

GREEN RIVER

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DURING INTERMISSION MALINI WATCHED the tourists stretch their sun-reddened legs and order second rounds of passion fruit and papaya juice as young waiters tried to keep their eyes from the fleshiness of the women in their low-cut sundresses. Nobody seemed to notice her sitting with her skinny legs folded under her on a stuffed armchair. Meanwhile the young local models, including her older sister Geetha, had run offstage to change outfits. Malini's parents in their typical style had deposited them at the hotel with a brisk, "We'll be back in time for the second part of the show."

The air conditioning in the Grand Ballroom wasn't working properly. The room had threadbare red carpeting and water stains on the walls. Malini unfolded her legs, which felt numb from so many minutes of sitting, slipped her feet back into her rubber sandals and walked over to stand under the ceiling fan. She found herself wishing that the event were over, that her parents were already there to pick them up and that they could hop into the air-conditioned car and get home before the curfew. According to the colorful printed program, there were three more presentations to come: Designer Saris, Tropical Evening Wear, and something called East Meets West. She could not believe that on their brief summer vacation back home, her sister had let herself get involved in this stupid fashion show.

Walking over to the picture window, Malini was delighted to see the beautiful jade green of the river below her. Did she have time to run down to the water for just a few minutes? The temptation grew so strong that she slipped out of the building. As soon as she stepped into the outside air, Malini felt free and back in her own skin. She half skipped down thirty or forty broad stone stairs, down to the thin black railing that separated the narrow hotel terrace from the green river water. She was glad to escape from the lazy tourists, the phony smiles of the models, the stuffy air. She was in the heart of the city, surrounded by the noise of cars and trishaws, the shouting of street vendors, the cawing of crows—yet it all had a calming effect on her.

The river was slightly broader than a stream, green and winding, with palm trees swaying gently on either side. Across the water was a stretch of shanties belonging to the washers who made their meager living laundering clothes in the river, hitting the clothes against large rocks and lathering them with bars of thick yellow soap. She remembered how shocked she'd been seeing this for the first time—clothes being

washed and scrubbed for rich people by poor people in a less than clean river. Behind the shanties, clothes were drying on lines running from one shack to another. Corrugated roofs, white shirts, undershirts and sarongs were all gleaming in the mid-afternoon sun.

Children dressed in rags were running to and fro by the water's edge. She felt a pang of envy. Even though they were much younger than she, perhaps six or seven years old—they were having fun. As she looked closer, she saw that they were playing a kind of game, throwing pebbles at some large logs floating in the river. One little boy was making a terrible face and screaming, "*Yakka!*" as he threw his pebbles. *Devil!* The pebbles hit the log and the child jumped up and down, laughing. Two smaller children clapped their hands. Malini looked closer. What she had thought was a log turned into a huge brown plastic doll and then, horribly, into a brown bloated body. Brown, bloated and half naked. It was a man's body, some torn shreds of clothing covering his private area. The torso looked mottled, possibly with blood. Who was he? What about his family—did they know? Where were the police? Why wasn't anyone noticing this? She looked to the left and right of the floating corpse.

Another body floated behind it, looking strangely unbalanced. She saw two fat arms, a long torso, and then—a single leg! She held firm to the railing, afraid to let go. Then she noticed the little boy scampering around looking for more pebbles. Her right arm rose instinctively and her palm went out in a STOP gesture. "*Karanna eppa,*" she said. *Don't do it.* The boy raised his gaze in her direction, and suddenly his eyes were locked with hers. They were dark and full of something that frightened her—intense curiosity, amusement, defiance? He motioned to his little friends and she heard giggles wafting over to her. She knew they were laughing at her terrible accent. But why weren't they ashamed that she had caught them in their ugly game? She looked once more up and down the river but saw nothing else unusual—no armed boats or crazed men with machetes or police or soldiers—nothing—just the calm green water and the two bodies—heavy, bloated, forgotten. The river, the palm trees, even the little children could no longer be trusted.

A man in a uniform quietly appeared at her side and she screamed, the sound of her own voice piercing the air and coming right back to terrify her further. "Miss," he said, his voice urgent, "Please miss, *balanne eppa.*" *Don't look.* She finally noticed the gold tassels on the light blue uniform and the little cap and realized it was just the hotel security guard. His kind middle-aged face was lined with worry. "*Balanne eppa,*" he repeated. "Come back to the hotel, miss," he went on and then he offered

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her his arm and she walked slowly, clinging to him like an infant, up the broad steps.

Inside, the Designer Sari show was in full swing. Beautiful young models a few years older and much taller than Malini walked up and down the aisles, their white teeth gleaming, their faces set in unconvincing smiles. Their short sari blouses exposed their midriffs. The sight of the bare brown skin made her want to throw up.

Geetha walked right past Malini in a sheer cream chiffon sari edged with gold that looked otherworldly. As she turned and walked back toward the stage, she strutted, her rear end swinging side-to-side. Malini wanted to run behind her and kick her into attention.

For the finale, the models were joined onstage by drummers and dancers who circled around them in a frenzy of ground-pounding movement. Malini normally loved the sound of the drums but right now, they felt menacing. With each beat, she became more and more terrified. Where were her parents? What was taking them so long? They were supposed to have been here for this part of the show. She could feel her heart pounding and her sweat soaking through the chair.

In the front row, an overweight tourist rose and started mimicking the dancers, bending his knees and stomping his feet as though he were trampling mud, his large belly jiggling over tight shorts, the back of his neck red from exertion and exposure to the tropical sun.