

## **Nan Violence**

On the evening of November 1, 2010, in the sixty-third year of his existence, my uncle Mr. Acharya Jain bit into a piece of meat for the first time in his life. I would not have believed such a thing possible, but I heard of the event from his wife, a teacher of mathematics and a woman of absolute integrity.

The momentous event took place in the sometimes-Indian, sometimes-Bangladeshi, and sometimes-Colombian neighborhood of Jackson Heights, Queens.

Mr. Acharya Jain was a most observant Jain. He did not pursue any course of action that was forbidden by the religion's foremost apostles of nonviolence, the twenty-four Tirthankaras.

"Nothing that breathes, that exists, that lives, or that has essence should be destroyed, or harmed, or denied of his or her potential," Mr. Jain used to be fond of saying to anyone who was within hearing range, usually his wife or a fellow subway rider.

He loved all of God's creatures, big and small, and accorded an ant the same wonder and respect that one normally reserves for a whale on the National Geographic Channel. He strained his drinking water through a washcloth to avoid harming the bacteria. He organized online protest groups against the Draize test.

"I can't believe," he used to say, "that we are living in a society that considers it acceptable to place noxious solutions into the eyes of conscious rabbits just so we can test if so-and-so deodorant is safe."

However, even though Mr. Jain could never quite gather up the defiance to eat a hamburger, he liked to think of himself as an adventurous man. He was the first person in his family to move west of his ancestral home in Chembur to the Bombay suburb of Santa Cruz. In the years to follow, Mr. Jain showed himself to be even more restless. He continued to move farther and farther west until he arrived in New York. And even in this city of sinners, where people killed cows and stuffed them between buns at fast-food joints, Mr. Jain refused to budge from the teachings of the Tirthankaras.

"Eating meat is the deadliest sin," he liked to say after rustling the morning newspaper. "Violence toward animals desensitizes us to violence toward man. When a pilot drops a bomb in Baghdad, or when a suicide bomber blows himself up in Tel Aviv, remember that it was that first chicken . . . that first fish he killed or ate that started him on this journey of violence."

Mr. Jain had come to America to work for the research labs at I— Corp. He was a bright man who had spent the years of his youth reducing the latencies between the electrical and mechanical components of the world's first supercomputer.

He had then spent his middle years fretting over the designs of every boy who courted (or spoke to) his daughter Ananya.

Ananya had ultimately married a good-for-nothing Indian boy and moved back to Bombay to “discover her roots.” And I— Corp. had sent Jain off with an “ice cream social” to commemorate his retirement. The firm hadn’t even served strawberry ice cream at the event, which was his favorite flavor.

Mr. Jain’s giant brain, freed from the encumbrances of business and family, now settled on the complex issue of laundry. The endless permutations and combinations presented by the mixing and matching of colors, whites, cycles, temperatures, and bleach fascinated him. Surely there had to be a formula that allowed one to arrive at the optimal amount of liquid detergent for light, medium, and heavy loads, something that was more comprehensive and emotionally satisfying than the recommended “one capful.”

Mrs. Jain, who had retired earlier that year from the Joseph Pulitzer School, found her husband’s preoccupation with laundry taxing. She had spent over thirty-two years teaching mathematics to an endless procession of unwilling young minds. She would have liked nothing better than to commence her retired life by taking pleasure in new joys, be they reading poetry, pontificating on the relative merits of toe-up-with-gusset-and-slip-stitch-heel socks with her knitting partner, Mrs. Chang, or discussing the latest antics of her grandson via Skype with her daughter in India.

However, she found that she couldn’t accomplish any of these simple pleasures with a husband who would interrupt a couplet about a heart found bloodied at the onset of spring with a question on whether it would be more optimal to wash gray clothes along with the colors or along with the whites.

“Does it matter?” she asked him.

“Of course it matters. There’s a time, place, and color for everything.”

She could tell he was being serious, for Mr. Jain, like so many introverted men, frequently masked his earnestness by attempting to be clever.

Mrs. Jain put on a sensible red sweater that she had knit the year before and took her troubles to the adjoining apartment building. She pushed at the gate until it dislodged a block of snow. As the gate opened, Mrs. Jain’s mind followed the slow, creaking sound back in time. How large the courtyard had seemed when Ananya used to spend entire afternoons playing hopscotch under the watchful eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Chang.

What was it that the great Mirza Ghalib had said? *The entire world appears like a playground/The dusk and dawn making their eternal rounds.*

A film of tears had formed in her eyes by the time she reached the Changs' apartment.

"Is everything all right?" asked Mrs. Chang.

With a focused glare that shone through the moistness, Mrs. Jain told her neighbor her troubles. "Today, it's the laundry," she said. "Tomorrow, it will be the dishes. And soon, every day, it will be something."

"This will not do," said Mrs. Chang. "Tomorrow morning, you get up and come directly here for the day. We'll knit and talk about more sensible things. Woman things."

*Woman things.* The words blazed themselves into Mrs. Jain's mind like the promise of a prophet, a sign in Times Square.

That night, the second hand of the grandfather clock in the Jain residence went *clickety-clack, clickety-clack* like a pair of knitting needles, and Mrs. Jain woke up well before the first plane flew over their roof to land at LaGuardia International Airport. She flossed, shampooed, and conditioned with brisk efficiency, and even as the teakettle rumbled in its buildup to whistling, she made breakfast for her husband and went next door.

Mrs. Chang had a teapot at the ready.

Mrs. Jain told her about her grandson, who had skipped school to drink sugarcane juice. The principal had punished him with a caning. God had punished him with jaundice.

Mrs. Chang responded by saying that children will be children. "Jaundice won't be able to harm an angel like that," she said, as she poured out a hot stream of tea.

Mrs. Jain smiled.

She took out a printout for a pattern from her handbag. The pattern called for a "multiple of 4+2". Her gauge was five stitches per inch. She imagined that the cap she wanted to knit for Mr. Jain would be ten inches wide. She decided on using forty-eight stitches, plus two.

As she worked through the math, she was transported back to her classroom. She shifted her weight on the wooden chair, and it creaked like the chalk on her blackboard. She reflected happily on some of the many students she had guided through introductory algebra.

Then she thought of what that great poet, Robert Browning, had once written: *The lark's on the wing, The snail's on the thorn; God's in His heaven—All's right with the world!*

But when lunchtime arrived, and Mrs. Chang began throwing vegetables into her hot pot, Mrs. Jain sensed that the lark had fallen off its wing. The snail had been pricked by the thorn. And she felt guilty.

What would Mr. Jain do for lunch? Mrs. Jain knew that, even with his newfound interest in household chores, Mr. Jain would not be able to cook himself a meal. He was the kind of man who would weep even before taking a knife to an onion. Not that he would ever cut or, for that matter, eat an onion. A conscientious Jain like her husband would never eat a root vegetable that could otherwise serve as a home to millions of God's tiniest creatures.

Mrs. Jain told her friend that she would go home and cook a meal for her husband.

"That's impossible," said Mrs. Chang. "*You* must eat lunch. Here. With me. And you have to tell me more about your grandson."

Bombay was a large city, Mrs. Chang knew, and if it was anything like Beijing, the possibilities of mischief and disaster for a boy of seven to get into were endless. He had only just gotten done with jaundice. Cholera was surely around the corner. Besides, the strong diagonal eyelets on Mrs. Jain's cap were starting to take shape. It would take a truly heartless knitter to abandon them at such a promising stage of their development.

"Why doesn't he just eat leftovers from last night?" asked Mrs. Chang. "You said you made a large casserole."

"He has never been a fan of leftovers," Mrs. Jain said. "Do you know what he says about leftovers? He says that they make life predictable and boring. He says that they make a man repeat yesterday's journey, and that, while eating a leftover meal, he feels as though he is commuting."

"That's crazy talk," said Mrs. Chang.

But there was nothing that could be done about it. Men would be men. Nobody could stop them from thinking crazy thoughts or saying crazy things.

"If only it weren't snowing so hard," Mrs. Chang said. "He could go to that vegetarian restaurant on 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue."

"If only," said Mrs. Jain.

It was at that moment that Mrs. Jain had the idea that would spark the ensuing catastrophe.

“Mrs. Chang,” she said, “if a man cannot go to the restaurant, then the restaurant can go to the man. I’ll order in some delivery.”

“But that’s such a small place. I don’t know if they deliver.”

“They don’t,” said Mrs. Jain. “But I know someone who will.”

Like many schoolteachers, Mrs. Jain had students who had long since been graduated from both middle and high school and were now involved in the pursuit of promising careers. Many of them still romanticized their school years, especially those spent with her, and celebrated the role their education had played in their success. They had particularly fond memories of Mrs. Jain, who had helped them understand polynomial equations of the second degree without resorting to the use of harsh words or painful barbs.

Mr. Singh, proprietor of the Nan Violence restaurant, was one of Mrs. Jain’s appreciative former students. Mrs. Jain had also eaten at his restaurant in the past and thought highly of her student’s culinary skills. And, apparently, so did a large portion of Queens. The Zagat guide had said that Nan Violence was “authentic,” and “the last word in Indian cooking,” and “located conveniently outside the Roosevelt Avenue station.”

Mrs. Jain knew that Mr. Singh had no doubt in his mind that he served the best North Indian food in all of New York City. Confidence is an expansive emotion. It spills readily into other areas. At the age of thirty-five, Mr. Singh had begun to fancy himself a great singer who hadn’t made it “there” (Bombay) only because he was “here.” His ex-wife had once pointed out that he wasn’t that good a singer and that his voice broke on the higher notes. Even if she were right (which she obviously wasn’t), Mr. Singh had reasoned, it was nothing that couldn’t be concealed by turning up the volume on his synthesizer.

He had begun to sing for his guests every night. His American visitors found the performances ironic and delightful. The Indians worked their way through their meals by philosophically reasoning that great flavor required great sacrifice.

Mrs. Jain called Nan Violence and asked to speak to Mr. Singh. She asked him if he would be kind enough to deliver a Jain meal to her husband.

“No meat, obviously,” she said. “Also, please don’t make anything that has onions or any other root vegetable.”

Hearing the voice that had coaxed him through quadratic equations, Mr. Singh felt warm and nostalgic. He assured Mrs. Jain that he would prepare the order himself and, what’s more, deliver it to Mr. Jain.

As a child, Mr. Singh had often forgotten to carry over the remainders on long-division problems. He had grown up to be a careless man.

While preparing the order for Mr. Jain, Mr. Singh began to sing a song that celebrated childhood. It wasn't an easy song. Mr. Singh found that he had to close his eyes and raise his hands toward the ceiling as he reached for the higher notes. Focused on the song instead of the meal, Mr. Singh committed three acts of carelessness. He forgot to include the salad. He forgot to seal the *nan*. And, in the most grievous of all the errors, he packed a goat dish instead of the cauliflower.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mr. Jain opened the door to see a man in dark sunglasses. He thought that Mr. Singh was likely from the FBI. Or even the CIA. Mr. Jain, after all, was a brown man and, in these suspicious times, was prone to the occasional bout of paranoia. But as the gentleman shuffled from foot to foot, Mr. Jain had time to consider the facts. An FBI agent would not show off his chest hair. He would not smell of so many perfumes. And he most certainly would not touch Mr. Jain's feet and ask for his blessings.

"Specially prepared Jain meal, as requested by Mrs. Jain," Mr. Singh announced.

"Really?" asked Mr. Jain. He was surprised but glad, for he was also beginning to feel hungry. "What is it?" he asked.

"A surprise." Mr. Singh beamed. "Cooked according to the exacting instructions of Mrs. Jain."

In addition to quadratic equations, *exacting* was a word Mr. Singh had learned in school. Now he felt particularly educated and wise and, while making small talk about the weather, felt confident enough to throw in a few words about global warming and El Niño.

Once blessedly alone again, Mr. Jain twisted open the casserole's plastic cap. It came apart from the container with a sticky sound. The container itself was filled to the brim with an oily dark brown gravy. The curve of a tomato glistened in the soft rays of the afternoon light.

"Ooof," said Mr. Jain. "The Punjabis and their oil. Just like . . ." He searched for an analogy. "Just like Punjabis and their perfume."

He wondered what surprise his wife had ordered for him. He stabbed into the curry with the plastic fork Mr. Singh had provided. He closed his eyes as the distinctive aroma of cumin overwhelmed his nostrils.

There was no crunch, as there would have been with broccoli or cauliflower. Instead, Mr. Jain chewed on something that was soft.

It was a kind of softness that Mr. Jain had never experienced in his life. No sooner had he chewed on one layer than a fresh softness emerged through another one that lay immediately beneath it. It wasn't soft like a piece of copper or lead heated above its recrystallization temperature. Hot metals were bright, eager to change. This was a more unyielding kind of softness. It appeared almost resentful when asked to give way. Almost, thought Mr. Jain, as if it had once breathed . . .

During his moment of illumination in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the great warrior Arjuna had seen the countless eyes and countless mouths of Krishna.

The Buddha had felt a shaft of light illuminate the crown of his head underneath the pipal tree.

For Mr. Jain, the truth manifested itself as a strand of a dead animal wedged between his teeth.

Trembling with disbelief, Mr. Jain spat the curry into the sink. He then looked with dismay at the brown stains of shame there. He turned on both of the faucets. Water gushed forth and drilled with a great roar against the stainless-steel surface of the sink. But the sound of the water wasn't loud enough to hush sixteen generations of ancestors and saints who reprimanded him in a stern and wordless silence.

Mr. Jain grabbed a sponge. He grasped the dishwashing detergent bottle by its neck and let out a generous stream of the gel. He scrubbed at the sink feverishly. After what seemed to be an entire lifetime, the sink returned to its unblemished state. The air was saturated with the scent of fresh lemons that the sticker on the detergent bottle promised.

Mr. Jain emptied the remaining contents of the food container into the plastic bag lining the trash can. By the time his thoughts caught up with his hands, he realized his error. The trash can contained junk mail and envelopes from utility bills that bore his name and address. These were clues that an inquisitive person, such as his building superintendent, or God, could use to tie the perpetrator to the crime. True, God might already know of his trespass, but there was every chance that He or She had been looking the other way at the moment of the bite. The ways of the Divine were mysterious.

Mr. Jain got down on his knees. Sorting through the muddy brown filth, he pulled out the envelopes and every other piece of paper that might bear his name. As the curry perverted his fingers and turned them a deeper shade of brown, Mr. Jain thought of the people who were forced to clean the toilets in India. Mr. Jain had always understood at an intellectual level the horrors of the caste system, but now he understood the injustices of the centuries-old evil sensually, more completely.

Mr. Jain got to his feet and cautiously carried the plastic trash bag down the hall to the incinerator chute. There was the clank of the door, a great *whoosh*, the receding sounds of descent, a loud bump, and, finally, a calming silence.

Mr. Jain spent the rest of the afternoon in a haze of repentance. At several moments he spoke aloud to himself. He was in the middle of a sentence when his wife entered the apartment. With a perfect understanding that can only be achieved after many years of marriage, both husband and wife ignored the awkward moment entirely and slipped into their household routines.

At seven in the evening Mr. Jain's stomach rumbled, not with hunger but with guilt, if such a thing were even possible. He resolved to never eat again for the rest of his life. After all, rigorous penance could wash away the stains of even the greatest sin. Even the ten-headed demon Ravana had forced the gods to grant him a boon of invincibility through the force of sheer austerity. But Ravana did not have to contend with a sharp wife who had taught mathematics and was at ease with integral calculus.

"How was lunch?" asked Mrs. Jain.

"It was delicious."

"Was it the cauliflower?"

Mr. Jain became suspicious. "Why would it be anything else?"

"I'm only asking," said Mrs. Jain. "How did he make it? Indian style? Manchurian style?"

At that moment, Mr. Jain understood exactly how a person who has murdered another person and has just received a visit from the major crimes unit on *Law & Order* must feel.

"Manchurian. Schezuan. Chinese. Indian. Nothing like Asian cuisine," he said vaguely.

He turned on the TV and increased its volume until the voice of Larry King filled their entire apartment.

"Turn that down," said Mrs. Jain. "What's the matter with you? Are you going deaf in your old age? Why, just the other day . . ."

Mr. Jain felt thankful to Larry King for having shifted the focus of the current conversation from the matter of the lunch toward one of Mr. Jain's other failings. As his wife continued to pontificate, Mr. Jain walked to a window. Like most New Yorkers who chance upon a celestial object through the blockades of the city's skyscrapers and light pollution, he was surprised to see the full moon.

He followed the contours of its round body with his eyes. It seemed perfectly still and content, as though it were above a city where no one had sinned, a city where all the animals were in a perfect state of health. It exhaled gently, and a puff of moonlight dribbled out into the sky.

Later that night, Mr. Jain felt his head sink into his pillow. How soft it was! He found it amazing that he had never paid attention to such a simple yet exquisite delight before. He moved his eyes to a curtain that billowed gently in a puff of steam given out by the radiator. *Billowed*. When was the last time he had used that word? But it seemed especially appropriate for this occasion, when the entire world seemed enveloped by a misty veil that softened edges and dimmed sounds, even muffling the clanging of the garbage truck and the accompanying shouts with New Jersey accents.

His wife moved in her sleep. The rustling of the cotton sheets eased him further into his thoughts. He touched her fleetingly on her back. The feeling of being enveloped in a world of softness deepened. Everything and everyone seemed to be covered by the moonlight from all those hours ago. Mr. Jain's mind was carried by the gentle breath of the moon into the past, to when they were young. He felt the curve of his wife's body, the arch of her neck. He opened his mouth. He chewed on the fresh air that seemed to have come in through the window. It was soft, soft, almost as soft as the . . .

When he woke up, he felt embarrassed. He was unable to look into his wife's eyes or, for that matter, his reflection in the stainless steel sink.

"I need to say my prayers," he told his wife.

"You should say your prayers after your shower," she said. "If the building management shuts off the hot water as they have been doing lately, even God won't be able to help you."

But Mr. Jain did not need the comfort that a hot shower brings to a winter body. He needed the solace that is brought about by the admission of guilt to the Tirthankaras.

He put in a cassette on the teachings of Jainism delivered by Pandit Shri Bharilji. Mr. Jain felt glad that he hadn't thrown away the tape player. He would never digitize these recordings of the talks delivered at the SIES College in Bombay. The whirring sound of

the player's motor lent the recordings an old-world quality and imbued them with an aura of timelessness.

The Pandit began his lecture with a quote about the importance of being watchful so as not to inflict harm on any living being. He quoted first in Hindi and then more slowly in English from the *Shree Mahavir Aarti*:

*Dayadharm Ka Jhanda/Jag Mein Lahraya.*

*The flag of nonviolence/You unfurled in the world.*

How censorious the Pandit sounded today! Mr. Jain began to apologize to the Pandit. But he felt his mind start to wander as soon as the Pandit moved on to speak about rebirth. Mr. Jain nodded as the Pandit pointed out that death hastened one toward *moksha*, where a man is freed of earthly encumbrances and delivered into a universe of salvation and bliss.

Had Mr. Jain done the goat a favor by being indirectly responsible for its death? On earth, the animal had probably been leading a miserable existence, tied to a rope or locked in a pen. But now the goat was likely witnessing entire galaxies and discovering great metaphysical insights.

Mr. Jain began to sense ambivalence in the Pandit's teachings. He felt confused and helpless.

He knew that eating any more animals would be a direct affront to the teachings of the Mahavira, the twenty-fourth and the greatest of the Tirthankaras. But he also clearly had a realization whose essence he had been fighting ever since he had seen that soft puff of moonlight.

He was going to eat more meat.

Procuring more meat would not be a simple task. In a neighborhood like Jackson Heights, where there were at least five Indians per square inch, it would be impossible for a respectable Jain to order meat at a public restaurant. Tongues would be clucked. Judgments would be passed. A scandal would ensue.

He decided to go for a walk. It was cold and wintry outside, but Mr. Jain could not recall a single instance in his life when a walk hadn't shed light on a particularly vexing problem.

On Northern Boulevard, he saw a large American flag above the door of a diner. Mr. Jain scoffed as he read the words *The Land of the Free*. For many Indians, Jackson Heights was hardly the land of the free.

Mr. Jain wished that, instead of Jackson Heights, he were in Jackson, Mississippi. There, no one would know what a person of the Jain religion was. There, no one would think twice before serving him a few pieces of meat. It was Jackson, Mississippi, and not Jackson Heights that was the land of the free.

His shoes slid on a patch of ice on 37th Avenue. Mr. Jain recovered his footing. He continued walking blindly with flakes of snow swirling before his eyes.

“Some weather we are having, huh?”

Mr. Jain smiled uneasily. He recognized the Muslim gentleman from the train station.

A month or so ago, this man with a prominent skullcap had asked Mr. Jain for directions to a particularly esoteric section of Brooklyn. Mr. Jain had been overcome with sympathy. How badly the Muslims were being treated after 9/11! In the South, a bus station attendant had turned a Muslim man away from a water fountain. In Massachusetts, a group of fraternity boys had beaten a Muslim pizza delivery boy to death. But Mr. Jain would not be like the others. He would be kind to Muslims. He had supplied the man with directions. Having performed this act of kindness, he had passed through the turnstile.

The man had caught up with Mr. Jain at the subway platform. Mr. Jain had greeted him politely with a nod of his head. The man must have felt encouraged, for he spoke again. At first, he had asked Mr. Jain if this was indeed the correct platform for the F train. He had then proceeded to ask Mr. Jain a far more difficult question. He had asked why there were so many gods in the world when it was clear to even the dimmest intellect that Allah was the only true God. Why were there so many infidels who insisted on worshipping other gods?

Mr. Jain had looked over his shoulder for the FBI agents who were undoubtedly on their way. To get away from the man, he had jumped into the first train that arrived at the platform. He'd sighed with exasperation as he realized that he had boarded the R train. Even Allah would admit that a journey on the screechingly slow R train was too harsh a punishment for the most heinous of the infidels.

Now, Mr. Jain thought that it was remarkable that he should run into this man again. He found it even more incredible that the man should remember him after so many weeks.

“Some weather indeed,” he replied politely. “It shouldn't snow this much in November.”

“Would you like to come into my store?”

Mr. Jain was caught up in a flurry of unclear thoughts, through which shone a faint but obvious light of illumination. He couldn't refuse the man his simple request. If he did so,

he risked appearing like the bus station attendant who had refused a Muslim a drink from a fountain, perhaps even as callous as the group that had murdered the pizza boy. After all, being at the receiving end of an unkind action caused one to lose faith in humanity, which was but the first step that led to the taking of another human's life.

There was a pervasive smell of incense in the store. An orange flower shone brightly from the top of the counter. It was almost as orange as the jumpsuits that the inmates wore in Guantanamo Bay. The green cover of a Koran, a prayer mat with exquisite floral patterns, signs written with the confident strokes of Arabic lettering—each of these distinct sights overwhelmed Mr. Jain's mind in a single emotion of fear, so much so that he was soon incapable of discerning individual objects, unique things.

"Would you like to buy something?"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Jain, eager to take recourse to any action that would hasten his exit from the store. "I will take that."

The man looked to where he pointed.

"A burka?" He rubbed his palms together. "Excellent. Excellent. There's nothing like a burka to keep beautiful the jewel of the house."

Mr. Jain smiled uneasily. He contemplated what his wife would do if he insisted that she wear such an all-enveloping garment. As he realized the answer, the fog of confusion lifted, and Mr. Jain experienced his first lucid thought since entering the store.

She would kill him.

Mr. Jain paid the approving store owner for his purchase. He scanned the heavens for the helicopters that always seemed to arrive at the scene of an anti-terrorism raid. But save for a black crow that had decided to brave the snow, there was nothing in the sky. The icy wind clasped tightly at his face with its cruel and thin fingers. Mr. Jain felt victimized, as though he had been singled out by the winter and indeed the entire world for harsh treatment.

A patrol car moved slowly down the avenue. It passed Mr. Jain and, picking up speed, disappeared with a loud screech around the corner. Mr. Jain felt relieved. He also felt slightly unsafe. He couldn't help thinking that if the NYPD had its act together, if they were truly acting on every suspicious development, he would at this very moment be surrounded by a posse of policemen.

But this was no time to be thinking of matters related to national security. It was a time to be thinking of individual security. Mr. Jain had recently read of black sites, secret prisons that the government operated in countries like Poland and Romania. Poland

was cold. Mr. Jain shivered as he thought about how chilly their secret prisons would be. He decided to go home and dispose of the incriminating evidence. He had to put a safe distance between himself and the burka.

Just yesterday, he had combed through the leftovers of the goat carefully, removed all the clues that could link him to its murder, and disposed of the remains in the trash. Today, he was about to take a burka back to his apartment and dispose of it in the trash. In the newspapers and the movies, criminals were often portrayed as glamorous individuals who stayed in glitzy condominiums and walked around with flashy models. But the truth of the matter was that, in the real world, criminals had to spend a disproportionate amount of time next to a trash chute.

Mr. Jain rushed toward his apartment, never slowing down even as his feet slipped on the thin sheet of ice that had formed along the length of 73rd Street. Once inside the building's elevator, he stabbed the DOOR CLOSE button. Shocked at his rudeness as she approached the elevator, Mrs. Gomez, his neighbor of fourteen years, gasped with disbelief.

Mr. Jain grunted with relief. He could not afford to be with anyone else in the elevator, the dimensions of which were eerily similar to those of an interrogation room.

As the elevator hurtled to its destination, Mr. Jain realized that his wife would probably have gone to Mrs. Chang's. The apartment would be a chamber of solitude. As soon as he entered the foyer, Mr. Jain acted with the recklessness of one who knows that he is alone and not under observation. He flung the bag containing the burka onto a chair and plopped heavily into the couch.

He closed his eyes and took solace in the first moment of comforting darkness.

The steam heater rattled and hissed. Mr. Jain felt the lobe of his right ear glow with its warmth. His breathing returned to normal. A dog barked outside. Mr. Jain's mind latched on to the familiar and comforting sound. By the time the dog had run down the street and its barking had faded, Mr. Jain felt like himself. He felt like a scientific man with an inquisitive mind.

He began to wonder just how a woman would feel when she was under the burka. He had read recently about some politician who had pointed out that having to wear a burka was a violation of liberty at the most fundamental level. Using words that had left an impression on Mr. Jain's mind, the politician had said that while she was under a burka, a woman could not even eat an ice cream cone.

On the other hand, his wife's friend Mrs. Islam had once told him that that every woman, at least in America, had the right to choose to wear, or not to wear, the burka.

“I wear it,” she had told Mr. Jain, “because I choose to. It makes me feel safer in this neighborhood. It gives me privacy. And because it is something I choose to do, it empowers me.”

Mr. Jain decided to investigate further. He pulled out the burka cautiously from the plastic bag. It was black. Mr. Jain, who had seen plenty of youngsters make their way toward nightclubs, thought that it was a very New York color. The word *hip* came to his mind. He held the garment in his hands and found that it was heavy and layered. He had to unfold it at least seven times before he could see it stretched at full length.

This burka didn't have the permissive window around the face that was prominent among those of the Muslim women back home in Bombay. There was a small mesh rectangle around the eyes, but it was tiny and narrow. There was a flap that one could turn upward to uncover one's face. But that was all. Could a woman gaze upon all that was going on in the world through such a small portal? Mr. Jain decided to see for himself. He allowed the burka to fall over his body.

At first, he experienced an absolute darkness. Then his eyes adjusted to the reduced light, and he was able to see. Mr. Jain took a few steps into the foyer. He tripped and recovered his footing. His confidence grew after he had taken a few more strides. He made a bold left turn into the kitchen.

Far from being trapped, he felt liberated. This was a garment that gave a man (a *woman*, a *woman*, he had to remind himself) the ability to be completely hidden from the world. At the same time, he (*she*, *she*, he had to remind himself again) could do absolutely anything unseen. She could pick her nose. Scratch her torso. She might not be able to eat an ice cream cone, but she could secretly eat meat. At the very least, she could easily buy meat in broad daylight without fearing that she would be recognized and judged.

And as long as he was under the burka, so could he.

Mr. Jain tried to recall the words of Pandit Shri Bharilji to calm his fevered mind. But then he thought about the goat's softness. He recollected the touch of his wife's back and the gentle puff of the misty moonlight.

The Pandit did not stand a chance. Mr. Jain had lost control over his thought processes. Just as a rolling stone has no choice but to go to the bottom of a mountain, Mr. Jain's actions were now tinged with inevitability. He was going to have to eat meat again.

A small step took him out of his apartment. A few more took him into the elevator, out of it, and outside his building. He now knew how Neil Armstrong must have felt on the

moon, each small movement momentous all by itself and propelling him forward into a world of adventure.

He crossed the street, intoxicated with the pleasure of the meat that was so close, so very close. Inside the burka, his feet moved quickly but awkwardly, like the slurred words of a drunken man.

As he turned onto the avenue, he felt something push hard at him on his left side. His shocked body shut down in an instant, like a supercomputer in the first stages of malfunction. But then he began to see. He began to hear. He heard a man shout angry words from the window of a car.

Mr. Jain discerned that the car in the intersection had nudged him. Through his narrow field of vision, his eyes swam in the sea of blue that surrounded the Ford SUV's logo.

"Hey, go back to your own country!" the man said. "Go the hell home if you don't even know how to cross a street here!"

Mr. Jain was nervous. At this very moment, he was likely being observed by everybody on the street. Yet he couldn't see even one person in his immediate field of vision.

To Mr. Jain's credit, he remembered that he was playing the role of a woman.

"I am sorry. I am sorry," he said in a high-pitched falsetto. He thought he sounded like a woman.

"Are you OK, madam?" A man came close to Mr. Jain and touched him on the shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" he shrieked. "Or else I will call the police!"

Those words were successful in clearing the crowd that had gathered. People began to walk away from Mr. Jain. A golden retriever poked its nose under the burka and lingered for a moment longer than was necessary, but it responded to the frantic tugs of its owner, and it, too, was gone.

Mr. Jain's confidence grew with this minor accomplishment. He breathed deeply. He resisted the temptation to open the face flap so that he could see more clearly. As he had when he was a child of seven in Bombay, he looked with exaggerated care in both directions for oncoming traffic and finally crossed the street.

Mr. Jain sighed with relief at being alone. He walked to the corner of the next block and made a left. Here, he found new cars, new dogs, and new people. That was what he liked most about New York City. A man could go to a new block and start his entire life anew.

Mr. Jain reprimanded himself. It had been irresponsible of him to leave the apartment without conducting an extensive practice run with the burka. He had been right in supposing that the burka was a garment of invisibility, that it could be the robe of a superhero. He thought that Superman hadn't simply walked out his door one day to fly around the world. He would have first conducted a few test spins around the block.

Mr. Jain thought of going back to the apartment. But, like many people who had endured a trial, he found that the experience had strengthened him. He felt ready to take on new adventures.

When Mr. Jain was first learning to drive, his teacher had told him that he should get behind a car that was going at the speed limit, then follow it at a safe distance. Mr. Jain now applied that same principle to walking in a burka. He got behind an old lady who was pushing a cart and followed her at a safe distance. Unluckily for him, she didn't walk all the way to the Nan Violence restaurant. Instead, she made a sharp left by a cardboard box covered with snow and disappeared into the cavernous interiors of the Patel Brothers grocery store.

Underneath the burka, Mr. Jain licked his lips. It was icy and wintry outside, but he tasted sweat. Mr. Jain wasn't surprised. As he had told many a research employee over the flame of a Bunsen burner, "Success is 99 percent perspiration. . . ."

And he was close to achieving success.

Nan Violence was just a few steps down and across the street. Mr. Jain stood still and turned his head a full 180 degrees. This allowed him to get a panoramic view of his surroundings. He then walked forward like Mr. Neil Armstrong, one step at a time, his gaze alternating between the ice on the pavement and the person now directly in front of him.

He entered the restaurant. He was greeted by two pairs of eyes, one of which was Tibetan and the other distinctly Indian. Mr. Jain recognized the latter. They were those of the devil incarnate himself, the man who had given Mr. Jain that first push down the slope of sin. Mr. Jain had no doubt that the proprietor of Nan Violence was the devil. How else could any human make a curry like that in his buffet display shine with such an unnatural glow?

Mr. Singh beamed widely. "What would you like, madam?"

Mr. Jain was thankful for the reminder. He was now a lady. He pointed at the dish that he recognized so clearly in the display and spoke in a falsetto voice. "What animal is that?" he asked.

“Goat,” said Mr. Singh. Mr. Singh launched into a eulogy on both the quality of the meat and its exquisite preparation.

Mr. Jain ordered the goat dish to go. He immediately recited the words of the *Shree Mahavir Aarti* prayer internally and asked for the great saint’s forgiveness.

He sat down at a table as he waited for his takeout order. A lady of generous proportions gorged on a large piece of chicken at the next table. Mr. Jain marveled at how permissive her religion was. Unlike him, she could eat meat, and in public too. Unlike him, she could show her face freely in society, without having to hide it underneath a burka.

At the table next to him on the other side sat a timid-looking man with a thin mustache. *A software engineer on a work visa*, thought Mr. Jain. They always looked scared. They always sported thin mustaches. The man had worked his way through one plate of food from the buffet. He was probably contemplating if he could make another visit to the buffet with his unclean dish. Or wondering if he should he instead call for the waiter to take away the plate so that he could start anew. In either case, he would be making a public exhibition of his gluttony.

Mr. Jain recognized a mirror spirit in this software engineer. In a city where one fast-food restaurant had more than enough calories to feed its entire population, he and the mustached man were among the last few remaining sensitive souls for whom eating inappropriately was a source of shame and anxiety.

Mr. Singh drew in a whistle as Mr. Jain handed him a twenty-dollar bill. Who knew that Muslim women were so hairy? He felt sympathetic for his Muslim brethren. With all the attention bestowed upon them by the FBI and CIA, there was no relief for them in the outside world. And, judging by the hairy hands of this woman, they wouldn’t get much relief at home, either.

Mr. Jain slid the goat into the protective folds of his burka. He walked down the streets with a jaunty air. He felt full of the genuine confidence that comes from accomplishment, which is far greater than the confidence that comes from mere praise.

But he thought of his prior experience with Mr. Singh and stopped in his tracks. What if Mr. Singh had mixed up the order again? What if, instead of the goat, he had packed a cauliflower? It was best that Mr. Jain find out now. He could not envision making the treacherous walk from his apartment to the restaurant inside the dark confines of the burka again.

He turned to face the closed shutter of a deli. He opened the bag. He drew in his breath as he heard that familiar sound of the plastic lid unsticking itself from the container. It

was difficult to see the contents of the vessel in the darkness of the burka. Mr. Jain lifted the flap of his burka to take a closer look at the cubes that were floating in the curry. Mr. Singh had not made a mistake.

Mr. Jain smiled, but only for an instant.

The shutter of the deli opened, and Mr. Jain found himself looking into the face of another man. He pulled the flap of the burka over his face and rushed out into the bustle of the street.

Mr. Rossi looked at the receding figure with great shock. His mouth opened in such a perfect O that he looked like a cliché from a cartoon. He experienced the paralysis that a normally sedentary man experiences after being suddenly thrown into the midst of adventure.

At the same time, he felt surprised and blessed, as though he had been handpicked for a very special mission, namely to protect America from the Muslims. And he hadn't been handpicked by your average, hairy, human hands; he had been selected for this endeavor by the manicured and majestic hands of God himself.

Mr. Rossi had spent his career as a construction worker for the MTA. After retirement, he had settled into an easy routine that mostly involved drinking beer and gardening. One morning, he had opened the *Queens Ledger* and read with great dismay that Olive Garden had been voted the best Italian restaurant in Jackson Heights. Oh, how his beloved neighborhood had changed! Giglio's, Bella Notte, Cascarelli's . . . all these great establishments had been run out of business by those curry places, those *Raj*-somethings.

Mr. Rossi had resolved that he would bring great Italian food back to Jackson Heights. He took over a space that had been previously occupied by yet another Indian fast-food shop. He stocked it with antipasti, pastas, parmigianas, cannoli, espresso, Limoncello, and fresh sausage flown in all the way from Chicago. He then filled the deli with his three favorite sounds in the world: Italian music, New Jersey rock 'n' roll, and the shrill pitch of his mother yelling at him.

If the tragic events of 9/11 hadn't taken place, Mr. Rossi undoubtedly would have had a different reaction to seeing a man in a burka. He would have shrugged, smiled, and said, "Only in New York." But 9/11 *had* happened. Those bastards had come to America and tried to destroy it. America had been changed forever. Americans had been changed forever.

Nowadays, one had to be ceaselessly watchful. One had to be brave. He would be brave. Mr. Rossi ran after Mr. Jain with no regard for the ice streaked treacherously along the ground.

“Hey, you!” he shouted.

Mr. Jain, who was your average, middle-class Jain, was inexperienced in matters of subterfuge. He stopped and turned around. He gasped with surprise as Mr. Rossi pulled open the flap of his burka. He stopped breathing as Mr. Rossi snapped a photo with a camera phone.

“Smile!” Mr. Rossi growled.

Mr. Jain now felt a modicum of his considerable powers of analytical reasoning return to him. He saw clearly that he did not need to smile. Instead, he needed to detach himself at once from the current situation. He turned his back on Mr. Rossi and began to run. Mr. Rossi followed him down the block at an impressive pace. But Mr. Jain, though older, had kept to a regimen of a long daily walk for the last twenty-five years and was easily able to outdistance the overweight deli owner.

Mr. Rossi stopped when he came across a patrolman on the corner of 73rd Street and 37th Avenue.

“Officer!” he gasped. “I have something really important here . . . something life changing.”

Officer O’Hare frowned. He did not like the sound of “life changing.” He was a simple man who had joined the police force because he’d wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. He relished a steady, day-to-day, routine life that began with an egg on a roll and ended with a medium-rare cheeseburger. He thrived on predictability. He did not want to change his life or, for that matter, meet people who wished to do so.

Mr. Rossi shoved his phone into the officer’s face.

“What’s this?” O’Hare grumbled.

“It’s a Muslim man.”

“So?”

“He’s wearing a burka!”

“And your point is . . .?”

“First, they came at us with their bombs. Then their planes. And now, they are cross-dressing!”

“Cross dressing in planes?” Officer O’Hare asked.

“No, cross-dressing on the open street. In broad daylight! They are out to corrupt the moral fabric of our society.”

Officer O’ Hare looked at Mr. Rossi with a blank stare.

“This is serious,” Mr. Rossi said. “Don’t you remember what our president said after that horrible day in September?”

Officer O’Hare tried to recollect just what was it that President Bush had said. But nothing more than “Go shopping” came to mind. But why should he remember anything that President Bush had said? He had stopped listening to Mr. Bush ever since the president had withdrawn the troops from Afghanistan and taken them into Iraq.

“He said that, as Americans, we now have to be extra watchful,” Mr. Rossi said.

“Yes,” said Officer O’Hare. “If you see something, say something.”

“I don’t think it was the president who said that,” said Mr. Rossi.

“Well, somebody did.”

Officer O’Hare found that he didn’t like the person in front of him. He looked away from Mr. Rossi and examined a snowflake on the sleeve of his uniform with great attention.

“I think we might be getting away from the point,” Mr. Rossi said. “We should be studying the photo of the man in the burka.”

“Let’s have a closer look, then,” Officer O’Hare said.

He held the camera phone close to his eyes. Then he stretched out his arm and studied the photo from afar. Those sparkling eyes. That thick mustache. He had seen that face before. He looked beyond the tensed features. He looked for the essence of that face. As a policeman, he knew that every face had one expression that never goes away, no matter the current emotional state of the person. It is the expression one wore most often, one that left an indelible imprint on a person’s countenance. George Bush always had a look of smug satisfaction. Shaquille O’Neal had the gentle smile. In this case, it was the look of quiet contentment that shone through the fear. Officer O’Hare recognized the man on the camera phone. He was Mr. Jain, the soft-spoken husband of his childhood math teacher.

Like Mr. Singh, Officer O'Hare was fond of Mrs. Jain. She had taught him the essentials of algebra and calculus without ever once raising her voice. In a society where people needed calculators to figure out tips and where politicians fooled the population with deceptive graphs, he felt happy that he was not innumerate. Armed with the simple workings of the Trachtenberg Speed System of Basic Mathematics Mrs. Jain had taught him, he had become a more confident man.

"I will take care of this," he said to Mr. Rossi.

"Take care of it, how?" asked Mr. Rossi. He put two fingers to his head and blew out crudely with his mouth to mimic the sound of a gun.

"I will take care of it," repeated Officer O'Hare. "I will take it up with the proper authorities."

"The FBI? The CIA? Homeland Security?" Mr. Rossi asked excitedly.

"There are . . . others," Officer O'Hare said mysteriously.

Mr. Rossi was impressed. His fevered imagination flew to faraway lands with secret prisons and double-humped camels.

"You are a good man, Officer," he said. "With people like you guarding America, we will remain the land of the free."

Officer O'Hare felt a need to be free of this conversation. But he decided to take steps to protect Mr. Jain. If Mr. Rossi went around telling people what he had seen, Mr. Jain could be in danger. Nowadays, there was no shortage of vigilantes and paranoid law enforcement officials who might take immediate action to harm the old man.

"Thank you," he said. "And take care that you don't breathe a word of this to anyone. It's top secret. You are now a privileged citizen helping the state."

"Got it, Officer," Mr. Rossi said. He clicked his heels together and promptly slipped on the pavement.

Officer O'Hare decided to check up on Mr. Jain first thing the next morning. He doubted that the old man was up to anything dangerous. So he liked to cross-dress as a Muslim woman. So what? People began to act more strangely as they got older. Why, Lady Gaga had once worn a dress made entirely of meat, and she wasn't even old. All Mr. Jain had done was wear a burka.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mr. Jain placed the burka underneath a pile of heavy bedspreads at the very back of his closet. He pushed at the door. The wheels of the closet door groaned over the fifteen-year-old guide rails before closing.

The snow had stopped, and slanted rays of the winter sun poured through the window of the bedroom. They fell weakly on Mr. Jain's face. He felt as though the entire world was shining a spotlight on him. He pulled down the blinds.

He sat down cross-legged on the floor. He closed his eyes and focused his attention on the stream of air leaving his nostrils and hitting his upper lip. More than derivative calculus or organic chemistry, the art of Vipassana meditation was the best skill that Mr. Jain had acquired in his life. It had kept him in perfect equanimity during his most stressful days as a parent and as a head of one of the world's largest research labs. It had helped him come to terms with the horrible events that had played out on 9/11. Now, as he realized at a physical level that all things must pass, he found that the technique helped him calm down and disengage from the encounter with the deli owner.

After an hour, he felt relaxed. Mr. Jain gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. He was able to think in a clear and articulate manner. The first thought that came to his mind was that he wanted to eat the goat. His mouth filled with saliva as he thought about its chewy softness.

The plastic bag opened with the rustling sound of candy wrappers. Mr. Jain opened the container and stabbed the plastic fork into the goat. This time around, the decision to eat the animal was premeditated. As a result, Mr. Jain was able to enjoy the meal without any accompanying guilt. The evidence, too, was disposed of in a calm and thorough manner. By the time Mrs. Jain got home from her knitting session, the apartment was spotless and unblemished, as though it had never borne witness to a non-vegetarian meal.

The exertions of the day had worn out Mr. Jain. He went to bed earlier than Larry King. He slept through the show and through Mrs. Jain's asking him if he wanted dinner. When he woke up in the morning, he had no recollection of even walking from the couch to the bedroom. He realized that he had slept deeply. He felt satisfied.

"Are you OK?" Mrs. Jain asked.

"I have never been better. I feel completely rested."

"You do look better than you have lately," his wife observed.

"And I feel better," said Mr. Jain. "Today, I think I will take a long, long walk."

“I was worried,” said Mrs. Jain. “You didn’t even eat dinner yesterday. There’s a lot of leftover food in the fridge. I would have made you something fresh, but I don’t like to waste food, especially now that we are retired.”

Mr. Jain had already begun to raise his hand. “You know how I feel about leftovers,” he said.

“It’s not really leftovers if you haven’t eaten it the previous night,” Mrs. Jain replied.

“Don’t worry,” said Mr. Jain. “I will manage.”

“‘Manage’? It’s a miracle that you ‘manage’ to get wet in the shower. How will you ‘manage’? And what will you do for lunch if you won’t eat the dinner you didn’t eat last night? Come to think of it, what did you do for lunch yesterday? I asked that Singh boy to stop by again, but he said that nobody responded when he buzzed the apartment. Where were you?”

Mr. Jain stopped brushing his teeth. He became watchful. He looked carefully at a sliver of white foam that dribbled out of his mouth and fell onto his forearm. He gurgled water in his mouth exaggeratedly. By the time he was done, he had thought of an alibi. He felt great pride in just how adept he was becoming at living a life of crime.

“I forgot to tell you,” he said. “You remember my friend Matt from the research lab? He’s visiting New York for two days. We had lunch together in the city yesterday. We will be lunching again today.”

“Ah, yes, I remember Matt,” his wife said. “Why don’t you have him over for dinner?”

“If a man is visiting New York for two days, let him stay in the city. Why drag him all the way to Queens? If you are out on a safari, wouldn’t you much rather see the lion? Would you be content to merely see rabbits?”

“I didn’t know you had that opinion about Queens,” his wife said.

“There are a lot of opinions I have that you don’t know about,” said Mr. Jain. “For example, I think using hot water to wash whites is highly wasteful, and—”

Mrs. Jain said a hasty good-bye and went off to Mrs. Chang’s.

The apartment was once again empty.

Mr. Jain put on the cassette of the great Pandit. He nodded in approval as the wise man began to speak. The Pandit emphasized how important it was to remain extremely watchful so as not to fall into evil and violent ways.

Mr. Jain touched his ears in contrition and begged for forgiveness. “Never again, never again,” he said. He smiled with satisfaction as he realized that he believed himself. He was now a vegetarian again. When he walked the streets, the chickens, the goats, the pigs, and the cows could walk beside him, for they would believe that he would do them no harm.

He decided to give the burka back to the Muslim gentleman at the store. He wasn’t sure whether it was a religious object and if it could be disposed of in the trash. Mr. Jain was a God-fearing man, and his voyage into the world of sin had made him even more so. He didn’t want to take the risk of offending a particular god, even if that god belonged to a religion different from his own. He folded the burka neatly and packed it into a khaki backpack that he had preserved from his engineering days.

Outside, the sun shone so brightly that an old man’s skin appeared to be whiter than his hair. The ice and snow had become a thing of the past. The gutters were filled with the merry sound of bubbling water.

“What a day,” Mr. Jain said to the superintendent. “In New York, the weather fluctuates more rapidly than the stock exchange.”

The superintendent was a kind man. He smiled and nodded his agreement as though hearing this comparison from Mr. Jain for the first time.

The leaves on a nearby tree were still green and sparkled with good health. An apple bobbed heavily on a branch. It was a wonderful day to be vegetarian. The sky was a heartbreaking blue. A white cloud advanced and frothed like a wave on a beach. Mr. Jain felt alive. He wanted to dive into the sky and keep swimming forever.

A chickadee hopped onto a nearby branch and chirped melodiously. Mr. Jain inhaled deeply. He felt better about himself. He was once again a person who was not capable of doing harm to a single other being in the world. The Mahavira was right. Nonviolence and kindness to living beings was not an act of charity; it was kindness to oneself.

“Excuse me,” said someone nearby.

Mr. Jain stopped breathing. Why was a police officer talking to him?

“You are Mr. Jain, aren’t you?”

Mr. Jain decided to choose his words cautiously.

“Yes,” he said simply.

“I thought so,” said Officer O’Hare. “You are Mrs. Jain’s husband. The Mrs. Jain who teaches math at Joseph Pulitzer.”

“She has retired,” said Mr. Jain. “And, yes, I am her husband.”

He felt ashamed of the self-centered view he was taking of the situation.

“Is she all right?” he asked. His was not a vengeful God, but there was just no telling. Everyone seemed to be so angry nowadays.

“Oh yes, yes.” The officer smiled. “I’m sorry, I should have been clearer. I was just walking down the street, and I thought I recognized you.”

“Me?” Mr. Jain felt damp. There was no snow or ice, but it suddenly felt as cold as yesterday.

“Yes, you visited our class when I was young. Mrs. Jain was my math teacher.”

The bird began to sing once again. It belted out a verse from Al Green’s “Love and Happiness.”

It was a happy coincidence, for it was Mr. Jain’s favorite song. He started to laugh. He made conversation with the officer. They exchanged pleasantries about the weather and remarked how much the neighborhood had changed. Mr. Jain made a dark joke about the Mets. Officer O’Hare nodded sadly and laughed. Because Mr. Jain was of Indian descent, and because the officer was young, Mr. Jain asked him if he was married. Mr. Jain shook his head censoriously on learning that the officer was still single and offered to speak to the “relative of someone I know.”

It hadn’t seemed possible, but Mr. Jain found that his heart was capable of holding even more happiness than it had only a few minutes ago. It swelled his chest to dangerous proportions. He released the pressure by letting out a melodious whistle.

The sun was nice. The policeman was nice. The golden retriever that walked by Mr. Jain was nice. The Reverend Al Green was right. Love was all about walking together, talking together.

His mood darkened as he thought about having to go back to the Muslim man’s store and return the burka. The universe seemed so vast and full of possibilities that Mr. Jain wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to listen to a man with a strident, narrow worldview. However, he decided to go to the store right away and get this unpleasant errand off his list. In a post 9/11 America, it wasn’t safe for him to walk around with a burka. And for that matter, it was definitely not safe to be seen by a young policeman (nice as he might be) walking with a burka to an Islamic store.

Mr. Jain decided to approach the store by a circuitous route. He would go up to the more crowded Northern Boulevard, where a man could be anonymous. After a few blocks, he could turn left and head back toward his destination.

He decided to turn left on 71<sup>st</sup> Street. This would give him an opportunity to say hello to Mrs. Salsano if she was out on her front porch on this fine day. Mr. Jain had often felt that he could look endlessly at the purple, green, and yellow bracts of the vine that traveled the entire length of her porch. Mr. Jain had first admired the bougainvillea when he had moved to New York all those years ago. It had reminded him of the Bombay of his childhood, a time when man hadn't yet occupied every square inch that could otherwise be occupied by plant or animal.

He reached Mrs. Salsano's porch. She was sitting outside, but Mr. Jain found that he had to gaze at the amazing plant through the window.

"You've moved it inside for the winter?" he asked.

The old lady smiled and nodded.

Mr. Jain bowed to Mrs. Salsano, just as he had been doing for the last two decades. He then paid her a familiar compliment. "What a beautiful plant, Mrs. Salsano," he said. "What a beautiful plant."

Mr. Jain let out another whistle and walked on down the street, marveling at the colors that the sunlight had managed to coax out of people and things. That car was so yellow. That building so orange. And that flag was so red, white, and blue.

Mr. Jain stopped to take in the words *These colors don't run*. This wasn't entirely true. The dyes that were used in making brightly colored fabrics were often unstable. They would bleed. They would run. It was necessary that the owner apply a strong dose of pre-laundering products or at the very least test the flag with a dab of water before putting it into the washer on cold. Mr. Jain knew that the owner probably meant the words metaphorically, but there was always a danger that, through continued exposure to this message, he might actually start believing in them.

In supposing that the owner of the flag had meant these words metaphorically, Mr. Jain was right. The bold assertion was the first piece of poetry that Mr. Rossi had ever indulged in in his life. Now, he stared at the flag proudly. He then stared at the gentleman on the street looking at the flag.

Mr. Jain had read in *The Journal of American Science* that over 55 percent of all communication was nonverbal, and much of this nonverbal communication took place through the eyes. He now thought that the authors of the article were wrong. The actual number was somewhere close to 99 percent. Mr. Jain saw two sentiments reflected as clearly in Mr. Rossi's eyes as though the man had shouted them.

The first was that the deli owner had recognized him. The second was that the deli owner wanted to murder him.

Mr. Jain's wife had once told him about a poem by the great Mirza Ghalib, in which there was a memorable line: *Even my shadow runs away from me/Like smoke from fire.*

As Mr. Jain turned around and began to run, he thought that, in this case, it was he who was running away from his shadow. And he was running so fast that he doubted if his shadow could keep up with him.

The little details that he normally enjoyed in the course of his walks—the Grecian statues on the lawns of different houses, the colors of the awnings on the stores, and the various types and hues of collars on the ambling dogs—now began to pass by in a blur.

Mr. Jain was reminded of his younger days, when he had to commute to work. In those days, he had to rush every morning to the station. On his way back home, the walk went by in a blur of tiredness. Mr. Jain used to fret about how the demands of his job were taking him away from observing the details of animals and things.

The Mahavira had stressed the importance of attention and *bhavana*. It was important that human beings pay attention to the details of things. They needed to observe every vibration, sensation, or event, even if that event was as insignificant as the walk of an ant. It was only through such rigorous awareness that humans could truly avoid causing harm to their fellow beings. But, faced with the demands of an all-consuming job, Mr. Jain had walked without paying attention, without practicing *bhavana*.

Now, he felt that familiar feeling of passing through the world in a careless way once again. Only this time, he wasn't walking. He was running. And it wasn't his boss who was making him hurry through the streets. His haste was provoked by a gentleman with a mad gleam in his eyes, a man who hadn't yet made it to the headline of the *New York Daily News* but who was quite possibly homicidal.

Two blocks later, Mr. Jain found himself by the subway station. Roosevelt Avenue dug like a giant fork into Broadway right by the Mexican taco stands, the Chinese bakery, and the root of all sin in the world, Mr. Singh's Nan Violence.

Mr. Jain dashed into a Dunkin' Donuts.

Mr. Jain had often thought that the restroom at this particular branch of the donut conglomerate was similar to the Statue of Liberty in that they both seemed to have thousands of people lined up in front of them at any given moment. But now, the people had disappeared. The restroom was empty. It was a miracle. Mr. Jain felt that after all of the atrocities he had been subjected to, the gods were finally conspiring to act in his favor. He opened the door and bolted into the restroom.

Mr. Jain leaned against the door. He promised God that if he were to get out of this mess, he would make an offering of donuts to all the poor and starving people of Jackson Heights.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mr. Rossi entered Dunkin' Donuts. He found that it was silent. It was Sunday. The patrons of the establishment stared at the toppings that were yet to be eaten and into the coffee that was yet to be sipped. They were content with life. Mr. Rossi laughed at them for their easygoing ways.

The nation was under attack!

While these people ate donuts blissfully, the Muslims were cross-dressing and corrupting the morals of American society at its deepest level. If they weren't stopped, there would be soon be a day when Lady Gaga, Bruce Springsteen, and even The Situation from *Jersey Shore* would be seen in public wearing burkas.

But not if he had anything to say about it.

Mr. Rossi moved his round head on his stout neck and scanned the establishment.

And there he was!

He was dressed in a burka, casually paying the cashier for some all-American coffee and all-American donuts. The gall of it! Mr. Rossi walked up to the counter and threw open the flap of the burka. He found himself staring into a perfectly oval face and the most beautiful pair of dove-shaped eyes that he had ever seen. Eyes that widened in fear and flashed with anger.

"You bloody bastard!" the woman inside the burka yelled.

These seemed to be the code words for activating the other subversives in the shop.

Mr. Rossi found himself pushed against a wall. A Hispanic man dressed in a hoodie had his palms pressed against his chest. The man seemed to be in a particularly bad mood, as though he had just been advised to go on a diet and stay off the donuts. He had one question for Mr. Rossi.

"What's your problem, man?"

If Mr. Rossi were to be honest, he would say that the biggest problem he currently faced was that this particular gentleman's hands were pressed way too tightly against his chest. But he didn't say anything. For one, the hands that were pressed against his

chest made it difficult for him to utter even a single word. In addition, he perceived that this particular gentleman wasn't really looking to make conversation.

He began to breathe in gasps so that it appeared that he was in the final stages of cardiac arrest. The man eased up on his grip a little. It was the opening that Mr. Rossi needed. He pushed hard, and his questioner was thrown back against a table. Mr. Rossi rushed out of the restaurant. The colors on his flag might not run, but even if they did, it was doubtful that they would have been able to keep up with Mr. Rossi. He was going, going, and he was gone.

Mr. Jain opened the door of the restroom cautiously. He had put on his burka. He was hopeful that he wouldn't be confronted by the flag man. Surely this man wouldn't accost a burka-clad person in a neighborhood where all the Muslim cab drivers of New York City came home to roost.

"It's all right, sister."

Mr. Jain peeked out of the mesh over his eyes to see a young Hispanic man. He was well built and had a tattoo of an anchor on his forearm, visible where his sweatshirt sleeves were pushed up.

"There was someone walking around harassing women," he said. "But I took care of him. But be careful out there. It's a crazy world full of crazy people. There's a lot of ignorant fools out there."

Mr. Jain looked at this man in the hoodie with a devout air. He appeared to be a messenger of God who had been sent down to protect Mr. Jain. Mr. Jain thought about how God took so many forms when he came down to earth. Sometimes he manifested himself as the warrior Kalki on a white horse, at others a Puerto Rican gentleman with a picture of an angry snowman on his hoodie.

Mr. Jain nodded vigorously inside his burka to convey his gratitude to his savior. He wanted to shake hands with him and shower him with effusive praises. However, for the first time he sensed that his hands were too big and his voice too deep for him to convey his gratitude without complicating matters further. He felt hopelessly inadequate to thank this god among men. He felt a great sense of shame, which compelled him to leave the establishment hastily.

He was surprised to see that, even in this turbulent world, the sun had continued to shine brightly. The birds improvised their compositions, but now their efforts were wasted upon Mr. Jain. He walked toward his apartment with his mind clouded in fog. His irritation was further increased as he bumped into a man inspecting an orange outside the Patel Brothers grocery store.

“These stupid Indians,” he muttered. “They will look at an orange from all angles as though they are buying a Picasso painting.”

He instinctively knew that it was wrong to stereotype individuals. In fact, this very propensity for stereotyping in modern society was responsible for all the problems he currently faced. However, Mr. Jain was too angry to feel magnanimous enough to admit his mistake. He repeated his assertion to himself, and by the time he had reached his apartment house, his views on the matter of Indians and oranges had hardened.

He rushed up the stairs without waiting for the elevator. There was a small wooden box outside his apartment. Mr. Jain smiled inside his burka. He knew it was a Christmas gift from Mr. Kohnen, an entrepreneur in the borough of Brooklyn.

Two years ago, Mr. Jain had helped the young man with the architecture for a datacenter just as he was launching his startup. Since the two men didn't know each other well enough to discuss matters of religion, Mr. Kohnen did not know that Mr. Jain's religion did not permit him to touch a drop of alcohol. The young man had shown his appreciation by sending Mr. Jain a bottle of wine for the holidays each year since. For the last two years, Mr. Jain had re-gifted the bottle to the superintendent of his building.

But today he carried it inside and sat down on the couch.

“Collateral estoppel,” he said to himself. “One person cannot be convicted for the same crime twice.”

Collateral estoppel was one of the fundamental tenets of the American Constitution, an area that Mr. Jain had studied extensively after reading Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. He recalled how the principle of double jeopardy had been most memorably applied to the *Ashe v. Swenson* case in 1970.

Now, Mr. Jain applied it to his own situation. He had already committed the cardinal sin of eating meat. For this trespass, he would be reborn as a cockroach, a rat, or one of those thieving rickshaw drivers in New Delhi. Since he was already condemned, why shouldn't he go ahead and sample the wine? It wasn't as if matters could get any worse in the afterlife. . . .

A Supreme Court justice would have pointed out to Mr. Jain that his reading of the situation was flawed. Taking the life of another animal and drinking alcohol were, in fact, two different crimes. Mr. Jain could be tried separately for each and be given an even harsher punishment. He could, for example, be reborn as a cockroach in a New Delhi rickshaw.

But Mr. Jain's mind, normally so astute and incisive, had been muddled by his repeated interactions with the flag man. Let alone the complicated tenets of US Constitutional

law, he was now incapable of recalling even the far simpler tenets of the good Pandit Shri Bharilji.

Mr. Kohnen was not a terribly sophisticated man. He had selected a wine bottle that had a screw top. Mr. Jain opened it effortlessly. He reached for a glass from the top shelf of his kitchen cabinet. He watched with wonder as the red liquid gurgled its way into the glass, sometimes appearing dark, sometimes lighter, but always mysterious-looking.

The first sip was bitter. But after Mr. Jain placed the glass down, he found that the taste stayed with him. He thought of yet another couplet from Ghalib that his wife had once recited:

*The scent of a flower, the sigh of a heart, and the smoke of the lamps from your assembly/Whosoever departed from your gathering departed perturbed.*

Mr. Jain had departed from his assembly with the wineglass, and he found that his nose, his lips, and indeed his entire being were deeply perturbed. It was an insistent perturbation, one that demanded instant satisfaction.

Mr. Jain picked up his glass and drank deeply of the wine. His chest felt warm. His mind began to swirl with thoughts. At the epicenter of this tornado was the flag man. Mr. Jain felt with a deep conviction that the flag man was at the root of all the troubles in his life. In fact, the flag man was at the epicenter of all the problems in American society. The flag man stood against the sentiments of Thomas Jefferson and the very men who had founded this nation.

He had another long swallow of the wine and tried to remember Tom (the founding father now appeared familiar to Mr. Jain) Jefferson's words. What was it that the great man had said? Mr. Jain thought he recalled that it had something to do with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In America, a man had the liberty to choose between Nike and Adidas as he pursued his happiness. He had the liberty to choose his food. His religion. His garment, even if that garment was a burka. Mr. Jain began to feel angry toward people like the flag man, who stood in the way of accomplishing Tom Jefferson's dream.

Mr. Jain stood up. These were times that called for action. What if Gandhi had told the British, "Go ahead and levy that salt tax. I can't be bothered right now. I have to watch *Larry King Live* on television." India would be such a different country. Replete with colonial powers, the world would be a terrible place. But Gandhi hadn't sat at home and watched basic cable. He had marched on to Dandi. He had walked. As Mr. Jain would walk now.

With his burka flapping in the wind and the wine swirling in his head, Mr. Jain turned onto Northern Boulevard. He made a left turn on 71<sup>st</sup> Street and went up to the home with the flag.

And even though it wasn't cold, his body trembled with agitation. Mr. Jain recited the words of the Pandit to calm himself.

*Dayadharm Ka Jhanda/Jag Mein Lahraya.*

*The flag of nonviolence/You unfurled in the world.*

Mr. Jain repeated the words to himself, but the wine induced a small yet crucial error.

*Dayadharm Ka Danda/Jag Mein Lahraya.*

*The baton of nonviolence/You unfurled in the world.*

The flag man was washing his store window. In his worst transgression to date, far worse than the eating of the goat and the sipping of the wine, Mr. Jain committed an act of active violence. He did not have a baton, but God had given him a pair of hands. Mr. Jain punched the flag man in the face.

Mr. Rossi widened his eyes as he saw a row of knuckles coming toward him. . . .

When he came to, he found a bright light shining on his face.

The man who wore a burka stood nearby, squinting and looking away. Mr. Diaz also saw the young Hispanic man from the Dunkin' Donuts shop earlier that morning, and he was talking to a TV news reporter. Mr. Rossi recognized her from the evening news.

"Mr. Rossi?" the Hispanic man said. "Is that the creep's name? Whatever. So I saw this Mr. Rossi this morning in Dunkin' Donuts. He was being a public nuisance, walking around pulling the burkas off women's faces. Big ups to my brother in the burka here. It takes courage, you know, to offer yourself up as bait to apprehend a criminal."

Mr. Jain looked at the nice police officer who had been his wife's student.

"I can't comment on an ongoing investigation," Officer O'Hare said to the news person, who had asked him a string of questions. He then pursed his lips and refused to open his mouth to say anything more, not even to caution the cameraman, who was in danger of tripping on an untied shoelace.

At the beginning of the millennium, Officer O'Hare had read about two American and Chinese fighter jets that had collided in midair over Hainan Island. The journalist had referred to the affair as an "international incident." The words had left a deep impression on Officer O'Hare's mind. He had thought at the time that if he could get

through life without being part of an international incident, he would have done well for himself. Now, he saw that he would have to follow the instructions on his yellow police tape if he were to make good on his resolution. He would have to proceed with *Caution*.

“Mr. Jain,” he asked, “did you dress in a burka because you were worried about how Muslims were being treated in our country? And because you wanted to catch people who harassed them?”

Mr. Jain smiled weakly. He resolved that this would be his last sin. After this one time, there would be no more meat. No more wine. And no more lies.

“Yes,” he said.

Officer O’Hare’s instincts had not failed him. The encounter of Mr. Jain and Mr. Rossi did become an international incident.

However, it blossomed into that rarest of entities, an international incident of the good kind.

Mr. Jain was awarded a Presidential Citizens Medal for “protecting the religious diversity of American society.” Leaders of Arab nations issued statements praising “a non-Muslim for defending the honor of Muslim women.” A women’s-liberation group in Saudi Arabia, greatly moved by Mr. Jain’s call for “liberty of choice,” started a group on Facebook called No Gain without Jain and defiantly honked car horns through the streets of Jeddah.

And, although I wasn’t privy to it, there also must have been a domestic incident in Mr. Jain’s residence. I called on my uncle a few weeks after the winds of publicity had blown over. His wife was still upset with him. His daughter had not yet stopped calling their residence from Bombay every fifteen minutes.

“I leave you alone for a few days, and this is what you go and do. I suppose I don’t mind that you wore a burka, but you actually went and hit another man?”

“And why don’t you mind that he wore a burka?” asked Mrs. Chang. “If I were you, I would mind.”

Mr. Jain smiled thankfully as I changed the topic to the A4 processors on the new smartphones. My stomach rumbled as we got into a heated discussion on sub-45 nanometer engineering.

“Do you want to step out and grab a bite to eat?” I asked.

“No, no,” said Mr. Jain. “We have some excellent leftovers.”

## **About the Author**

Arun Krishnan is a writer of Indian origin based in New York City. He is the author of *The Loudest Firecracker* which was published by Tranquebar Press. The book was nominated for the Crosswords Books Award and won favorable reviews from Time Out, The Pioneer and The Hindu.

Arun is also the host of the Learn Hindi from Bollywood Movies Podcast. The podcast has been featured in The Guardian, National Geographic Traveler and the Wall Street Journal.

The podcast and links to other writings can be found at [www.cuttingchai.com](http://www.cuttingchai.com)