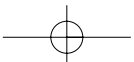
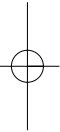
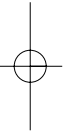
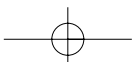
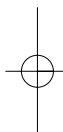
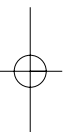


Homesick





Homesick

Roshi Fernando



First Published 2010
by Impress Books Ltd
Innovation Centre, Rennes Drive,
University of Exeter Campus, Exeter EX4 4RN

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Typeset in 10/12 Sabon by Swales and Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon

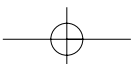
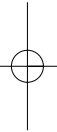
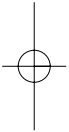
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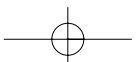
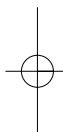
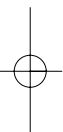
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-907605-02-4

For Tom
Every day, every day, every day . . .





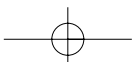
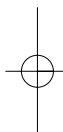
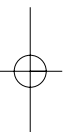
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their guidance, help and often, love: Tom Saul, Stevie Davies, Ira Fernando, Edward Saul, Isobel Saul, Miranda Saul, Spiky Saul, Nigel Jenkins, Rona Laycock, Jennifer Cryer, Mali Fernando, Ishani O'Connor. Many thanks to Elisabeth Bennett, chief Archivist at University of Swansea for her invaluable help with the research for 'Research'. Thank you to John Tams for permission to use 'Rolling Home' in 'At the Barn Dance'. And a huge and heartfelt thanks to Richard Willis, Colin Morgan, Julie Swales, and all at Impress Books.



Homesick

Victor is thinking of other parties, of his childhood: quiet, dignified, the productions of an excitable wife of a dour clergyman. Homemade marshmallows, he remembers, lightly coloured with cochineal, dusted with icing sugar. He stands in the hallway of his own home in south east London, looking at the late afternoon sun colouring everything with a honey glaze. My, he thinks, he can even see his own pudgy hand, reaching up to the table to steal a sweet, and a servant clucking away behind him, shoo shooing him, as if he were an escaped hen. If his father had seen him, there would have been the nasty, damning words about thieves, about hell. He hears Preethi and Nandini in the kitchen, the pan lids banging, the murmured voices, one of them chopping at the table, a small laughter. I am rich, he thinks.

He walks into the sitting room, adjusts cushions on the plush cream sofas, a recent investment. The plastic covers have been removed for this evening, but will go back tomorrow: Nandini said that, once bought, this three-piece suite would be their last. It must survive thirty years, then, he thinks, for we are so *young* still, barely fifty. The sun is setting. He stands by the window, looking out to the opposite houses. Already there is music from the end of the street:

West Indians, their party will be raucous. Never mind, never mind. He takes his C. T. Fernando record out of its sleeve, holds it carefully by the edges, blowing the dust away gently into the last pink rays of the sunshine. When he places the needle on to the crack-crack of the outside lines, he can smell poppadsoms frying, he can feel the warmth of other air, he can hear the voices of people long left behind. And Victor's eyes fill with tears, for there is no going back in his life. Only the moving forward to better things, there is only the climb up steep, green hills that signify this Britain. He sits gingerly on the sofa as if he were the guest and the sofa the host. "*Ma Bala Kale*," C.T. sings, and Victor hums along, remembering that the poppadsoms will not be fried until the evening.

* * *

Preethi is angry. Nandini is again talking of money, of wasted opportunities. She is talking about resolutions, and Preethi is tired of saying – yes, *Ammi* I will work harder, I will forget that under this skin, there is *me*. She wants to say – you know I'm slow, I'm not like Rohan and Gehan, I just can't *do* what you want me to *do*. But she changes the subject. Talks about Clare, her friend from school, coming to the party.

"She's got the whole of *Brideshead* on video. Sometimes we watch two episodes . . ."

"Watch? But I thought you studied together?"

"Yes. We do. But sometimes, we take a break and watch – and it is by Evelyn Waugh. And you used to watch it with me." Which wasn't true, she thought – *Ammi* was always asleep on the sofa.

They are silent.

"So, who is coming tonight, *Ammi*?"

"Wesley and Siro. This one, Gertie – she is bringing that foster child of hers. And her brother. He's done *very* well. He is here attending *Sandhurst*."

"What's that?"

"Officer training."

"What? For the army? Which army?"

"The Sri Lankan army, fool."

Preethi pauses for effect. "The Sri Lankan army who like to repress and murder Tamil people. You know, Tamil people like me and Dad?"

“Don’t be clever, clever. We left that behind, all that talk. You’re in England. Talk of English politics. How can you understand Sri Lanka? It is not ours to understand any more.”

“That’s rubbish,” she starts, but her mother slaps her hand. It stings.

“Don’t say ‘rubbish’ to me. Do you think I would have said ‘rubbish’ to *my* mother?”

Preethi washes her hands, and wiping them on her backside, edges around her mother’s chair in order to leave.

“Where are you going? Come and chop the rest of these onions, then peel the carrots and grate them.”

She wants to call Clare. Tell her to bring a bottle of wine, which they can sneak to her room and enjoy by themselves. She sits back down at the table and starts to peel the carrots.

“Onions first!” her mother says. It is going to be a long New Years Eve night, Preethi thinks. But tomorrow will be 1983, and something good should come of it.

* * *

Nandini finally in the shower, Victor takes another journey around the theatre of his house, imagining the characters who will be there shortly, seeing them stand with drinks in their hands, their colognes mixing with smoke, the perfumed silk-saried ladies perched on the chairs he has placed around the sitting room and dining room. The table is laid: Rohan and Gehan helped Preethi by lifting it and pushing it into the centre, so that people can travel around it, serving from the various dishes Nandini has prepared. They had argued this morning, about the expense of a party. Nandini said he should have asked fewer people. But he knows that not everyone would come. Nandini is tired all the time, he reminds himself: he had been on Preethi’s side. He would have let her go to college. She was happy at the local school. But Nandini took a second job, begged the private school to take Preethi on. Every penny is saved: no, he won’t think about it now. He wears a Nehru shirt, khaki, and cream slacks. He looks into the hall mirror, combs his floppy straight hair back into the quiff he has worn since he was eighteen. All of his friends wear their hair this way.

The clock in the hall strikes seven. Gertie said she may come early, but the rest of the crowd are always late. Victor can hear the

television upstairs in his bedroom. He helped Rohan carry it up there, in case the younger crowd got bored. He walks upstairs to see what they are watching. He looks around the door. His three children are lying on his double bed. Gehan holds the video buttons, and leans on his elbows, flat out on his tummy. He is still a baby, behind his glasses. Rohan and Preethi lie leisurely side by side, propped up by pillows. The tape finishes rewinding, and Gehan presses play.

The familiar trumpet solo, the white words, and then the fade into a single face, a stilted Italian accent: "I believe in America."

"*The Godfather, The Godfather* – it is all you watch," he says from the doorway. They shush him. "Hmm, hmm – that can wait. Your mother will need to get ready. Enough, enough. Go and put a change, Gehan. Rohan."

"I'm changed Papa," Preethi says.

"I know you are darling. You look lovely," he says, as she walks past. He touches her face, pinches the burgundy satin of her dress. "Come and choose some music with me," he says gently, "they will all be here soon."

* * *

Preethi watches from her window for Clare. She managed to call, and Clare said to look out for her Dad's Mercedes. Clare is staying the night, as her parents are going to a party in a hotel in town. Down the road, there is laughter, reggae music, shouting. Preethi wishes she was there: all her friends at her old school were black. She misses Sonia and Marcia and Shanelle. She wonders if they are partying somewhere, maybe in that club in Peckham they used to go to.

She can see cars stopping on the street, and people getting out. Saris, men in suits. She turns to her door:

"Someone's here! They're here!"

* * *

Chitra and Richard don't arrive until nine thirty. They have battled with public transport, pushed against the crowd on their way to Trafalgar Square, and now walk leisurely up to the door.

"Listen," Chitra says. Richard pulls her to him and kisses her. "Listen," she says again.

"What?"

“Music. Baila music. And can you smell it? Can you smell the curry?”

She stands on the doorstep, but doesn't ring the bell. What will they say? The people who knew her before she left her husband for Richard will all be there, sitting as they always do, in vicious eyeing circles around the room. But she cannot resist, and Victor said he wanted her to come. He insisted that she come. And she is proud of Richard, this famous writer, this gorgeous god with his shoulder length, greying, Byronesque hair. Suddenly, the door opens, and she peers in, as Preethi throws her arms wide.

“Aunty! Come, come!” and they are pulled in to the warm embrace of the party.

* * *

Victor knows they are expecting him to say something. Nandini has indicated with a nod that the food is ready to serve. He looks around him, from face to face. There are thirty or forty people there, talking, laughing, some kissing on either cheek. Mr Basit is sitting in the centre of the sofa, his wife Rita, perched on the arm next to him; Jenny, their daughter, is upstairs. Nandini is not happy because Mr Basit brought a bottle of whisky, and insisted that Victor try some. Victor gave up drinking in the Summer of '77, the same week Elvis died. But Victor respects Mr Basit, and it is an honour that he brought such a special bottle of whisky – old whisky, Basit says. Victor had opened the bottle, took cut glass tumblers from the kitchen (Nandini specifically told him earlier that only plastic cups must be used), and poured a glass for Mr Basit, a glass for Wesley, a glass for Hugo, a glass for Mr Chatterjee and a glass for himself. He did not offer any to Kumar, Shamini's cousin, even though he slinked about the back door purring obsequiously at Victor. Nasty looking fellow, drunk when he got here, Wesley said. They had stood together outside in the garden, five friends, toasting the New Year. It had been a quiet moment of clarity, filled with the resonance of the cold, bell-like clinking of their glasses. They had all knocked the drink back, in one, as they would have done with arrack in Sri Lanka. And the salt harshness of the spirit on his lips dances there still. He looks around at the party, and he sees them all in the swimmer's gaze of a whiskied moment. Nandini's eyes shine black and hard, as he raises his glass and shouts: “Friends! A toast! Here is – I mean – *to US!*” and he

stumbles a little, and laughs. “Time to eat, time to eat . . .” Nandini turns, calls to Preethi, and Preethi and Nil, Siro and Chitra follow her to the kitchen to start bringing through the tureens of mutton, lentils, silver platters of yellow rice, glass bowls of salads and baskets of poppadoms.

Victor sits down next to Gertie. Her foster child May is with her.

“Hello, little girl,” he says, pinching her cheek lightly. “There are a lot of other little girls upstairs. Why don’t you go and play?”

She shakes her head.

“Shy, shy,” Gertie says. “Talk to my brother, will you? He’s another shy one, *nayther?*” she says, poking the young man sitting beside May. Victor nods to the man, an officer in the army.

“Come and eat,” he says to the fellow. The brother had been introduced but Victor cannot remember his name. The whisky has clouded his mind, and all he sees are colours now, around each person, greens, purples, golds, crimsons. Around this man, there is a yellow fire, an easy lion aggression: if the fellow were to open his mouth, a roar of the fire would belch out, and Victor realises he hates him, without reason. On impulse, he takes the man’s hand, pulls him from his chair, and pushing his shoulder lightly, leads him to the dining room, where people are already loading their plates. Nandini stands watching the dishes empty, waiting to swoop down to refill them. He catches her eye: she smiles from the side of her mouth. Victor looks at her across the party, and a tenderness for her erupts from him, and to his embarrassment and surprise, he imagines their warmth in the dark, the smell of her neck, the soft flabby skin of her stomach, crushed and stretched and worn. And he sees around her a glow of pink and mauve, which takes his breath away.

* * *

Upstairs, *The Godfather* has got to the wedding night, and Rohan has stopped the video. There are too many little children, and he is embarrassed by the girl’s high pale breasts: so ugly to him, so unnatural, the way she turns to Michael and removes her slip. The older kids are annoyed, and he is ushering children down the stairs to go and eat. But there is a crush in the hallway, so children run up and down the stairs, trying to go further upstairs to see what Preethi is doing in her bedroom. Gehan has taken the boys his age into his own

room, and they are playing Monopoly for real money they have rummaged from coats hanging on the banister.

Preethi calls down to Rohan: "Get the ghettoblaster out! Clare brought some tapes." He thinks this is not such a bad idea. Nil comes to help him.

"Where's Mo, tonight?" he asks her. Her brother is one of his good friends, and he is disappointed he didn't come.

"He's gone up to Trafalgar Square with some mates." She seems shy; it is strange, for they have known each other since they were toddlers. Nil is beautiful now, with her long hair and her deep reddish skin, the high cheekbones like her father Wesley. Her eyes dance at him.

"You've got a secret," he says. He knows her, he can read her.

"I've got engaged," she says. He didn't expect it. It is a punch in the head.

"No," he says. "Who to?"

"Who do you think? Ian, for goodness sake."

"And Uncle's going to let you marry a white guy? Like hell!"

"Yes, he is."

"You haven't told them, have you?"

"Yes. They won't stop us. They like him."

"They've met him? Liar. You're making it up."

"I brought him home."

"What, for a curry feed and a quick sing-song?"

She slaps his back. "Shut up," she laughs. "I'm hungry. Let's go and eat."

But before they go down, he pulls her back to his parents' bedroom, and closes the door, and quite unexpectedly, they find they are kissing in the dark, the way they have often kissed before. He feels nothing sexual toward her. His dick nestles limp in its place, but there is comfort in their kiss. When they walk out, he knows there will be no more kissing Nil, and so he prolongs it, keeps her there, against the door, brushing her hair away from her face, and smiling at her closed eyes.

* * *

In the kitchen, Nandini and her friends are talking about relatives in Sri Lanka. Shamini's husband's family are cousins to Victor's father. Nandini pretends to be interested, but what she and Shamini have in

common is something internal and unsaid. They had both defied their families and married Tamils. Shamini's husband had left her. Victor, her husband, her *husband* – there were no other words for the upstanding, beautiful man who lay next to her, who stood tall, who took her hand and held it, sometimes as if clinging on – he was here, and although Shamini felt their equality, they are not equal. Shamini is a sniping woman, silly with her children, the two little girls Deirdre and Lolly. If she talked of them, it was always about Deirdre, the clothes she has bought for Deirdre, the expense, Deirdre's shoes, Deirdre's beauty. And in fact, the child is a fat-faced thing, who uses both hands when she eats, smearing food down her lovely dresses, picking her nose too. Nandini hates the child: there is something like an animal about her open mouth. Lolly, they all like. She had been a charming baby, with big eyes and willing to go to anyone with her arms raised out for a hug. But even Lolly has seemed to become a wretch recently: like a beaten dog.

“And why did Gertie foster a black child, *chchiii* . . .” Shamini says, under her breath to Nandini.

“What do you mean?” Nandini says sharply. Chitra and Dorothy turn.

“The blacks,” Shamini says even more quietly, “nasty . . .” But before she can continue, Nandini comes quickly to her and holds her arm.

“We are all the same, in this house. Who are you to say you are better? All are welcome. Sinhala, Tamil, Burgher, Black.”

“I am just saying,” Shamini begins, but the other women stand behind Nandini.

Dorothy draws a breath. “You know Shamini – I have been here longer than most of you. Do you know, Hugo and I came in '62? And when we got here, it was the black people who made us feel welcome. Look at me – I am almost white. And Hugo, he *is* white, after all. But our accents, our clothes – people turned away. Even at church. And who became our friends? The black people we met in our building. That child is a lost child . . .” but she cannot go on. She does not understand Shamini's objections.

Gertie and May come into the kitchen to wash their hands, followed by Kumar, Shamini's cousin. He is holding Lolly by the hand.

“Lolly, come here darling,” Nandini says. Chitra strokes her head as she walks past. Her hair is short, like a boy's, parted at the side with a diamante clip pushing it back behind her ear. A short yellow

dress and tights, and strangely, as she approaches, she has to tug her hand away from the drunk cousin, and his hand trails down the dress, behind her. All the women but Shamini look at him, and Dorothy clucks him away. Renee Chatterjee calls down the corridor, “They’re trying to get Rita to play the piano! The singing! I love the singing!”

“Lolly,” Nandini says, “this is May. Take her now and go and play upstairs with the others, darling.”

Lolly approaches May, and shrugs at her. May follows, and the party of women laugh, following Renee’s voice into the corridor and to the sitting room, where already the chords are being played of the song about Surangini, and the fish man. Nandini can hear Victor’s raised voice in the dining room, and the laughter that follows, and she smiles.

* * *

Preethi and Clare are drunk by eleven. But not too drunk, because Vita, Nil’s sister, has joined them and so has Jenny, and they have shared the bottle of wine, giggled about boys and talked about sex, and Clare has told them what a blow job is, and they have all agreed that it is something that they will never do, not for all the money in the world.

“Imagine even holding one,” Preethi says, and they break into hysteria, but it is false. It is a party, and they are drunk. Clare has cigarettes, and offers them around. Preethi and Jenny refuse, but Vita takes one, and they all stick their heads out of Preethi’s window to look up at the moon and continue talking. The party has slipped leisurely into the front garden, and men stand with drinks and cigarettes, and their smoke reaches Preethi and Jenny, Clare and Vita. They stay quiet to listen, because there is an urgency to the voices, and Preethi sees it is her father and a beautiful young man talking.

“There are other ways,” her father says.

“What do you suggest?”

“Killing, beating, all of this – it is not the answer. *Forgiveness* – that is the answer,” Victor says.

The young man throws his head back and laughs, then drinks down his drink. “Forgiveness? What has your forgiveness done for you? You think the way things are in Sri Lanka is down to the Sinhalese? The Tamils didn’t do so badly under the British, did they?”

Should we have forgiven after they left? Where would we be now? Still under Tamil rule, that is where, and no more Sri Lanka,” he says, clicking his fingers. “And you here – what will your forgiveness do for you here? The whites hate you!”

Clare shouts down “I don’t hate you Victor! I *love* you!” and Preethi elbows her, and Vita chokes as she tries to smother her cigarette puffs so her uncles don’t see her.

“You see,” Victor laughs, pointing up at the window. “It is nearly midnight. We don’t want to argue now, do we?” He puts his hand out to the young man, and rests it on his shoulder. “Come, come. I will get you another drink. Come and sing,” he says.

Preethi hates her father for this. She hates his appeasement and his gentility.

“Oi,” she shouts down, after they walk away, “leave my Dad alone!” and the four of them laugh again.

Chitra calls up. “Silly girls! Wherefore art thou, silly girls?”

They giggle, and choke, and watch other people in the dark – Hugo kissing Dorothy’s hand as he leads her back into the house; Richard and Chitra easing their way down the hill, arm in arm. “Bye, Aunty!” Preethi shouts after them.

“D’you think she does?” Clare says, and they all squeal at the thought of Chitra and Richard going home to bed.

“Course she does.”

“What, blow jobs?”

“Err, don’t,” Vita says.

Preethi hangs out of the window still. “It’s a beautiful night,” she says. “On such a night as this, did fair Troilus . . . what is it?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Preethi,” Clare says.

Vita finishes her cigarette and throws the stub down onto the road. “D’you know what I want to do? I want to *dance*.”

* * *

“Singing, singing,” Gertie says.

“I love it,” Renee Chatterjee replies. They have never met before, and although they would have a million things in common, neither of them has bothered to find out more about the other. It is too loud, and Gertie is out of sorts. She wants to tell someone: tell them how much May means to her, how wonderful a child she is, how they sat next to each other on the settee and sometimes the child’s hand

would stroke her own, and the companionship of it means more than anything. The singing stops. Men gather around the piano, their hips thrust forward, elbows gathered to their sides, their hands awaiting the next clap. Nil brings Rita a drink, leaves it on the top of the piano. Kumar leans onto Rita's shoulder, and Mr Basit pulls him back, pushes him out of the inner circle.

"I have to take the child back," Gertie says to Renee. Renee follows her line of sight. Through the French windows beyond the piano, children can be seen running in and out of the bushes, playing hide and seek. Lolly and May hold hands, and Deidre chases them. Although it is dark, she can see May's face, wide with joy, suddenly just a normal child.

"Why?" Renee asks.

"Her mother wants her back. She hates her because she is black. But she wants her back."

"The mother is white?"

"Yes, and the father was black. She expected the child to be like her." Gertie wants to tell of the scars on the child's back, where the mother bleached her.

"Does the child know?"

"No. I don't know how to tell her . . ." and her voice breaks. Renee takes her hand.

"Then don't tell her. Just take her."

Gertie stares, wide eyed. "That would be a *sin*."

Mrs Chatterjee pats her hand. "You enjoy each other for the last few days. She will remember you, you know that."

"Her mother hates her. And I have to take her back."

"Never mind, never mind. Life is hard for us all," Renee says, and as they sit watching the singing, Renee taps Gertie's hand in time, as Gertie dabs at her eyes with her dead husband's white handkerchief.

* * *

The ghettoblaster is best in their parents' bedroom, Rohan and Preethi decide. Clare is flirting shamelessly with Rohan, her arm around his neck as he leans down to the deck to put Michael Jackson on. As he presses the play button down, "Don't stop till you get enough" begins, and he twirls her into the room, first with her arm, then pulling her back into a crotch thrust by the waist. Clare is

thrilled, and so is Vita who has been in love with Rohan since she was born, she thinks. Nil sits on the bed, watching, and Preethi calls to Gehan and his friends. Clare goes back to the 'blaster and turns it up. The children have run in from the garden and are now outside the bedroom, looking in curiously. They all watch as Rohan and Nil, Preethi, Vita, Jenny and Clare all start to dance wildly, their arms in the air, their feet pounding double time to the beat. On the stairs, a late arrival: Mohan has run up the hill from the station in order to be with his family for New Year. It is five to twelve.

* * *

Victor stops everything: "It is nearly midnight! Let's count down! Ten! Nine! Eight!" Before he can continue, the noise from upstairs throbs the counts for him. "What is that?" he says, but he knows it is his children.

"Another song!" Kumar shouts, but as he shouts, he falls over.

"Three! Two! One!" Wesley says, and then "Happy New Year!" and everyone shouts Happy New Year to each other, and there are kisses all around Victor, but the music goes on upstairs, so that as the people kiss each other in his sitting room, and their colours mix like a kaleidoscope into smoky patterns, he becomes angry. He remembers home, the New Years when he was a teenager, the faces he kissed there, the night heat and rain, and his mother's orchids, their silhouettes in the moonlight. He remembers the smell of the warmth, of drying coconut and rice. But he remembers also his father's stinging switch, his mother's face turned away. He wants to get to Nandini, because he is all out of it: of the party, of the friends, of his children. Nowhere he can find home, but if he found Nandini, it would be there, in her, and he would be safe again. He looks for pinks, for mauves.

* * *

The dancing does not stop. They show off to each other. They dance, brothers and sisters together, they dance because they can. They are exhausted, but they push on, they push each other on, because they are new, they are the ones.

* * *

“What to do?” Siro says to Nandini. “She is determined to marry him, what to do?”

“Good. Let her make a good marriage,” Nandini says. Wesley and Victor sit with them in the dining room. Many people have gone. Gertie and her brother sit on the opposite side of the table.

“Good, good. These children will never go back,” Gertie says. “Let them make marriages here.”

“But with white fellows?” her brother says.

“Why not?” Gertie asks sharply. “You think once you give them all this, you can take them back there, take it all away?”

“Why not?” Wesley asks. “They can get used to anything. They are not English. They are *ours*.”

“What rubbish!” Nandini says, and Siro agrees with a nodding of her quiet head.

“What is their mother tongue, now?” the brother says.

“What does it matter?” Victor says.

“Language – it is important. What is their mother tongue?”

“Ask me what is mine,” Victor says, “It is the same as theirs. We speak in the language we live in. It is not important.” He sees the yellow fire, as if it were dangerous, this man, dangerous.

“What language do you dream in?” the brother asks.

“Dream?” Wesley answers for Victor. “We live in our dreams. We do not need to dream.” They all laugh.

The children come downstairs. Vita sits on Wesley’s knee. Preethi throws her arm around Victor.

“What is your mother tongue?” the brother says to them both. Clare leans against the doorway. Preethi shrugs. Vita says, “Oh my God, are you arguing about that stuff again?”

“Do you want to know? I will show you,” Nandini says, and she elbows Siro, and the two of them together poke their tongues out, catching the tips with their fingers. Nandini crosses her eyes. Victor laughs, but he wants to cry.

“We belong *nowhere*,” he says. “But if we belong anywhere, it is *here*. I have chosen *here*.” He stands. “*We* have chosen *here*. And that is it,” he says, flicking his wrist up as if tossing an imaginary cricket ball into the air. “We are *here*.”

* * *

When everyone is finally gone, and the children are asleep, he and Nandini go to bed. They talk of the brother, of Kumar and stupid