

The Taj Mahal

The Taj is a big white building straight ahead, but what I like is Raj Kumar who is practically dancing in front of us.

We will stay in India for one month. In his suitcase, my dad took from home hotdogs and macaroni and cheese, because I know, even before we come, that I won't like the food. The only problem is that since it's my food, my cousins will say I should learn how to tell the cook, who lives in their apartment and sleeps in a room I have never seen in the kitchen, how to cook it, and I don't want to, which I say over and over, until they do it for me.

Yesterday, we visited another Auntie. I'm not sure if she is a real blood relative or just someone to call Auntie and say Namaste to, because that shows respect. That Auntie was in the kitchen, even though they also have a cook, because that's the way it is here, and also drivers, which is even weirder. Another thing that is incomprehensible is that two adults, a husband and wife, might have an argument and that the husband might hit her, but this is what my sister said when my parents asked what we understand about what is happening with my cousin's parents, which is who we will be staying with while we are in India. I looked at my sister like she had two heads because what she said sounds wrong to me.

My teacher has given me a binder full of worksheets to take care of while we are away. Mostly, I watch over them from a far distance until my mom makes me pick up the binder and sit at the dining room table and do it, usually, after breakfast. I start with the vocab and leave math for last because I will do anything before I will do math. One of the vocab words is incomprehensible, and I like that word because it can be used for many different occasions, like when you are African American and also Indian but have never before in your entire life set foot on the continent of Africa or on the continent of India, until now.

Way in the future when I am thirty-seven, which is an incomprehensible age in an incomprehensible time, I will be in the kitchen in Connecticut, and my boyfriend, who I'll refer to as my partner because we will be serious, will sit with my parents in the room we call the tea room. They will tell him about the time my dad returned to India and the customs officer looked at his birthdate and looked at him and said, "You were born into a free India." I'll hear it and wonder why they never told me because by then I'll think that all my life what was missing was a connection to my culture, which might have been fixed with stories like that. But today I am not in the tea room, and even if I were back in Connecticut I still wouldn't be, because the tea room comes after.

Instead, Raj Kumar is trying to sell us postcard pictures of the Taj Mahal, which is the same thing he has been trying to do for twenty minutes. A lot of other people also try to sell us the same pictures. None of their pictures show the Taj Mahal with a man peeing, I mean urinating, in the reflecting pool, but that's what I have on my camera to prove that it's that way here. And that's why it is totally unfair how Sonali yelled at me yesterday when, instead of eating a folded up leaf with food tucked inside that she bought me from the street, I let it fall onto the curb, because it was gross. "There are people starving," she said, but I already know that because a whole lot of them came up to the window of the taxi while we were driving from the airport and were stuck in traffic. It was hot, and we wanted to roll the windows down, but we couldn't because then they came faster, and their hands almost came in through the window,

when they made a movement like they were eating with an imaginary fork because they know that we don't speak their same language, and also, they are kids.

By the time we get back onto the airplane to go home, I will have eaten every box of macaroni and cheese and all of the hotdogs and survived mostly on soft-serve ice cream and bread. Later, when I am back in Connecticut, we have social studies about Rosa Parks, who is interesting, but also not that interesting, so instead, I tuck my hand into my desk. With hardly a sound, I pull out the picture postcard. I turn it over so that the Taj is facing the desk. On the back I read, "Raj Kumar," one time in Hindi and one time in English.

"How old are you?" I'd asked.

"Twelve," he said. "How old are you?"

"Ten," I said. "When do you go to school?"

He said, "I don't like to."

I laughed because he was so busy with cards and money and English. He laughed because I am busy with school. He knows that it's that way because he is from there and we are from here and he knows that means we are rich, which is something that for Raj Kumar is incomprehensible. I like being rich, the way it feels to walk by myself down the street, past the cement houses that have one small window, and inside, I can see that almost all they own is a TV, right into the shop on the left and pull my money out to buy chocolate and also the white roll of paper tied with a loop of string that sits on the counter behind the uncle-aged man for making drawings.