

**Excerpt from Atima Srivastava's *Looking for Maya* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1999)**

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**Excerpt from *Looking for Maya*. (Chapter One)**

Sipping an espresso, I stretched out my legs in the sunlight. All around me, people were babbling in different languages, students, tourists. The waiter in his crisp apron carried precarious coffees to the tables set on the pavement. Behind me, I could hear the Italian football on the big screen, inside the café and I felt inexplicably happy. The final examinations were over, the long Summer: yawned before me and I had a feeling that I was going to live and live. There was another café opposite on Greek Street, where people in sunglasses were sitting sipping coffees, but Bar Italia was still the original café in Soho. It stayed open till three in the morning when people emerged from Ronnie Scott's jazz club across the road. They were served hot coffee and croissants and sweet cakes. Maison Bertaux, the old French *pâtisserie* was a hundred yards away, the black; hairdressers with old-fashioned chrome chairs and durex machine, the Pakistani newsagent that sold European papers, the Polish lunch bar full of old men in cravats. I'd told Luke all about the corners of London, full of different cultures, introduced him proudly to places that he had only heard about as he was growing up by the sea.

I felt his arm sliding around my shoulders. He nuzzled the side of his head lovingly against my neck and the newly cut hair bristled against my skin. And suddenly, it occurred to me that I hadn't been aware of Luke for these delicious minutes of knowing I was living in my beautiful city. I moved my head to take a look as he slipped easily into the chair next to mine.

'Looks great,' I smiled, rubbing my thumb against the side of his head, like the fur on a cat.

'It's an amazing place. Just like you said. A real barber's shop. Faded signed photographs from the fifties and everything,' he said generously, smiling at me.

I knew how much he loved me. I'd known it since we'd met at the beginning of our final year. We'd come together finally, having seen each other moving around campus with different groups, with other people, until at last, (we liked to say), met at the right time. Of all the places for students to meet, we had met in the library. Of course I had noticed him before, it was impossible not to. Luke had one of those faces that couldn't be described without the word honest slotted in somewhere. His smile was dazzling, his eyes clear and blue and twinkling. He was handsome like anything, serious and eager and keen. He had put down his books and asked me for a cigarette, our conversation easily staggering into the information:

what subject, where do you live, what sort of music. The lights had gone out and we'd said goodbye, almost immediately bumping into each other again in the coffee bar, and then again in the square. We couldn't stop smiling that day, soaking each other in, feeling exuberant, sitting in the Union bar till it closed too, and already knowing each other.

The university was in an old shipbuilding town with no romantic spots. We drove down in Luke's old Saab to the harbour to see the sunset, stayed till moonlight, unwilling to let each other out of sight. He liked old things, old cars and old ideas, despised Englishness and its restrictions, loved music and its egalitarianism. He held my hand and looked into my face. We had leaned into a kiss and the kiss had gone on for hours; a silent rushing journey through the stars. Lost in space. At the end of the kiss, we had come to the heart of each other, gasping for breath, exhilarated with the moon and the world and everything.

'I want to know all about you. Everything and still keep going, never get to the end of it,' he'd said, his bright blue eyes shining.

'I feel like I've known you for ever. And there's so much I want to show you,' I'd said, both of us so wrapped up in the deep romance of it, unaware that: people everywhere say such things and believe them to be unique.

Luke was my first real boyfriend. Almost immediately we had fallen into the patterns of a life together, enjoying the shopping, the cooking, the TV, essay writing. Friends who shared the same bed. The ease with which we spent the last stage of our formal education together, made it the best time of my life. He didn't know about the Kings Road or the Marquee in Wardour Street or about jumping the trains without a ticket and I had gleefully filled in his gaps of knowledge. We had hitched into London on weekends, bought leopardskin trousers and Spotlight hair dye, watched bands in dark smoky clubs and kissed on the last train back. Sometimes, Luke's open admiration for my fake cosmopolitan experience made me uneasy but I admired him too, for all he'd shown me: which knife in a restaurant, the recreational use of soft drugs, the window into his life at public school. We had become a couple on campus, a couple people liked to look at. I knew he liked it less than I, for him our relationship was beyond that, it was close and deep. Yet, it was enjoyable to be looked at together. We were lithe and attractive, my dark skin against his pale skin, his hair blond, mine dark. Our arms were always wrapped around each other making a creature which was IndianEnglish. Luke liked that phrase I had coined as my own, although I had stolen it from Indian cinema magazines which had gossip columns in that strange hybrid language full of Indian words written in English italics. We had given it another meaning, my white boyfriend and his dusky damsel.

Luke consulted his watch and grimaced. 'We'll have to go soon. I said I'd meet Ralph after lunch.'

I nodded, leaning my head back on the chair, feeling the sunshine pressing on my skin. Luke called both his parents by their first names and although I'd said RaviKavi in my head, and even for fun sometimes, I could never get used to calling my parents by the pet name their friends had for them.

'Ralph's having lunch with an old friend. From the old days. We won't stay long,' said Luke, pulling on a cigarette. We were both watching the street through our sunglasses. It amused me how Luke regarded family obligation as a chore, even though he only ever had to see his mum and dad at Christmas and birthdays and occasional times when one of them was in town. Even when I'd left home and started living sixty miles from London, RaviKavi expected full weekly reports and fortnightly meetings with me. Their eager questionnaires hadn't changed since I'd been at school, excavating the English world on their behalf. What did they give you to eat at dinner, my dad would ask, what do you mean they only seasoned the chops with salt and pepper?

'Excuse me,' said a woman with a camera in her hands, stopping by our table. 'Do you mind if I take a photograph of you?'

Luke and I looked at each other without taking off our sunglasses and smiled broadly.

'I'm from *Pinned* magazine, we're doing a photo spread of Londoners. Interesting looking people,' she smiled.

I felt a surge of love for Luke, at how beautiful he must look to her, and me next to him, beautiful by association. It had never been anything passionate, we had fitted together like spoons, admiring each other like complementary things. Horse and carriage, bread and cheese.

The photographer asked us both to lean towards the camera, and at the last minute Luke threw his arm around me and pulled me close. He wanted to say, 'It's not just a pose, it's incidental this superficial beauty, there's more to it than that.' For Luke the long kiss at the harbour was always a point of reference, a feeling he liked to revive between us, but it seemed to me that that heat, that white intensity had cooled to blood temperature, to a level where we now lived contentedly and peacefully. She took my address, as I was the one with an address in London and said she'd send us the magazine.

'We'll be late,' said Luke paying the waiter. Suddenly, I didn't want to meet Ralph or his friend, I wanted to push Luke into a doorway crowded with cardboard boxes and oil drums, kiss him long and hard on the lips against the barrage of noise and colour in my sweet City, in

my wonderful world.

Ralph was sitting with his old friend at a table inside the cool elegance of a small restaurant in Meard Mews. Shadows passed over them from the large window facing the garrulous street. Ralph stood up as he saw us arrive, our frayed shorts and sandalled feet stepping upon the thick carpet. The chill of the air conditioning hit me like a slap and I shivered. I liked Ralph, I'd met him twice and I knew how well he approved of me. I realized with a shock that his friend at the table looking at us diligently, was Indian. He was wearing a pale linen jacket with an open shirt and his hair was thick and wavy, flopping over one bushy eyebrow, and he had a shaggy moustache which covered his top lip. On his nose rested thin metal-framed John Lennon - my father would have said: Gandhiji - glasses. How typical of Luke to have not mentioned it. English people never thought it quite correct to point out racial difference, thought it vulgar to assume that an Indian should be interested or even know another Indian in a big city. RaviKavi were obsessed with it, always nosing out connections, however tenuous, to mark their country and their long journey. Arrey, my dad would say to a complete stranger, are you related to the Mehtas in Allahabaad, then you are almost my neighbour, you will be insulting me by not coming to my house for khaana.

Ralph shook Luke's hand and gave me a little hug and pulled out a chair for me. His friend was looking at me curiously and I remember thinking, he's old, but he's quite handsome. For a moment I wasn't sure that he was Indian, because his skin was so fair, the colour of pale golden tobacco and his eyes were grey more than brown. I didn't know Indians could have grey eyes.

'Amrit, this is Luke, I think you remember my errant son, and this is his lovely friend, Mira,' said Ralph expansively. 'Amrit Kaushik, Mira Chowdhary.'

'Hello,' said Amrit looking at both of us. 'So nice to see you.'

'Good grief!' said Ralph, taking in Luke's appearance. 'Is this a new fashion?'

Luke smiled and exhaled smoke. 'Yeah, it's a new fashion, Ralph.'

'Two earrings?' said Ralph doubtfully. 'One earring, alright, although in our day, that meant something else altogether.'

'In Indian villages, lots of men wear two earrings, It doesn't mean they're doubly homosexual,' said Luke and I sucked in my lips in order not to laugh. I noticed a smile creeping around Amrit's face. Ralph looked crushed.

'London is, after all, only a village,' smiled Amrit. 'And our days are over, Ralph.' We all laughed. 'Now,' he said, cleverly changing the subject, 'would you like something to drink? Or

perhaps a dessert. They're rather good here.'

We said we'd have some wine and coffee and Amrit looked at the menu and ordered a bottle of Chardonnay. I looked around the restaurant at the waiters standing in shadows and the murmuring diners and I crossed my legs underneath the weight of the thick damask tablecloth. His accent was Indian, but not like any Indian accent I had ever heard. It was Indian but it was posh, there was no confusion of Ws pronounced as Vs, a distinction that my father after spending twenty years in England still couldn't discern. His accent wasn't like my father's lumbering careful English, a language he always seemed to be getting over and done with before he could luxuriate in his perfectly modulated Hindi. It wasn't like Mr Ahmed the ticket collector at the station who had always had plenty to say in English and Urdu about the colours I had dyed my hair at the age of sixteen. Amrit's accent wasn't like the blacked-up Benny Hill, or Peter Sellers or the Sabu character in the old black and white movies. He didn't sound like the Visiting Gods who came to stay in their hordes with RaviKavi and pronounced Cambridge as Kambridge, snacks as snakes.

The waiter showed Amrit the bottle and poured a little into his glass. Amrit smiled and said softly, 'I'm sure it's fine,' and gestured towards my glass. It struck me as supremely sophisticated to not even bother to taste the wine, because if it wasn't very expensive, what did it matter? It was mere affectation. I thought with shame of how I had dragged Tash into a restaurant in London, to show off what I had learnt from Luke, sipped a glass of cheap wine with a serious expression on my face.

'Hmmm, yes I think I do remember you,' Luke was saying and so I looked at him and then at Amrit, as though legitimately. 'Once, in the holidays.'

'Kids,' said Ralph.

'I tried to teach you chess. You weren't terribly interested. But then you were a dreaded teenager,' smiled Amrit. He didn't look at me.

Luke began to smoke and smiled back at Amrit politely.

'Would you pass the ashtray, Ralph?' he said.

Within five seconds of meeting Ralph, Luke became formal, a little resentful at being his father's son. It seemed to be their way of relating to each other, this over-formality and I supposed it was how all boys who had been to public school sat with their fathers. There were no excited howls of 'hello' and 'ahh' on the phone between them, as there were between me and my parents who drove me mad the way they treated every word, every contact from me as a national holiday.

'And how are you, Mira? How are things with you?' said Ralph, leaning across to me with

a genial smile.

I shrugged. 'OK, I haven't done much about anything. I suppose I should think about getting a job.'

'You must talk to Amrit,' said Ralph suddenly. 'He's a writer too.'

I cringed. I had won a short story competition some months ago, won a hundred pounds, blown it on a weekend to Spain with Luke, who had boasted to everybody about his girlfriend the writer. RaviKavi had smiled knowingly on the phone. Of course I was going to be a writer eventually, despite the degree in History; it was in our genes. Never mind that RaviKavi hadn't written for twenty years, left their literary friends behind in Delhi and Bombay, lost all the books they had published, dismissed the mark they had each made on the landscape of Hindi poetry.

'Oh, god, it's nothing. Nothing really. Of no consequence,' I said with embarrassment as Luke and Ralph explained.

'All writers begin from no consequences,' grinned Amrit.

'Mira's parents are both poets,' said Ralph proudly, even though he had never met my parents, never heard them reciting their poems about rural India and democracy and open skies to the Visiting Gods who stayed in the house and belched their way through the London itineraries prepared by my parents.

'Really?' said Amrit turning towards me 'What are their names?'

I smiled. It was such an Indian question. English people asked your name out of politeness and necessity, but for an Indian your surname signified everything they needed to know about where you came from, what sort of background, even what your profession was. When I was growing up, the stubborn point in our little triangular family, I used to think Indian people walked about with maps rolled up under their arms, ready to pinpoint each other, label them and talk of them, in the stereotypes they had unearthed. Arrey, he is a Gujju, don't expect a discount . . . Delhi has full-eee degenerated under this pushy Punjabi culture . . . of course he is a scholar, Bengalis have always been . . .

Amrit hadn't heard of Ravi Chowdhary or Kavita Joshi, but he nodded just the same, and I was aware that I wanted to tell him, wanted him to know where I was from, which meant explaining where RaviKavi were from. He knew Lucknow, how civilized the people were in that small town where my parents had grown up speaking that gorgeous language referred to as Hindustani, the mix of Urdu and Hindi reminiscent of the Nawabs of Oudh.

'You know what they say about Kayastas?' said Amrit with a smile. 'This caste you belong to, the writers' caste. This odd fifth caste. They began as scribes in the Mughal empire and

imbibed the ways of, the Muslims. My father used to say, never trust a Kayasta, they are sharaabi kebabis. They drink and eat meat, they are nearly Muslims, themselves!"

We all burst out laughing and I felt an odd kinship with him because he knew these things.

'I thought Muslims didn't drink?' said Luke ingenuously.

'They're not supposed to drink,' I said shyly. 'But their music and literature...'

'Hindus are a pious lot,' declared Amrit and smiled.

'The fifth caste?' asked Luke in puzzlement.

'See, they are neither priests, nor warriors, nor merchants. Nor are they the "Children of God",' Amrit smiled. 'They are side-ys.'

I laughed out loud at his use of the euphemism for Untouchability, at his use of Bollywood slang for hooligans.

'But surely,' insisted Luke, 'the caste system isn't relevant any more? Not amongst educated, urban people?'

'Indeed, indeed,' said Amrit, with such a show of innocence, that I wanted to laugh again.

He didn't have intimate knowledge of the world of Hindi literature but he knew how I had learnt my language, from the privileged position of the daughter of poets amongst traders and clerks and bank managers. He knew in the way, I realized with a sudden shock, Luke or Ralph would never know. His Hindi pronunciation was accented. He must be an English writer, I remember thinking.

And your parents, do they live here too?' asked Amrit.

'They've gone back to India, because my granddad died and my dad had to sort out the house and then they went to Delhi because they're trying to build a house there on a plot they bought years ago,' I said in a rush.

I wondered if he knew automatically the freedom enshrined in those words. If he could imagine how my heart had soared at their worried faces at Terminal 3, when they were leaving me behind, all alone, unheard of, free as a bird. How I had reassured them that I would be fine, I would look in on their house regularly, I would manage very well in the flat they had recently purchased in an uncharacteristic burst of investment. I would thrive on the monthly allowance they had arranged with my bank. RaviKavi had never planned their lives, looked down their noses at money They had moved from their small town to big cities, but always lived frugally, enjoying their own community of two, never making any real friends in this country, inviting all the old ones to come and complete and redraw the circle of Delhi-Bombay-London.

'I've been living independently for nearly three years anyway, Dad, what's the problem?'

I'd said confidently and RaviKavi had frowned at each other.

'We'll speak every week You keep all your doors locked. We'll be back soon,' my dad had threatened me 'Soon' had turned into months, because land plots couldn't be abandoned, building work couldn't be left unsupervised in Delhi, which was lawless these days, so their blue aerogrammes had explained.

'Take as long as you want,' I'd said generously, already seeing my brilliant future spreading before me like a glittering universe.

'Don't be funny,' my mother had admonished.

RaviKavi hadn't any need to say don't do anything to excess, don't be a bad girl, don't make us ashamed of you. Lucknow people didn't speak directly, it was vulgar. In the Mughal times, the pattern of conversation had been full of incredible politenesses, delightfully archaic phrases that my father had often regaled me with. When the cultured Muslims went to enquire after a friend's health, they didn't rudely ask, 'Are you unwell?' They would say, 'I hear those who wish you ill, are unwell.'

'Ralph tells me you're off to foreign parts?' said Amrit, neatly changing the subject from me to Luke and I was glad of it.

'I'm planning a trip to India,' said Luke enthusiastically, absently slipping his hand across the table over mine. I couldn't help feeling a mixture of elation and embarrassment whenever Luke demonstrated affection towards me in front of either of his parents. They had thought nothing of Luke and me sleeping together in the spare room in their house in Brighton, twenty minutes from the front. Somehow, despite his Englishness, I was conscious of Amrit's eyes upon us, just like I had always been fearful of 'uncles' and 'aunties' roaming the Pizza Parades and Chix Chox of my childhood in North London. Any boys I knew then had been strictly instructed by me that kissing and cuddling was naff in public. I had yearned to snog on pavements, suck tongues at the bus, but the humiliation of my parents' certain disappointment had been too much to bear. University had been the site of permissiveness, safely sixty miles from uncles and aunties and Lucknow sensibilities.

'Luke's researching the musical influences of the East upon the Western tradition,' said Ralph, and Amrit raised his eyebrows.

'I'm waiting for a grant from the Arts Council, it should be enough for a few months,' said Luke. 'There's an international artists' community on the edge of Delhi. It's a sort of cultural centre, multi disciplined. I want to go and stay there.'

Amrit nodded and smiled. 'Yes, I met the fellow who runs it, Prem Nath, at the Royal Festival Hall last summer. I was doing a reading there. You remember, Ralph, when we saw



the Bach recital?'

I looked at Amrit talking so knowledgeably about so many things and I thought how clever he is, and then I looked into my wine.

'He's a really fascinating person,' said Luke, 'and actually an accomplished musician himself, a tabla player. He was extremely supportive and it's an area that hasn't really been touched upon. I'm interested in the wandering troubadours; they still practise their craft, in almost exactly the same way, the making of the instruments, the oral tradition, the movements, they're still intact.' Luke looked up sheepishly and I smiled at him because he reminded me of an absent minded professor whenever he talked about his work, oblivious to everyone around him. Ralph and Amrit were listening with serious faces.

'Luke's worked very hard,' said Ralph softly, looking at his watch. He was really proud of Luke, I knew that, but Luke never seemed to notice. They were so alike in many ways, so warm and tender to everyone and so diffident with each other. Two people who kept missing each other the whole time, substituting the loss of communication with barbed comments.

'Yeah,' I grinned and made a face. 'Luke's a real swot.'

Luke grinned back at me and held my stare. And I thought with a start, that my opinion was the only one at the table that interested him, that I was the person who mattered to him most. I looked away hurriedly and drank down the glass.

'Luke, you haven't forgotten Mum's birthday?' said Ralph. 'We're having a do. You'll bring Mira, of course?'

Luke clicked his tongue in exasperation. 'Of course I haven't forgotten. I thought I'd get her a line drawing of the Pier, I saw one in Charing Cross Road of all places. Pen and ink. It's quite old.'

'Yes, she'd like that,' said Ralph.

I leant my elbow on the table, cupping my chin, and 'thought how formal they were and how estranged I was from Luke's life. And I had an odd feeling of utter happiness as though one could always be free from another person's spleen and blood and manners. I was conscious of Amrit sitting opposite me and I wondered if he too felt like an outsider, an Indian amongst English people and happy to be there, intact in himself.

'I'm sorry,' said Ralph, reaching for his wallet, 'I really have to go. I have to make an auction by three and I'll be driving back. Luke, I did say two o'clock.'

'Never mind, Dad,' said Luke. 'Give my love to Mum. I'll phone her in the next couple of days.'

'Let me,' said Amrit, placing a finger on Ralph's sleeve.

'Ok,' said Ralph cheerfully. 'Sorry I can't make the launch. Too hectic.'

Amrit waved it off good naturedly and then he turned to us. 'If you're free, you're welcome to come along. It would be nice to have some young people there. There'll be some wine and some boring speeches but you might find it amusing,' he said.

'Amrit's new book is just about to come out,' explained Ralph. 'I hope at least, Luke, you can come up with some suitable...'

'Come as you are, both of you,' grinned Amrit. 'Don't be so stuffy, Ralph.'

They laughed like old friends. I looked at Luke who was smoking as he leant back in his chair, a resolute expression set on his face. Amrit smiled and pushed an invitation across the tablecloth towards me and as my fingers touched upon the slim card, I saw his eyes rising to look into mine.

'It would be nice to see you, Luke,' said Amrit. 'I'd like to hear some more about your obsessions. Both of you.'