

“The Arctic Route”

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Fiction

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The inflight entertainment selection left something to be desired in Geoff’s opinion. It consisted mostly of Bollywood films and Hindi soap operas that he neither had heard of nor could fully comprehend, even with subtitles. Not surprising, considering this was South Asia Air. There was a modest selection of so-called “Hollywood Blockbusters,” but that consisted almost entirely of superhero bullshit and animated Disney movies. Ruchi had suggested that they simultaneously start a movie called *Mission Majnu*, which was a spy film about nuclear secrets in Pakistan – the kind of fare Geoff would normally jive with – but he abandoned it after about twenty minutes and turned off his seatback screen.

“What’s your problem?” Ruchi asked, pulling out her earbuds.

“I dunno. Just not feeling it.”

“It’s good.”

“Keep watching. I’m not stopping you.”

“But I wanted you to watch as well.”

“What difference does it make?”

“It was supposed to be a shared experience, G-man.” She stuck out her lower lip and offered a pouty frown.

He kissed her on the side of the head. “Sorry.”

He lifted the shade and gazed out the window. The sun was high in the sky, so near midday wherever they were. They had been in the air for about ten hours and far down below was a snowy and desolate landscape. Although they had flown through Zurich en route to Delhi, their return flight connected in Newark, apparently following an arctic flight path. Judging from the terrain, Geoff concluded that they were traversing one of the Fennoscandian countries – Finland, Norway, or Sweden. Then again, it could have been northwestern Russia for all he knew. He thought about turning his screen back on to check the interactive map but was simply not curious enough.

Suddenly Ruchi gasped and grabbed Geoff’s arm, startling him.

“You OK?” he asked.

She paused the movie and removed her earbuds again. “What?”

“I said, Are you OK?”

“Yeah. It was just something unexpected that happened.”

“Someone got killed?”

“Yep. Why don’t you watch?”

“Nah, I’m gonna work on some branding stuff.”

“OK, then don’t bother me.” She flashed a sassy smirk and popped her earbuds back in.

Geoff dug his backpack out from under the seat in front of him and extracted his laptop computer. He lowered his tray table and opened up the computer, but there was hardly enough room to work. They were in the coach cabin, in the far rear of this Boeing 777-300er, and Geoff

was a big boy: 6'2" and 205 pounds. In order to type and to get a clear view of his screen he had to sort of crunch himself up and sink into his seat. Not ideal. He should have popped for business class, but lately he had been acting a bit pound-foolish, or, at least, that is what Ruchi has been telling him.

He opened the branding and design proposal that Hogan & McNellis had forwarded to him the day prior. Although it had taken the firm two weeks longer than estimated to author and compile these documents, Geoff had factored in this sort of delay and was not sore about it. The project was still on schedule and his investors had yet to begin breathing down his neck.

This proposal was for the new Northern Italian steakhouse concept that his restaurant group, Amberlake Partners, of which he was the CEO, was preparing to launch later that summer. *Fuocovento* was the name they were going with, and it would be situated in a prime Los Feliz location. Four thousand square feet: enough room for sixty tables, a full bar, and an open kitchen. This would be the group's most ambitious investment to date and, consequently, its biggest assumption of risk. Geoff was nervous but also, as was his inclination, stoked.

He scrolled through the branding documents, pausing to review the mission statement on the third page: *Our mission at Fuocovento is to mesmerize and transport via exquisitely crafted cuisine, to offer an inspired culinary escape for an upmarket clientele, and to guarantee satisfaction to every diner.* Geoff had written that statement and, reading it now, felt that it was a bit flat, a bit boilerplate. He made a mental note to work on it more later, during the flight, to run it by Ruchi one more time and brainstorm a bit.

He flipped ahead a few pages to the "Interior Aesthetics" section. This consisted of three pages of images that the branding consultants had culled from design magazines, architecture books, and décor websites – images that, they believed, would properly reflect the vision of the

restaurant as Geoff and his chef-partner Miles Pfeiffer had described it. Looking at the images, Geoff frowned. The proposal was clearly too traditional, too stuffy – your rich uncle’s kind of joint. Amberlake wanted to *reinvent* the steakhouse, not tread in the footprints of other establishments. He had repeatedly urged Hogan & McNellis to think far outside of the box, but apparently they did not get the message. Maybe they were the wrong partners for this project. He would have to give that some thought as well.

Geoff, in general, was quite confident in his ability not only to lead this sort of project from conception to launch, but also, after that, to navigate the treacherous and unforgiving Los Angeles restaurant industry, to react and adapt until they had secured an enduring place among the best-in-class. He had completed his MBA with a concentration in marketing at the University of Virginia, where he and Ruchi met. Certainly, that program furnished him with both a sophisticated understanding of various aspects of commerce and a valuable rolodex. However, more notably, he seemed to have a natural capacity for this sort of work, the kind that blended artistic vision with project management precision and cold, hard financial acumen. He would have asserted that it was an inherited characteristic, but neither of his parents were business-minded in any way: his father a high school history teacher and his mother a nurse.

That said, he could not hold a candle to his wife when it came to organizational strategy or corporate politics. At the age of thirty-four she had already worked her way up to the controller position for Empyrean Industries, a Fortune 500 chemicals producer. The woman was a machine: the most efficient, productive, unflappable professional he had ever met. And she was only just getting started. It was hard to imagine where she would be in her career in another ten or fifteen years – certainly raking in an absurd salary, which was reassuring considering the unpredictability of the restaurant business. However, they also planned on starting a family in the

next two years and she had, more than once, threatened to leave the rat race and become a stay-at-home mom. “I want to spend more time at the beach,” she had claimed. “I could surf while the kids build sandcastles.” This, quite certainly, was a big bluff. Ruchi thrived as an executive. She never took sick days or personal days because she enjoyed work so much, excelled at putting out fires, loved building enterprises. Even during this much-needed vacation to India, it was clear that she was a bit stir-crazy.

They had spent two weeks in the so-called “Golden Triangle,” visiting Ruchi’s grandparents and extended family in Delhi and Jaipur, along with an obligatory sight-seeing visit to Agra and its magnificent Taj Mahal. Although Geoff had made numerous visits to Europe over the years, he had never set foot in Asia prior to this trip. He was gobsmacked by the premium hospitality he encountered throughout India – at the restaurants and hotels and souvenir shops and, even more so, at the homes of Ruchi’s family. Blondish, brawny, and of German ancestry, he expected to feel out of place, perhaps even discriminated against or taken advantage of, in the Subcontinent. However, he was welcomed with great enthusiasm virtually everywhere he went, was thoroughly and conscientiously catered to, and was so generously plied with food that he was certain he had gained ten pounds over the fortnight.

Ruchi had grown up in Thousand Oaks, northwest of Los Angeles, but had traveled to India at least every other year of her life. So she was hardly phased by the circumstances they encountered or the reception that awaited them. Leading up to the trip, she had repeatedly asserted that Geoff would find inspiration for his work in India, but he was so Continental in his sensibilities, and so enamored, in particular, with Mediterranean luxury, that he had not taken her seriously. However, as always, she was spot on. There was, of course, rural simplicity and urban poverty in many places; but, at the other end of the scale, there was breathtaking opulence. In

New Delhi, they stayed at The Maharaja Estate, a palatial five-star hotel and spa. The customer service was absolutely exquisite, the members of the staff, from top to bottom, expertly trained to provide a comforting and memorable VIP experience to each and every patron. And the attention to detail could only be described as next-level: hand-crafted furnishings in every room, manicured gardens around the perimeter and within the courtyard, acres of white-marble floors, gold-plated fixtures, gem-encrusted chandeliers, and tropical flower arrangements everywhere one looked.

“This place makes Ambra look like a fast-food joint,” he confessed to Ruchi as they settled in for their first night at the hotel. Ambra was Geoff’s proudest achievement to date: an elegant Spanish-Moroccan fusion restaurant and lounge on the water in Marina Del Rey.

“You’re right,” Ruchi replied, characteristically plainspoken. “It does.”

Geoff vowed to up his game, to leverage this remarkable experience, to recalibrate his sensibilities, and to set his sights ever higher. This is what he was thinking about as he continued to review and critique the underwhelming branding proposal. He wondered whether an American firm would even be capable of approximating the Indian ideal. Perfect, he had long been conditioned to believe, was the enemy of good. *But screw that cut-rate mindset*, he now thought. *Perfection will be my aim from here on out.*

Then there was a loud bang accompanied by a brief but violent shuddering of the aircraft. Geoff and Ruchi looked at each other with furrowed brows. Ruchi removed her earbuds.

“Did you hear that?” Geoff asked.

“I thought I heard something.”

“There was a weird sound from up ahead. Maybe an engine.”

They peeked over the seatbacks in front of them. A flight attendant suddenly darted from the rear of the coach cabin toward the front.

Then there was another, even louder explosion and a whoosh of icy cold air seemed to fill the plane all at once. The craft shuddered again, this time without stop, and began to lose altitude. Oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling.

“Oh, my God!” Ruchi exclaimed amidst a sudden outburst of panic among the passengers.

“Put it on!” Geoff yelled to her, yanking his mask on over his head.

The aft section of the fuselage broke off upon impact and skidded wildly across the icy terrain. When it finally came to rest it was leaning to the back and to the side, propped up by the rear right stabilizer. The impact with the ground was unlike anything Geoff had ever experienced in his life, more concussive by magnitudes than the most vicious, open-field tackle he had ever absorbed as a wide receiver in high school. He lost consciousness for an indeterminate period of time and when he woke was completely disoriented. He was staring up into the Nordic sky, which was patched with silver-white cloud cover. For a few moments he had no idea where he was or what had happened. It seemed that he had been roused from a comatic slumber, from a complicated, profound dream.

Then he felt pain. Across his abdomen, in his lower back, his right shoulder. Extreme, searing pain. He shook his head to clear it, at which point everything came back to him: the mid-air explosion, the harrowing descent, Ruchi’s screams.

Ruchi...

He looked to his left. She was there, buckled in, but unconscious and limp as a dish rag. Her head hung back and to the side, her mouth wide open. And there was blood – streams of it flowing from the top of her head, down along her temple, spilling onto her shoulder. Geoff turned to assist her, but that effort alone was prohibitively painful. It felt as if fire were coursing through his nervous system. He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. The frigid air seemed to freeze in his windpipe. His lungs burned.

There was an acrid odor in the atmosphere – chemical, oily, caustic. Geoff looked into the sky again. Off to the left was a distant plume of rapidly ascending, pitch-black smoke.

And behind him there was commotion, voices. One of them was incessantly screaming, *Help us!* Others were echoing the desperate sentiment in different languages. Geoff had the inappropriate urge to tell them all to shut up so he could think.

With clumsy, gelid hands, Geoff pulled off his oxygen mask and unbuckled his belt. This relieved some of the pain in his abdomen. With a groan, he leaned forward and looked around. This remnant of the fuselage consisted of only the last fifteen-or-so rows of the coach cabin. There were two rows in front of Geoff, then open air. It looked as if it had been surgically cleaved from the rest of the airliner. He turned around and assessed the situation behind him. A fraction of the passengers were conscious, some screaming, others attempting to assist their neighbors. Many were evidently dead.

Geoff returned his attention to Ruchi. She remained motionless. He unbuckled her seatbelt, gently removed her oxygen mask, and put his ear to her mouth. He could not determine whether she was breathing. He grabbed hold of her wrist and checked for a pulse. He seemed to feel one.

“Ruchi?” He looked into her face and shook her gently. Blood continued to drip from the side of her head. He propped himself up to examine the wound on the top of her head. The physical adjustment sent shockwaves of pain down his spine. He began to wonder whether he had broken his back.

The crown of Ruchi’s head was a tangle of thick, bloody, black hair. Geoff could not determine from looking at it exactly where or how severe the damage was. He knew that head wounds tended to bleed heavily. Perhaps it was superficial. Perhaps it was a cracked skull. He thought about probing it with his fingers but decided that might cause more problems than it would solve. He looked into his wife’s face once more and began to convulse with sobs.

Nearby, somebody shouted something. Geoff raised his head and looked about. Three rows back an older Indian man in a blood-spattered turban was waving to him. The man shouted again.

“I don’t understand!” Geoff shouted back. “I don’t understand your language!”

The man responded with what seemed to be a desperate plea, his hands pressed together flatly. Geoff shook his head. Then he noticed the slumped passenger who was seated on Ruchi’s other side. The back of his skull appeared to have been caved in like a smashed honeydew melon. He was quite obviously deceased.

Geoff sat back in his seat again and put the palms of his hands over his eyes. He tried to think through the situation methodically. *What happened?* Their plane had crashed. *Where were they?* Somewhere cold. Somewhere in the north, near the arctic. *How badly was he injured?* Hard to tell. Mercifully, some of the initial pain had subsided. The remaining discomfort was most acute where the belt had dug into his stomach, in his neck, and in his right shoulder. However, in his amateur estimation, nothing seemed broken or dislocated. *What was the next*

step? Clearly they had to get out of the craft. *Then what?* Warmth. It was unbelievably cold. Now that they had survived the crash, he had to make sure they did not succumb to hypothermia, especially Ruchi who was wearing only a short-sleeved blouse and jeans.

Geoff carefully climbed over Ruchi and the dead man next to her, a difficult task considering his compromised constitution and the awkward angle at which the craft had come to rest. He looked down the aisle. It was relatively clear. Loose luggage had slid down toward the back, collecting in a pile in the aft galley. A female flight attendant was picking her way through the mess in an attempt to reach the passengers who were calling out for help.

“Hey! How do we get out?” Geoff yelled to her.

“This way! This way!” She pointed to the exit at the very rear of the craft.

“Geoff?” A stifled voice. It was Ruchi.

Geoff turned toward his wife. Her eyes were open, though foggy and pained.

“Ruchi!”

“Geoff...” She reached out a trembling hand. He took hold of it.

Around thirty minutes later, Geoff sat atop a patchwork of loose clothing in the snow-covered field upon which the craft had come to rest. Ruchi lay with her head in his lap, her face ashen and streaked and splotched with burgundy stains. He pressed on her wound with a t-shirt and, to his relief, the blood flow seemed to be lessening. Around them a few dozen surviving passengers were tending to their wounds – some writhing on the ground, others assisting the grievously injured, still others staring blankly into the distance, too traumatized to act. The turbaned man paced back and forth, pulling at his long beard and weeping openly. A couple hundred feet away, the front section of the fuselage burned, like a horrible, gaping furnace.

Noxious charcoal columns continued to billow into the sky. From his vantage, Geoff could not see any survivors in that area.

To the best of their ability, Geoff and Ruchi determined that her head wound was not deep enough to be life-threatening. The bigger issue – the *much* bigger issue – was that Ruchi could not feel any sensation below her waist. Her legs were numb and useless, like gelatinous, vestigial appendages. Geoff had hauled her over his shoulder to the rear exit of the plane and had held her in his lap as they slid down the evacuation slide. He had then carried her a safe distance away and had returned to the plane to retrieve loose pieces of luggage in order to wrap her in warm clothing and create a dry nest on which they could wait for rescue. Fortunately, he had found a down jacket that was more than big enough for Ruchi and a hooded sweatshirt that, while snug, provided him with much needed insulation.

After getting settled, Geoff and Ruchi were silent for a time, trying to come to terms with what had transpired. The plane had plummeted over thirty thousand feet in a matter of just a few minutes. It had seemed to be a certainty that they would careen nose-first into the bedrock, but, at the last moment, the pilots were able to pull it level with the horizon, allowing the craft to glide for a moment and then sort of violently bellyflop in the field. *Surreal* was an understatement. *Catastrophic*, even, was a weak approximation. If the people who surrounded them were the only survivors of this crash then, Geoff morbidly calculated, over three hundred souls had perished in the accident.

“Who is going to come for us?” Ruchi asked finally, her voice only at half-strength.

“I don’t know, baby.”

“Do you think we are in Europe?”

“Maybe Scandinavia.”

“It’s so fucking cold.”

“I know. I know. I’ll go find more clothing in a bit to cover you with.”

She groaned and coughed weakly. “I’m paralyzed, aren’t I? I’ll never walk again.”

“Don’t say that, Roo. We don’t know what’s what. We’re alive – that’s what matters.

Now let’s stay alive.”

“OK. You’re right,” she said, gulping, a tear rolling down her cheek. Geoff wiped it away with his palm.

Two young men approached, an Indian in a tan suit with loosened necktie and a white American in a soiled yellow sweater and jeans. They had been assisting in the evacuation and now were checking on the survivors.

“How are you?” asked the Indian.

“We’re hanging in there,” Geoff answered.

“How’s she?”

“She can’t walk. Is someone coming?”

“We don’t know. There is no reception up here,” the American said. “We’re going to check the front section of the plane for signs of life and see if we can communicate from the cockpit.”

Geoff looked at the steel carcass in the distance, still engulfed in a blazing inferno. “Be careful.”

“We will.”

Geoff watched them as they walked off, stomping through the snow, the Indian man limping pronouncedly. Then a convulsive pain shot through his torso, starting near his groin. He clutched his stomach and wheezed for a long minute until the spasm passed.

“What’s the matter, Geoff?” Ruchi inquired, looking up into his face.

“Nothing,” he rasped. “Just a pain in my stomach. I think the seatbelt might have torn a muscle or something like that.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t move.”

“I won’t.”

“Just stay with me.”

“I will.”

Time passed and the sun, with shocking velocity, sunk toward the horizon. It grew colder and windier. The survivors had followed Geoff’s lead and dug through suitcases to find warm layers. The flight attendant, whose name was Trishya, had retrieved and dispersed all of the blankets she could find in storage. But it wasn’t enough. Geoff and Ruchi were chilled to the bone. If, God forbid, they had to spend the night in this location, they would likely freeze to death.

There were only four survivors from the front section of the aircraft and all of them had suffered burns. With the help of the two young men, whose names turned out to be Andy and Suhail, they had come back to join the survivors from the rear of the plane. Andy reported that the cockpit was inaccessible, torched to a crisp. Hence, they had no means of communication with the wider world. But, he reassured everyone, it was only a matter of time before a search and rescue team would reach their location. “We’re gonna make it. Trust me,” he said.

They were in northwest Sweden. Despite the lack of cell phone service, some of the survivors’ phones, including Geoff’s Samsung, still registered GPS information. The nearest town, according to Google Maps, was Arjeplog, about eight miles north-northwest of their

position. The terrain in-between appeared to be rather flat and sparsely forested, but a man named Karl, who identified himself as an expert hiker, estimated that the one-way trip could take over four hours through the deep snow and there was no guarantee that those who attempted it would reach their destination in the rapidly approaching dark of night.

As the group continued to discuss their options, a shrill whistle from somewhere distant pierced the air. The survivors looked around. In a moment, a woman pointed and shouted, “Over there! Over there!”

To the east a few hundred yards was an unexpected sight. Three teams of reindeer, arranged in single-file lines. They were trotting in the direction of the survivors and, in a few moments, it became clear that each team was pulling a large sled.

“Someone’s coming. They’re coming!” the woman yelled. The able-bodied survivors stood up and began shouting and waving their arms.

“What is it?” Ruchi asked, unable to see for herself.

“Deer! Reindeer, I think,” Geoff said.

“Reindeer?”

“I don’t know. Something like that. They’re pulling sleds.”

In a few minutes, the sleds arrived onsite, each towed by four reindeer, which snorted and stamped and exhaled steam from their nostrils. They were piloted by two hirsute older men and a rosy-faced younger woman, all of whom wore heavy, fur-lined leather coats, puffy mittens, and colorful knit scarves and caps. They spoke a language which none of the crash survivors could understand. Geoff thought it might be Swedish, but Karl said that it was more likely an indigenous language. Regardless, it was clear that they were offering transport and the young woman repeatedly uttered a word that sounded like “doctor.”

There was room for three people on each of the sleds, which was disappointing considering there were twenty-nine survivors, most of whom needed medical treatment. The group quickly decided that the most seriously injured should go first, Ruchi among them. The reindeer people assisted in loading the sleds and used leather cords to secure the passengers in place. Geoff bent over to lift Ruchi, but nearly collapsed due to a shock of pain around his midsection. Suhail quickly came to his aid.

“How badly are you injured?” he asked, placing his hand on Geoff’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry about me. Please help me carry my wife to the sled.”

Suhail nodded, knelt next to Ruchi, and delicately scooped her into his arms. Geoff watched on as the young man then lowered her into a comfortable position on the sled between the legs of a large man with a compound break in his forearm and a gruesome facial laceration. Another woman was then seated between Ruchi’s legs, so that the three passengers were in a tightly fitted, tandem position.

“Are you comfortable?” Geoff asked Ruchi, wrapping a blanket around her.

“I’m seriously afraid,” she replied, shivering.

“These people will take care of you.”

“But what about you? I think something is very wrong with your stomach, Geoff.”

“They’ll come back for us. I’ll be OK. We’ll stay warm.” He put his hands on her icy cheeks and pressed his lips to hers. “The hard part is over, baby. They’re taking you to a hospital. I’ll be there with you soon.”

They embraced tightly, Ruchi wrapping her arms around his neck.

Then she said urgently, “I want to have children, Geoff. I want to have children.”

“I know you do. I do, too. And, you know what? As soon as we are back in LA, we’re going to get started. How does that sound?”

“But what if I can’t?”

“Of course you can.”

“I don’t want to be a crippled mother, Geoff.” She fought back a sob.

He looked into her eyes, which were riven with pain and grief, and caressed her face.

“You have to stay positive, Roo. Let the doctors do what they need to do. No matter what happens, you will be a better mother than you can even imagine. I’m sure of that.”

“OK,” she sputtered. “OK.”

Darkness descended upon the glacial landscape and, far away, rival packs of wolves began to sound off harmonically. Geoff sat in a circle with four of the other passengers. They talked about how horrible the disaster was, but how lucky they were to be alive. They shivered and shared fantasies about what they would do when they got back home. A young man from Minnesota said that he would quit his job and propose to his girlfriend. Trishya the flight attendant said that she would finally go to university to become a child psychologist. Another woman planned to reconnect with her estranged sister.

Geoff wanted to take care of his wife and love her as hard as he could possibly love her for as long as was able. He thought about Ruchi, sledding across wintry terrain, petrified that she may never again stand on her own power. He thought about their wedding, which was conducted in a traditional Indian manner, Geoff arriving at the ceremony on the back of a white horse, Ruchi in a breathtaking red and gold gown, her hair styled glamorously with floral accoutrements, an intricate, beaded ornament hanging down onto her forehead. He was

convinced, then, that he had found a precious gem of a woman, a rare, supernal spirit that he did not truly deserve. Although his enthusiasm for their relationship had waxed and waned as time went by – fortunately, not to a degree that would jeopardize their union – he vowed that, in the wake of this calamity, he would never allow his cynicism to get the best of him. He vowed that this... this *event*... would only deepen his affection and devotion.

He suddenly grew lightheaded. The pain in his stomach had intensified and spread to his back and seemed to be working its way up his chest. For the first time, he began to worry about his own condition.

Then, just when the cold seemed to be winning the battle, there came the distant thumping of rotors. Three large, orange, search-and-rescue helicopters approached and circled overhead, shining blinding spotlights down onto the crash site. They soon landed and a platoon of emergency personnel emerged carrying medical cases and stretchers.

One of the medics, a tall woman wearing a blue jumpsuit and helmet, approached Geoff. Over the din of the engines, she shouted something in what seemed to be Swedish.

“I speak only English,” Geoff replied, feeling as though his voice were caught in his chest, as though he had lost the ability to project.

“Are you injured?” she responded in English.

“I have stomach pain,” he said. Then he tried to get up from his seated position, but was overwhelmed by an agony that seemed to radiate throughout his entire body. He collapsed to his side, incapacitated. The woman set down her case and knelt over him.

“Lay on your back please.”

With a groan and wheeze, Geoff complied.

She pulled up his shirt to reveal his abdomen. There were patches of deep purple bruising around his navel and at the bottom of his rib cage. The woman pressed her fingers into the flesh above his groin. Geoff felt as if she had stabbed him with a dagger. He yelped and swatted her hands away.

She sat back on her heels. “OK. I believe you have an internal injury. We need to get you on the helicopter.” She turned and flagged one of her colleagues, who rushed over with a stretcher.

Geoff awoke in a recovery room at Karolinska University Hospital in Stockholm. He remembered the chaos of being loaded into the helicopter but very little of the three-hour flight itself. Looking down, he saw that his abdomen was heavily bandaged. There was a cannula blowing pure oxygen into his nostrils and an IV bag dripping fluids into a tube connected to his arm. He tried to prop himself up a bit, but his body seemed too damaged to respond to his brain’s commands.

In time, a doctor – a slight man with a thick coif and precisely groomed brown beard – came to see Geoff. He explained that they had performed a splenectomy and had repaired two bowel perforations. The prognosis, at this point, was for a full recovery. “How are you feeling now?” he asked.

“I feel like I’m living through a dream, or a nightmare, or a delusion... I don’t know what.”

“Yes, yes. I understand.”

“Where is my wife?”

“Your wife?”

“She was on the plane. Some... some reindeer people came with sleds and took her away.”

The doctor squinted his eyes and tilted his head. “I was not aware of that. You say, ‘reindeer people’?”

“Yes. They were like... I don’t know... Eskimos or something. They arrived before the helicopters and they took nine of the survivors with them.”

“I see. I see. I will have someone look into that right away.” The doctor took a long moment to make notes in his chart, then walked off.

Later a woman appeared. She carried an overstuffed binder and introduced herself as Alice, the staff counselor. “You are Mr. Fischer?”

“Yes. Geoff.”

“Are you comfortable?”

“Fine. Good enough.”

“Good, good.”

“Do you have word of my wife?”

“Ah, yes I do.” She flipped through her binder briefly before landing on the correct page. “She was taken to a hospital in Arjeplog and is currently en route via medevac to our location.”

“She is coming here?”

“Yes.”

“Do they have a diagnosis of her condition?”

The woman scanned a page in her binder. “I see there is paralysis and a head wound.”

“Is the paralysis permanent?”

“That, I do not know. I’m sorry.” She offered an empathetic look. “But this is one of the premiere hospitals in Europe. She will be in very good hands.”

Geoff nodded.

She continued. “I also want to let you know that we offer therapeutic services for those of our patients who have endured emotional trauma. If you feel that you would benefit from speaking with someone, please let me know.”

Geoff considered for a moment. He certainly felt on the verge of a breakdown of some sort, but he did not feel up for a visit with a shrink. “My main concern is my wife, for now. But thank you.”

When Ruchi arrived, hospital staff took her directly in for an MRI of her spine and X-rays of her skull and then admitted her to the intensive care unit, which was two floors below Geoff’s room. Immobilized, Geoff’s only option was to speak with her on the hospital phone. He dialed her room number and a nurse answered. When he introduced himself, she passed the phone to Ruchi.

“Geoff?”

“Yes, baby.”

“Oh my God, Geoff...” She started crying.

“I know. I know.” Hot tears formed in the corners of his eyes. “How are you feeling?”

Ruchi took a moment to compose herself. “I feel very tired. Very sad.”

“It’s OK to be sad. I think that is probably how everyone feels right about now.”

“I know...”

“How was the sleigh ride?”

This made her chuckle lightly. “To be honest, it was much more comfortable than I had anticipated. They took us straight to the hospital. It took about an hour. They surely saved some lives.”

“That’s amazing. The reindeer people to the rescue. I didn’t have that on my bingo card for this year.”

She chuckled again.

“Have the doctors said anything yet?” he asked.

“No. They did some scans. I am waiting to hear. They told me you had surgery.”

“Yes. I had some damage in my bowels. They took out my spleen, but they say I will heal up well.”

“Well, that makes me feel better. I don’t think you need a spleen, anyway.”

“No. I just need you, Ruchi. You’re all I’ll ever need.”

“I need you, too.” She began to cry again.

Geoff let his own tears flow. “I love you more than I can even express.”

“Me too. Me too.”

Once they hung up, Geoff dialed his mother. He felt oddly nervous about speaking with her, this being such an unusual circumstance.

“Hello?”

“Mom?”

“Geoffrey? Oh, thank God. I thought you might have been in the airplane crash that happened.”

“Mom, I was.”

“No... You were in the crash?”

“Yes. But I’m OK. I’m in Sweden.”

“Oh, my Lord. I don’t believe it. They said that there were fewer than thirty survivors! I couldn’t imagine that you were on that flight.”

“Well, I was. We were.”

“And Ruchi?”

Geoff did not feel ready to reveal the gravity of the situation. He wanted to see how the testing panned out before worrying his mother. “She’s... she’s OK. She’s here with me. We’re in a hospital.”

“Were either of you injured badly?”

“Well, we were both injured, but we’re alive and we’re out of danger.”

“Praise the Lord, you are alive. What a miracle. A true miracle.”

“To be honest, it doesn’t feel like a miracle. A lot of people died. It was horrible.”

“I can’t imagine, dear. I can’t imagine... I think I should fly there to be with you —”

“— Mom, I wouldn’t do that just yet. Let me find out exactly what’s going on before you do anything. They might send us back to the States soon. I have no idea what the plan is.”

“OK. But if you have to be there more than a day or two, I’m going to come.”

“That’s fine. Sure.”

Ruchi was diagnosed with an incomplete spinal cord injury and fractured L3 and L4 lumbar vertebrae, for which the surgeons conducted a vertebroplasty. They advised her to stay at Karolinska for two to three weeks while undergoing intensive physical therapy. Their hope was that she would regain some, if not most, of her mobility over time. But it would not be easy and it would not be comfortable, and they could make no guarantees.

Both Geoff's mother and Ruchi's parents flew to Stockholm that week to provide support. Geoff was discharged after four days and joined them at a hotel nearby. They took turns keeping Ruchi company at the hospital and assisting with her therapy and sleeping on the small couch in her room. The process was painful and tearful, but after eighteen days, the doctors expressed satisfaction with her progress. She was not quite mobile, but she had regained some feeling and control of her legs and feet and was able to take a few steps using the parallel bars as support. "I just don't want to be a burden on my loved ones" became her mantra.

After Ruchi's discharge, the family flew back to Los Angeles together, this time on SAS, first class. They had a brief layover in London, which was a bit tricky with Ruchi in the wheelchair. The mothers escorted her to the bathroom. Geoff and Mr. Bakshi took a seat at a nearby bar and ordered whiskeys.

Mr. Bakshi, sipped, exhaled, and then said, "My mother gave birth to three boys and three girls. Did you know that?"

"Yes. I think Ruchi told me."

"Two of my brothers passed away young."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Deepak and Aakash. They were much smarter than me. Much more handsome. Both wanted to be doctors. I was always very jealous."

"But you've done very well for yourself, Nitesh."

"Well enough. I've kept my family safe to the best of my ability, but, as we've seen, there is only so much we can control. Ruchi always thought I sheltered her too much. I think a parent cannot shelter his children enough."

“I wish it made sense,” Geoff sighed. “I wish the world operated according to a rule of fairness – according to laws that make sense. Good things should happen to good people. I know it sounds naïve...”

“You are speaking of karma. You would make a good Hindu.” Mr. Bakshi smiled.

Geoff nodded with a chuckle. “Ruchi’s rubbing off on me.”

“She is a special girl. And you are a good man. We are happy that you are part of our family. We have been from the start.”

“Me too,” Geoff expressed, although, since the crash, his self-esteem had plummeted. He had begun to doubt his capacity to caretake Ruchi in her compromised condition. And his mind seemed flooded with catastrophic thoughts about their future: that Ruchi would never improve; that his feelings toward her would be impacted by her disability; that he would seek fulfillment elsewhere, even violate his marriage vows. For a moment, he studied Mr. Bakshi, who was a proud traditionalist, who, undoubtedly, had never once contemplated falling short of expectations as a spouse or father. And Geoff felt small and insufficient.

Mr. Bakshi clinked his glass against Geoff’s then downed his whiskey in two gulps. “We would like you to stay with us while she recovers.”

“Well, that’s certainly something we can talk about...”

“Perhaps we should talk about it now?”

“I think that would be up to Ruchi.”

“I know my daughter. She will say no at first.”

“You’re probably right. But still, I don’t want to force anything.”

“Not force. Just persuade. I think she will listen to us if we present a unified front.”

“OK. We can do that. I guess it would be best.”

Over the north Atlantic, the plane encountered moderate turbulence, which made both Geoff and Ruchi rather ill at ease. They took a few Lorazepam and held hands tightly and reassured each other quietly. Geoff suggested watching a movie, but Ruchi had no interest. Once the air smoothed out, they laid their seats back and, despite the anxiety, fell asleep.

Mr. and Mrs. Bakshi's home in the Brentwood hills had five bedrooms, more than enough to accommodate Geoff and Ruchi and Geoff's mother, who decided to stay in LA for two weeks. Ruchi's brother and sister, who both lived in LA County, visited with their children during the first weekend after the family's return.

Ruchi underwent in-home physical therapy five days per week. Her recovery was slow and, for her, supremely frustrating. A month into the process, she still relied on the wheelchair. She became quite mercurial and, sometimes for hours, would lock herself in the bedroom and sob. Geoff floundered in his attempts to cheer her up and to imbue her with a sense of optimism. He suggested that they try to get pregnant, but Ruchi had no interest in sex. "I feel disgusting," she told Geoff. "I feel defective. I don't want us to be intimate until things improve." He understood and, in some ways relieved, did not push the issue.

Geoff slowly returned to work. His partners and investors agreed to push back the restaurant launch to the following spring to give him a chance to recover fully and take care of things at home. This was also beneficial for spiritual reasons: Geoff had seemed to have lost his drive. In the wake of the crash, upmarket cuisine had shed some of its significance, some of its shine. He began to question the trajectory of his career, to wonder whether he was putting his talents to their proper use. The most important thing, of course, was to provide for Ruch. He needed to optimize his professional efforts in order to achieve that goal, with all other aspirations fading to the background. He needed to create security and stability, to give her as much freedom

and flexibility to move forward in the way that worked best for her. If it meant that she became a stay-at-home mother, then so be it, although he was hopeful she would overcome any and all adversity and, once again, rise to the top.

Shortly after returning home, Ruchi decided to resign from Emphyrean Industries. “I’m in no position to take on the responsibilities the role demands,” she said, “and I don’t want to hold the company back.” This created some financial pressure for the couple, but, fortunately, they had previously socked away enough assets to hold them over for a time. Also, there was sure to be a settlement with South Asia Air that would provide additional cushion. The worst-case scenario would be that they would sell their townhome in Culver City and stay with her parents until the dust cleared, but that was only a remote possibility.

Geoff and Ruchi spent the night of their anniversary, August 23rd, on the rooftop dining deck at Ambra. They had not visited the restaurant since before the crash, and Geoff felt it would be a good opportunity to check in on things while enjoying a summer evening on the water. Ruchi was reserved during the meal and, when dessert arrived, began crying. Geoff rubbed her back and remained quiet. Recently, she had been irritated by his inquiries into her psychological state, so he had learned to let her express whatever she needed to express in her own time.

After a minute, she turned to Geoff and said, “I can’t continue like this.”

He pursed his lips and said, “You have to keep moving forward, Roo. That’s all you can do.”

“What if I don’t have it in me? What if this is the best it gets?”

“Then we’ll deal with that. But nothing – and I mean *nothing* – will make me lose faith in you.” As the words came out of Geoff’s mouth, he did not trust them. He felt as if he were performing, his confident tone a charade.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you believe in me?” She cleared a tear from the corner of her eye. “Why are you even with me, Geoff? You didn’t sign on for this and I don’t expect you to drag yourself through the mud for the rest of your life just because you feel obligated to me.”

“Obligated to you?” That hurt – in part because Geoff feared that there was some veracity to the claim. “You think I’m here simply out of a sense of duty? Ruchi, how dare you say that?”

“But it’s true.” She hung her head.

“It’s not true! And I don’t want you to say that again!”

“You’ve got the restaurants. You’ve got your health. You could find someone better! It wouldn’t be hard. You could find someone who isn’t... who isn’t so fucking pathetic.”

“Dammit, Ruchi. Stop this! I don’t care how bad you feel about yourself. Don’t you dare question my love for you. Don’t you ever suggest my heart is not in the right place!”

Ruchi put her face in her hands and sobbed.

Geoff immediately regretted getting so heated but, at the same time, he felt it necessary of late to push back on the fucked-up, doomsday narratives that were taking root and sprouting in his wife’s brain. The time for coddling had passed. She needed some tough love, a figurative slap in the face from time to time. Yet, he also recognized that he was angry with himself. He was not one hundred percent certain that his relationship would survive this trauma nor one hundred percent certain that he would not walk away one day. It made him feel weak, disingenuous, depraved. It made him question his entire identity.

He took a deep breath, then put his arm around his wife. In the soft light of their tabletop candle, her thin body shuddered.

In fall, unexpectedly, things took a turn for the better. Ruchi began improving markedly, day by day, both physically and emotionally. She had summoned a sort of spiritual second wind that was propelling her forward. She insisted on giving the wheelchair to charity and began relying solely on her walker to, deliberately and carefully, make her way around the house and, for exercise, up and down the street without a chaperone. She regained much of the weight she had lost and began taking better care of herself in general. Her improving health was most evident in her jaunty green eyes, in her shimmering smile. The old Ruchi – the robust, vivacious Ruchi – it seemed, was finally beginning to emerge from hibernation.

For the family's Thanksgiving celebration, she assumed the role of head chef and led a ladies expedition to the local Whole Foods to pick up all the fixings, both American and Indian. More than three dozen extended family members and friends gathered at her parents' house for the occasion, all overjoyed to see Ruchi functioning so well and in such an ebullient mood. They feasted and the young ones performed songs and dances, and then the grown-ups broke into teams to play a spirited game of Pictionary until late in the evening. Watching his wife flourish, Geoff felt as if a cumbrous malignancy, at long last, had been extracted from deep within his chest.

That night, as Geoff and Ruchi climbed into bed, she said, "G-man, I need to have sex with you tonight."

He smiled. "I've been waiting to hear you say that for months."

"I'm going to make it worth the wait. And I want to do it over and over, because we really need to make a baby."

"Twist my arm."

She laughed brightly, lifted her nightgown over her head, and humorously flung it to the corner of the room.

Opening night at Fuocovento took place in late March. Ruchi's recovery and the revitalization of their relationship had breathed new life into Geoff's work in the months leading up to the gala, and, with the unwavering support of his partners and financiers, he was able to manifest what many attendees considered a truly iconic restaurant. Architecturally distinctive, culinarily inventive yet authentic – a bold step forward in Geoff's career. His mother and in-laws were over the moon, as were *LA Times* food critic Jerry Minnick, James Beard Foundation Trustee Lani Faminiano, and various other distinguished patrons.

Ruchi, now four months pregnant and overwhelmingly radiant, stole the show. She wore a shimmering, strapless, silver cocktail dress that beautifully framed her toned physique, which she had worked so hard on over the winter, as well as her just-detectable baby bump. She wielded her charm like a samurai sophisticate, welcoming each guest, facilitating introductions, and, more generally, promoting good cheer. And, despite her ongoing reliance on a cane, she appeared, in Geoff's enamored eyes, to float from table to table like a seabird on the wind.