was show up and his talents would be nurtured. Money never seemed to be an issue, and if it were, the family had the only thing more valuable than money: connections. They knew who to ask for what and where to go to apply for *x, y,* or *z* scholarship.

In return, Devanand and his brother, Dhaaniel, were good children. They listened to their parents, did their homework, and reluctantly ate their vegetables. Their parents encouraged them, quietly disciplined them when necessary, listened to them, and made time for them.

It was a balanced equation: Devanand’s family loved each other in a measure so equal that there were no remainders. Their distribution of kindness and togetherness left no deviations from the norm. Theirs was a happy family, so similar to all the world’s other happy families. Were they ever to graph their lives, there would be small changes in amplitude here and there, but when viewed as a totality, the curve would look so stable and gentle that it would have an air of unreality about it, as if it were drawn by a machine and not plotted by the course of human life.

From a stable life came a stable mind. And from a stable mind came a love of mathematics rooted in an appreciation of its beauty, its foundation in order, and its ability to reflect a universe of theorems ready to be discovered and understood.

For now, though, he had to busy himself with something other than his own work or education. His family’s arrival was around the corner.

**The days before** his parents arrived were a blur of bleach, Pine-Sol, large black garbage bags, broom, and mop. Though the apartment was tidy, Devanand thought it necessary to tackle the invisible filth that stuck to the surfaces. Everything was to be cleaned, from the tile around the toilet to the thick tumbleweeds of dust under the futon couch and bed.

When he attempted to sweep up the collected detritus of graduate school, the breeze from the open street-facing window moved his piles just beyond the reach of the dustpan. Using the broom became a Sisyphean act: squat down to sweep into the dustpan, shuffle mid-squat to sweep some more, shuffle again, until the dust ended up underneath the fridge. The same breeze wafted in through the May air, mixing with the antiseptic odor emanating from every corner of his studio. It smelled like spring.

When the day finally came to pick up his family, he took an afternoon bus downtown to catch another one to head north to the airport. As the planes landed and took off, he thought briefly how airline deregulation reduced airports to the bare-bones concepts of mathematics. Airports were simply minimum spanning trees regulating efficient hub-and-spoke systems. As it got closer to the time of arrival, his eyes focused on the activity out on the tarmac.

Small tram-like cars linked behind a tractor ferried luggage to baggage claim. Each car on the luggage tram was curtained, as if the suitcases desired a modicum of privacy. Soon three men appeared, each with large yellow ear protectors over their ears and red batons in their hands.

The flight was scheduled to land at 2:35. And before he knew it, there it was, a TWA Boeing 767 driving toward the gate, guided by the men with their batons. It edged forward until the man crossed his batons in an *X.*

He leapt up. His heart felt as if it were attempting to mount an escape through his mouth. He smoothed out any creases in his jeans. He had dressed up as best as he could for the occasion: a tucked-in white button-down oxford, a pair of black Levi’s, and black penny loafers. He ran his hand over his hair to make sure it was still neatly combed to the right.

Devanand scanned each exiting face until he found his people. They came out of the plane in a row: father, mother, brother. He had but a moment before they saw him, but in it he finally grasped the weight of two years.

Did his father seem more hunched over? Was that extra gray in his hair? There seemed to be something else about him. Still, he exuded a confidence: he walked with his hands folded behind his back, and his dark eyes, wrinkles at their edges, seemed clear. He had about him the pride of a father who hadn’t imagined the life his son made, and now he had nothing more to do than to take credit for what came from his son’s accomplishments.

Out from the gate came his mother. His mother! She seemed shorter, skinnier, frailer—or did she always look like that? Devanand couldn’t quite remember what she’d looked like before he left India. It was as if her appearance at that moment of arrival had a kind of finality—how could she have ever looked any different?

And finally came his brother—now a man! Devanand barely recognized him. Gone was the boyish impishness he saw two years ago. His brother now seemed to walk tall, with broad shoulders. He had grown three inches taller and even had a face now complete with moustache.

His mother was the first to speak. “Devanand!” she yelled. In an instant all three looked toward him. They sized him up. From their quick up-and-down came the answers to the mysteries of what could not be explained in phone calls or letters: he too had grown, he too had changed—gone were the slouched shoulders and unsteady gaze. He seemed to have little flecks of gray in his hair. He seemed to have lost weight in his face and gained (a little) in his stomach.

“Ma!” he yelled back, walking over to embrace her.

“Beta, you’ve lost weight,” she said to him with a mother’s reflexivity. She put a hand on his cheek and smiled.

He could have said the same to her but didn’t.

“The master himself,” his brother exclaimed. “Or did you fail?”

Devanand turned to shake his head at his brother and give him a wry smile. Though he had grown physically, he was still the smartass he remembered. “No, Dhaan, I passed,” he said, rolling his eyes.

This is how Devanand would remember his graduation: a time of near-perfect calm. The world receded into the background, and what was left was undiluted respite. Over time the memory would mutate into a simulacrum—something that on its surface looked real, but in reality was a grotesquerie that had all of its qualities effaced in its transformation. The memory would become words without meaning: perfection, peace, love.

**The Simon family** toured St. Louis in four days. They stopped by Devanand’s apartment, where he caught his mother’s eye staring approvingly at the crucifix. She had purchased a guidebook on the American Midwest, special ordered to a bookstore in Delhi’s Khan Market. Iyob had rented a car at the airport to take the family around the city.

Each stop on their journey through St. Louis was catalogued by a photograph taken by Dhaaniel, who used a Nikon SLR that hung from his neck. Unlike Devanand, he had diverted only a few feet from the family tradition—in lieu of manipulating words, he manipulated images. The SLR had been a gift from his father after he too was accepted into Delhi University’s St. Stephen’s College. Dhaaniel would later give the used roll to Devanand before the family left, for fear that the airport’s X-rays would expose the film.

Photograph one: His mother, father, and brother tucked under the mesmerizing simplicity of the Gateway Arch.

Photograph two: The family squeezed together on a thin cobblestone pathway in the Missouri Botanical Garden, flanked on both sides by a line of apple trees surrounded by brilliantly red, coral, and white peonies in full blossom.

Photograph three: Devanand’s mother, Mariam, standing next to the large rump of a Budweiser Clydesdale at Grant’s Farm, her slight frame seeming minuscule compared with the horse’s musculature.

Photograph four: Iyob, Mariam, and Dhaan in the nosebleed section at a Cardinals baseball game, each wearing an expression of disbelief at how Americans had taken all the joy out of cricket.

Photograph five: Devanand’s father in the divine pleasure of biting into a freshly fried glazed doughnut from a small shack, “World’s Fair Donuts,” near the Botanical Garden.

Then came the days of pomp and circumstance. On Thursday, in the gym, his name was called out and mispronounced, and he walked across the stage to shake the hand of an unknown dean who had on his face a look of smug self-satisfaction, as if he were the one responsible for Devanand’s success. The next day came the whole university ceremony in the Brookings Quad. The exercise seemed stilted and forced: the professors and deans with their green doctoral robes, someone who called himself the grand marshal introducing the day as the 124th commencement exercises. Richard, Xiaobo, and Devanand sat together with the other MA students and rolled their eyes at every opportunity.

And a few days after the degrees were handed out came his family’s departure. The visit, like all such visits, felt rushed and incomplete. At the airport, tears began to well in his mother’s eyes.

“Don’t worry,” he told her, “I’ll see you in a month. I fly from San Francisco to Delhi at the end of June.”

“I’ll need to get a new guidebook,” she said, straining to find a smile. “For California.”

“You won’t need one,” Devanand said before adding, “You’ll have me.”

“Yes, we do,” she said. Without warning, she reached toward him and drew him into a hug that seemed both too short and to last for minutes.

“You’ve made us very proud of you,” she said.

“We are very proud of you,” his father said, before he pulled out his wallet and handed him fifty-one dollars (one extra for good luck). “The last we will give you before you start earning.”

An announcement came from the gate agent: the flight was now boarding their row.

“Just a month,” Devanand said.

“Be safe when you drive, beta,” Devanand’s father said. “We’ll call you from Montreal.”

“Accha, I’ll see you soon!” Devanand replied, standing there with his hands in his pockets as they turned around to board.

There was more that he could say. Beyond his silence lay a deep wellspring of love and appreciation. It wasn’t that the perfect phrase eluded him. It was that this was just a regular day with another goodbye. He would see them in a few weeks anyway.

Before they entered the jetway, his family turned around for one last wave.

Devanand pulled one hand out of his pocket and waved back. He smiled. His heart began to fill with that feeling of silent loneliness that comes after the frenzy, after concentrated time spent with others.

And then they were gone.

**Devanand’s family** was in Montreal for a week while his father conducted interviews for the newspaper. The parallels between Canada and India boiled down to a historical bullet point that a student could memorize: separatists in Quebec and Punjab wanted to leave their nation-states and form homelands. Iyob’s editor had thought that 1984’s bloodthirst had cooled and that the readership wanted to read the history of a once-violent separatist movement that had turned toward electoral politics.

Devanand talked to his family every night (the long-distance charges were being paid for by the newspaper). On those calls he heard stories of Montreal and its politics, and of comparisons between Khalistan and Quebec. Devanand hadn’t paid attention to the Khalistan movement. It had sprung up when he was young, and gained momentum when he was finishing his final college exams and trying to complete graduate school applications. Khalistan wasn’t for him but for the plucky men who left India to drive cabs in London and Vancouver or to mind corner stores in New York and California. What did these men want? They wanted what all men want when they move from one nation to another and find themselves lonely or laughed at: a home. As the memories of where they left ossified and the present offered drudgery, their dreams grew more ambitious: a prosperous home for the faithful and the pure, meant only for them.

A handful were content with fantasy, like parishioners praying for heaven. Some thought they could get this home from ballot boxes. But to win instead by any means necessary had a quintessentially male romance about it: guns, money, secret meetings, networks across borders, and self-deluding dreams of martyrdom and fame.

When Operation Blue Star was carried out and Indira Gandhi gave the order to shoot and shell the Sikhs’ holiest sites—a message that the weak live at the mercy of the powerful—Devanand barely paid attention. Of course his father covered it for the paper, and Devanand lent him a half-hearted ear during their phone calls. But he had his own life to think about: he had just started a summer internship at McDonnell Douglas Automation Company, and on top of that his months-old relationship with an undergraduate was ending as she graduated and moved to the East Coast for graduate school.

When Indira Gandhi was shot and killed by her own Sikh bodyguard, Devanand was stunned. A few days later, when he heard that thousands of Sikhs were killed in Delhi as retaliation for the act, he couldn’t quite believe it. How could neighbor attack neighbor in his own city? How could they rape? How could they murder? From over seven thousand miles away, the violent passions of his city looked like a jumble of tragedy and farce—all this death, and for what?

But once he learned that his friends from high school and college were safe, he slipped back into his coursework and life in St. Louis. It was as if the news from home became like the news of the world to an American: a thin bullet point shoved into a back section of a newspaper, to be either ignored or quickly forgotten.

It was perhaps because of all this, when it was his family’s time to leave Canada to return to India, Devanand talked to them one last time without a care or worry.

“Are you all packed yet?” his mother asked him.

“Almost done, most everything is in boxes. I should be done in a couple days. After that, I’ll pick up a car from the car rental downtown.”

“Great. We should get going to the airport.”

“Okay, Ma. Have a safe flight. I’ll see you soon.”

“Thank you, beta.”

“Call me when you arrive in London?”

“Okay, beta.”

“Tiik hai.”

“Accha, okay, bye.”

Click.

There was nothing else to say.

How could Devanand have known that one of those lonely expatriate men, an auto mechanic in Vancouver, heard the news from Delhi not as an American or as a Canadian, but as a man whose faith was so strong that it only took a few conversations with another to convince him of the need for revenge by any means necessary? Thousands of his brothers were murdered in the streets of Delhi! And what did Rajiv Gandhi say after he was sworn in as prime minister? “When a big tree falls, the earth shakes.” This man’s revenge would be simple. If those monsters made the earth tremble, he would shake the sky.

How could Devanand have known that this man slipped away from his wife and four children in the middle of the night? The man, who moved when everyone was asleep and no eyes could follow him, took a car radio into the thick woods on Vancouver Island. Among the towering western red cedar and thick forests of Douglas fir and Sitka spruce, he carried with him one stick, no more, of smokeless gunpowder. He placed his contraption on a rotting stump from a storm-felled cedar and waited, keeping time with the pounding of his heartbeat. The man smiled when the device went off in a firecracker burst that sounded like a whip cracking against bare skin.

How could Devanand have known that it didn’t matter if he paid attention to the news? That a man could find revenge by taking his experiments into the forest, sticking them in a suitcase, and checking that bag onto an airplane? And even more, how could he have known that to the faithful, there was no distinction between government and civilian, between collateral and intentional?

The truth was that there was no way for him to have known any of this. And so, when his parents boarded a plane and started off from Montreal to London, he slept as he would have slept on any other night.

His life and the Khalistan movement had existed like two distant lines running parallel into infinity until that brief moment when they veered into each other, crashing with the deafening roar of an explosion before they continued on their separate paths once again.

**The telephone’s** shrill ring woke Devanand up at six in the morning. He stumbled out of bed and hustled over to pick up the call. He shivered as he lifted the receiver off its base.

“Is this Devanand Iyob Simon?” The voice on the other end had a middle-class North Indian accent.

“Yes?”

“Are you the son of Iyob Geevarghese Simon and Mariam Anita Simon, and the brother of Dhaaniel Iyob Simon?” The voice sounded tired and automated—weary from making the same leaden calls over and over again.

“Yes, yes, why?”

“I regret to inform you that there has been an accident on Air India flight 128.”

“Who is this?”

“My name is Akash Gupta. I am an employee of Air India. The flight your relations were on has gone missing.”

“Missing? Where? What do you mean?”

“Sir, we have been told that radar in Ireland lost sight of the aircraft at 7:43 this morning, Irish Standard Time. At this time, we are working with the Irish authorities to locate the passengers.”

“Locate?”

“At this time, sir, we do not have any more information. However, at any time, you may call this number collect—I understand you are in St. Louis, Missouri, USA? You may call this number collect for information and we will cover any and all payment for the call. Do you have a pen and paper?”

“No, just a second, okay?” He reached over and picked up a pen and notepad. “Okay, yes, I’ve got one now.”

Devanand scribbled these numbers down. “Zero-one-one, three-five-three, zero-two-zero, nine-one-six, seven-seven-two-two, extension one-eight-two?”

“Yes, sir. At that extension will be officials from both Air India and the Irish Aviation Authority. Please give them your name when you call. Do you have any questions?”

“Yes.” Devanand paused to look across the room at his bed. His gray comforter had been pushed to one side when he climbed out to rush across the room. Through his window, open just a crack to let in the cool air overnight, he could hear the rapid-fire chirps of nesting birds. The bottoms of his feet stuck to the linoleum as he shifted his weight from one foot to another.

“Sir, are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any questions?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Is my family—” His voice began to break. “Is my family alive?” The question had an air of unreality as he heard himself ask it, as if it were part of a nightmare that didn’t know to stop when the phone started to ring.

“We will let you know about your family as soon as we have any information.”

“Okay, call me anytime. I’m here.”

“Thank you, sir.”

As soon as Devanand put down the receiver, the room felt as if somebody had filled all his moving boxes with ice. He felt tremors shake out from every hidden inch of his body. Each shiver seemed to work in reverse: they began at the tips of his fingers before they rushed across gooseflesh to the base of his spine and upward to his head. Each shiver brought a wave of relief. Each shiver brought denial.

His thoughts were clear: None of that was true. It was all some joke. Who is sick enough to joke about that?

Still, he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and walked slowly, as if he were on a thin ledge, over to the nightstand to switch on the clock radio. He switched it away from the buzz that woke him up every day to the AM dial. Commercial; Christian revival; commercial—finally, news. He sat down on the edge of his bed.

The traffic report. The news of a slowdown on Big Bend, an accident on 75 near St. Charles, debris on the roadway on 95 near Forest Park.

Then, the weather. Sunny, warm, no rain in the forecast.

Then commercials.

As he listened to the ads for car repair, mattresses, tire shops, and uniform supply, the shivers changed to sweat. He felt his heart pummel his chest. He felt a lump in his throat. He felt his hairline beginning to moisten. None of him was able to sit still: not his legs bouncing up and down, not his hands running along his thighs, and especially not his mouth muttering at the radio to hurry up.

A woman’s voice. “It’s 6:15 in the morning. Here are our top stories of the hour. An Air India flight en route to London from Montreal disappeared from radar just off the coast of Ireland around 7:43 a.m. Irish time. The Irish Coast Guard is now reporting that pieces of the plane have been found. No word on either the survivors or the black boxes. In sports news, the Los Angeles Lakers defeated the Boston Celtics to win the NBA Championship . . .”

Something in his body gave way. He ran to the bathroom. Everything in him seemed to desire an escape. Sweat poured from his forehead, burning. He couldn’t breathe.

He stumbled out of the bathroom to the futon to reach for his jeans, an old white T-shirt, and from underneath the futon, worn sneakers. He put them on and grabbed his keys and his packet of cigarettes and burst out of his apartment into the soft light of a cold morning. The sun was low and passed through the trees like water through a sieve.

Hands shaking, he opened his pack of Camels and put one in his mouth. He could barely flick the metal flint on his lighter and only just managed to bring the flame to the tip of his cigarette.

“Maadarchod, fuck, fuck, maadarchod.” Curses gargled around the lump in his throat.

At long last, the red glow and its gray ash. And puff, puff, smoke: nicotine coursed through him. Whatever relief there could have been by this fix was shouted down by the voices in his head: the man on the phone, tired and professional; the woman on the radio, announcing the headlines as if this were news like any other; and faintly, ever so faintly, the voice of his mother—a whisper in the cacophony—telling him how proud she was of him.

Tears welled in the corners of his eyes, stinging them. A tightness settled in his chest, curling around every ventricle and wrapping itself around every pocket of air until there was nothing left to breathe. There was no air to be found in front of his apartment, none in the cigarettes he held, none in the deepest reaches of his own body.

He began to move. He went east, toward the park. He crossed Skinker, giving only a perfunctory glance to the three lanes of early-morning traffic slamming on its brakes, throwing up middle fingers, and yelling from windows. Then he went past the public golf course, its greens still covered with morning dew. From there, up the steep eastern approach of Art Hill and past the museum, past the statue of Saint Louis atop his trotting horse, down Art Hill, past the zoo, he walked straight into Kennedy Forest with its bright-green new growth.

He went far into winding dirt trails, twigs cracking like small bones under his steps, birdsong resounding. At a spot near a trickle of a stream and a log where urban hikers liked to sit, he stopped and looked up through a green canopy of ash and elm to the empty sky, and he began to scream. Yellow warblers resting from their migratory journey and accustomed to silence at this hour, were startled into flight.

With the first scream, his heart pulsed through his body. With the second, his tension loosened. And with the third, fourth, fifth, and all the rest, he felt the earth underfoot and the sky above. This nightmare was not a dream.

Body heaving, shirt soaked through, fists finally unclenched, he used his shirttail to wipe the tears and snot from his face.

This pain was so clear, like metal glinting. But all that was left was the roaring burn of severing