

2014

No Good Deed Unpunished

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Recommended Citation

Amaral, Dinika M.. "No Good Deed Unpunished." *The Iowa Review* 44.3 (2014): 52-63. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7528>

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No Good Deed Unpunished

Since you left to become an English major in the U.S. of A., things went bad, as Bombay has been overrun by Britney Spears girls. Plaid minis, knee-high socks, shirts ajar between the buttons, sexiness feigning innocence. Straightforward girls like us—who would never betray a friend—are not around anymore. Things also went bad because of me, so I’m writing to beg forgiveness, one straightforward girl to another. Your forgiveness. Okay, okay, more TK.

I’ve started cycling. While on a hunt for a Gateway of India postcard for you, I imagined you cycling by my side. I went fast and slow, according to your cycle’s speed. Then, at the junction near Regal Cinema, I lost you under a truck or a bus. Hey, *Titanic* is coming to Regal next week. All Britney Spears girls are obsessed with Leonardo DiCaprio. Think it’s worth getting aboard?

My bike is new. An ATLAS 300! Man oh man, it’s purple, and I got purple sunglasses and shoelaces. I look awesome on it. Notice my “awesome” and “TK” Americanisms? On your note about *firangi* teachers and sentence variation...whatever, man! Tell them the language of a good tale is immaterial. Who says “tale” anymore? Back to my ATLAS 300! Before I lost you or reached the Hanuman temple, before I even left home, I took the long way via Badhwar Park. Why, you ask? One word: Pitawich. Yes, let your mouth—filled with the bland campus food there—water! I ate your favorite, cauliflower Manchurian, and not mine, East West.

I skipped our usual post-Pitawich *nariyals*. But when I rode by, the Colaba Causeway *nariyal* man ran out on the street holding a half-cut coconut in his hands that fell, bounced, and rolled onto the road, barely missing a bullock cart. Do we owe him money? *Arre*, you need to tell me. I mostly eat at home now, so I’ve no idea of our debts. Our old haunts make me lonely.

I’m failing physics. Another reason, apart from the klepto Britney girls, I need forgiveness. How to tell my dad I’m failing? That I prefer illustrating to studying? Dad thinks I’ll be a doctor like my *dada*. Since my fluke 92 in maths, he tells everyone, “My father’s death caused a vacuum in cardiovascular medicine in India. And the vacuum will be filled by...”

By no one. There'll never be another like my grandfather. But I was happy to hear Dad boast to his friends, who usually boasted about their Britney Spears daughters' modeling, TV, and Bollywood appearances and whatnot. You're right. "Whatnot" is derived from the French *étagère*. But did you know it became an English word alluding to a piece of furniture and then to bric-a-brac because the Victorians stored ornaments on *étagères*? I think merging other languages into English is why words have multiple meanings. What say we merge some Hindi into English?

Part of me was upset. "Conquer the world" and "With knowledge and love you can do whatever you want" are examples of dada-isms. Nothing about filling shoes or vacuums!

Fortunately, Dad was traveling. Oh, with bro. Since bro married *bhabhi*, he has been included in the family business. As soon as they were back, I knew Mom and *bhabhi* would fight for bro's attention like hens over a cock. This would, I had hoped, buy me more time with Dad.

Speaking of cocks, *bhabhi* said the most interesting thing to me: "The penis is the ugliest thing, but if you have it once, you want it always!" Don't be scandalized. I'm not saying we should become Britneys, or that *bhabhi* is one, but in the U.S. of A., sex is normal, *yaar*, like going to the bathroom. Americans share their interest and liking of it openly. And, because you're in America, we need to stop being prudes, so—penis penis penis penis penis penis!

Bhabhi said this after Malibu Spice. Her friends were over. It's crazy that America has fake IDs, keggers, marijuana—or *pot* as they call it—and frat parties, but no Malibu Spice. Don't fly with pot; we have it here. A small joke, *yaar*. It's okay to party and drink to understand the American way, the culture, and the American people, but: "You have a choice. Say no to drugs!" I'm surprised *Archie* comics aren't popular there. Are Hostess Twinkies as good as our redheaded buddy *Archie* says?

The nariyal guy threw me off. Yet my ATLAS 300! zipped through a foot of space between a taxi and bullock cart, and I stopped outside the blue Hanuman temple at the end of Colaba Causeway. Of all the gods, Hanuman is my favorite. Not because of his monkey face, but because Dada told me Hanuman's tail set fire to Sri Lanka. I knew a sacred *bindi* marking my forehead would delight Mom. Then, the bells started ringing, and the priests started singing the *bhajans*, and I saw the cows in there shitting, and I just wasn't in the mood to smell it.

Inside the shop, I looked for postcards. Outside, a band of naked *chokras* surrounded my parked ATLAS 300! They chattered excitedly.

Some were bold enough to touch. I didn't mind. Who wouldn't want to touch my ATLAS 300!? But if they'd tried mounting it, I would've jumped on them. I would've clobbered their heads back into their ribcages. I'm not so dumb.

Hands in the postcard bin, I squint with one eyeball on the bin and the other on the chokras when a random firangi man steps in front of me. *Colonialism is over. Move!* is what I want to shout, but whatever, on with my stor...no, my TALE.

I moved. He moved. I moved to the next bin. He followed. I looked up—scathingly, trust me—at his tanned, blond smile. “Do you know where I could get a busser root map?”

What? you might ask. “What?” I certainly asked. He repeated it until I held up my hand and said, “A busser root?” He pointed to a bus outside, and I got it! “Bus route” map.

Then a bony chokra was racing away on my ATLAS 300! I dashed out. I chased, man. I almost got run over twice. Unwilling to see my ATLAS mangled, I gave up.

And then I cashed in all my good karma chips because an old man, a real darling as it turns out, hit the chokra on the back with his walking stick! I ran straight to you-know-what. I held my ATLAS 300! so close. I kissed the purple letters of its name, the purple-silver burnish of the rest of it. Man oh man, I've never been more emotional. “You okay?” asked the uncle. I nodded and took his name, Dr. Sainath Nayyar. Dad always says, “Never leave a good deed unpunished.”

The chase had led me to Scheherazade, the building opposite Fariyas Hotel. It's near Ashoo's. Start Ashoo's French lessons again? *Il y a longtemps oublié le peu de français que j'ai appris à l'école.* Americans hate the French, but they'll love French from a sexy *desi*! Okay, here goes: as physics and my dad were the first of the three components of my apology, so Mallaika, who lives in Scheherazade, is the second.

The good Dr. Sainath Nayyar and I literally bumped into this ultimate *ooh babeh babeh* girl. Mallaika was doing a morning constitutional she didn't need, in a white T-shirt that wasn't see-through until she decided to wear her BLACK padded bra. We—the good doctor uncle and I—apologized. Then, we—Mallaika, the good doctor uncle, and I—spoke for a bit. Then she invited me to her house for breakfast.

Knowing your sentiments, I hesitated. During the pause, the good Dr. Sainath Nayyar bid us good morning and left. As we watched him walk away, she invited me to breakfast again. I was tempted. Yaar, forget breakfast, I needed water. I'd been cycling for over an hour. The sun was fully out. Mom was going to kill me. She tells everyone I have “wheat-

colored skin.” Why do boys only need to worry about financial stability, but girls have to be fair AND accomplished? Horrible double standard. Still, out of respect for you, I held off accepting her invitation. Fool that I am, I decided to see if she’d changed, so I asked if she was game for a joke. “Always,” she replied, without skipping a beat.

Leaving my ATLAS 300! in the care of Scheherazade’s *chowkidar*—who had a purple handkerchief around his neck that Mallaika said clashed with the khaki color of his uniform but that I thought a good omen—we raced back to the tourist shop. From a distance, my blue-eyed firangi spied us. I was right in my earlier assumption that none of the chokras or the shopkeeper would help him. Even if someone knew Hinglish, believe me, the firangi’s accent was so bad he wouldn’t have been understood.

Mallaika and I decided to jog the remaining distance between us. We waved at him as we jogged. His face lit up. He waved. All three of us waved. Laughter within our holy trinity. “Hel—” said I; “—lo,” said Mallaika. We gasped for air, prolonging the drama. “Hello,” he said. “You know where I could get busser route map?”

“Sir,” I said, struggling not to giggle. “This is my friend, Mallaika.”

“Hello, sir,” she said. Again, hellos made their way around the triumvirate.

“Sir,” I said, “Mallaika doesn’t know where you can get a bus route map either!”

It was too funny, man. Thinking of it, my stomach still hurts. My stomach also hurts thinking of breakfast at Mallaika’s. For chai, her mother gave me black tea with lemon. I called home so my mother could scream at me and then send the car. Still hungry, I invited Mallaika to lunch at our favorite restaurant. Things only got worse from there on, so brace yourself.

At Indian Summer, she ordered vegetable au gratin. If it sounds health freaky, take comfort in the cheese. Gratin is all about cheese. Lately, she told me, the boys at H.R. disappointed her. Who wouldn’t at a college named Hassaram Rijhumal? She asked if Jaihind had “cute boys.” I was like, “Hello, non-Britney here.” Not that she’d be into the brainiacs at my college, man.

Her not having a boyfriend left her to taxis or the bus, as she didn’t have her own car. I offered to stand in with my car until a suitable automobile-owning boy presented himself. The next day she visited me with a present—gum. It was important to always carry gum, claimed Mallaika, for kissing. Gum, not its ineffective cousin, mints. Take the gum out of your mouth, stick it somewhere safe—waste not, want not.

Or it got swallowed, or pushed down your throat with a passionate tongue. Kissing with gum meant you tasted *it* versus the makee-outer's spit. She's made out at Lovers' Point. In public, so close to my home! I wondered if Mom, who takes evening walks there, would recognize her. That, yaar, would be the best joke.

Rest assured, Mallaika and I hanging out was not at all like us hanging out. You and I are of the same mind, the same person in two different bodies. She's totally different.

She's tall. Her hair is glossy, straight, pitch black. She's groomed with manicures, facials, waxes, diets, exercises. Platform shoes and skintight jeans or tights emphasize her model figure. We are dumpy and pimply. We wear boy Levi's, sneakers, and loose shirts. Although I did buy a white T-shirt and had bro get me a black bra abroad. NON-PADDED. Unlike you, Mallaika and I have braces. They don't stop boys from drinking in the river of...okay, bad metaphor, sorry. But give me points for trying, and while talking to a writer in the U.S. of A., no less!

It gives me hope that boys are not worried about getting their lips or tongues cut on the braces, or about the food stuck in them. Perhaps one will kiss me. Ick, though—someone else's saliva. How will I handle a penis in...okay, okay, TK, TK. After marriage. Maybe I am a prude too.

In my bedroom I learned Mallaika's two obsessions. Cross my heart, I've never known anyone so obsessed with Leo. Everything was "Leo this..." and "Leo that..." She went mad on my *Romeo + Juliet* poster, kissing his lips, licking his teeth, his chin, his neck, ICK. With all her spit, it wasn't mine anymore, so I had her roll it off the wall and keep it. She hugged and kissed me on both cheeks, offering me, if I liked, kissing lessons. "No way!" I said.

"I'll show you on the hand. We can wash it and it's not personal, if you're afraid of..."

Here I'd given her a poster imported from London, and my repayment was being called a coward. You know me. I am many things. But the one thing I am is COURAGEOUS. Or, since we're working on penis-lingo, ballsy. *Au contraire*, you think, *au contraire dans l'absolu!*

I locked the door. We sat on the bed. I puckered up. It wasn't too bad. She kept her promise. Dry lips. No tongue. "You need a haircut," she said, touching my hair. I nodded. "I have to use spit," she said. "Mouths are never totally dry." When I nodded at that, she licked her lips. It made sense. I closed my eyes, ready again, though this time with a saliva twist. It was nice. Comforting. Her thumb rubbed my inner wrist and palm, which also felt good. For the next time, I wanted to try tongue.

But when you get to the end of this letter, you'll see why another lesson is unlikely.

In addition to a cut-above-Britney bod and the choice ability of teaching kissing, Mallaika's a brainiac. When we exited my bedroom, Mom recognized her from school and quizzed her about her marks. I felt the first twinges of jealousy. Mom wanted us to study together.

The next day, a Friday, I was in her house for our study date and found out her other obsession: chocolate. A typical girlie thing, but Mallaika could survive entirely on chocolate. A mystery how she maintained her figure, given the copious amounts of Amul and Cadbury she imbibed.

Thankfully, she has a flaw: acne. On her cheeks, chin, nose. It varies from extremely red and bumpy like the skin of a jackfruit to a slightly pinkish irritation like prickly heat. A source of great woe, it makes her, her mother, her father *très désolé*. She's had it since she was a child and her face was so fat you could put a school compass on her nose and go round!

She asked me to accompany her to the allergist. Her mother got to go into the doctor's office with her. I looked wistful as she told me to sit in the waiting room, but she didn't take my hint. It wasn't a total waste; in the magazines I saw pictures of skin bubbles and Pilonidal cysts—you don't want to know where these are located. The skin is the largest organ of the body, the surface with which we interface with the world, so how, despite her acne, could Mallaika still be considered, you know, sexy, a bombshell, you-name-it? Again the jealous monster in me raised its green head.

They ran tests. On her arms and back. One-inch horizontal and vertical incisions at a half-inch distance from each other. Over a hundred incisions. They tested for everything: peanuts, mushrooms, coconut, fabric types. My morbid enthusiasm, my curiosity, irked her.

She had a fever for a couple days afterward. I felt guilty and realized she'd become my friend. I couldn't delight in her suffering. Instead, I ran a sympathy temperature myself.

"Milk?" I confirmed when, two weeks later, I gave her a lift to H.R. College. I hung onto the giant Toblerone that Dad and bro, who were back, got me from duty-free. Too bad about her lactose intolerance. But—waste now, want later. I thought I'd take the Toblerone home.

It had different plans. We hit a pothole. Jumping out of my hands, it went under the driver's seat. "Yup, no chocolate," said Mallaika, having emerged with my Toblerone.

"And *dahi*, *paneer*, crepes, eggs, cheese, ice cream..."

"I can't eat anything dairy. Anything at all! Do you really want me to name them all?"

"I'm sorry you can't eat chocolate," I said, reaching for the giant Toblerone.

"That's okay," she said and began opening it. "Nice haircut, by the way."

It's no big deal. I tagged along when bhabhi went for a trim, and I got layers. Okay, layers and BANGS. There! I've told you. No Big Deal. They frame my face better. NBD.

Speaking of Bs and Ds, what about Big D? Heard from him? I know he wasn't your official boyfriend when you left, but are you two keeping in touch? Writing, calling, or chatting? Read on, read on. That bastard is the third component of why I'm writing to beg forgiveness.

Anyone with an ICQ handle "Big D" has a small penis. Nothing of his is big. Least of all his heart, man. And my best friend on earth deserves a big-hearted, big-penisised boy. Bhabhi feels that size doesn't matter, but for her friend, who got us Malibu Spice from Dubai: "It totally does." I don't get the joke, do you? Ask your firangi friends. Do they wear leather jackets like Brenda? I want one, man. How hot is Dylan? No! Brandon is not hotter and never will be.

To quote Def Leppard, making love to Big D will drive you, not him, crazy. Loving him bites. Remember our party in bhabhi's empty apartment? I moved everyone out of the hall and left you two alone. Your face was so happy as you served him Maggi noodles. He didn't eat. Technically, because I came in. But he wasn't going to. No sooner than I entered, or even before, he was standing, and then he packed us all off to Jade Garden. He was above two-minute noodles.

Nothing wrong with five-star restaurants, but he'd never enjoy the simple things, despite knowing the big things. Or understand why, if there's no heart in stuff, it's no good. He'd never go to the Taj in pajamas. The humor would elude him, as would the smiles of the hotel staff. Yaar, I would have eaten all the noodles you served me and would have asked for more!

Wish you were here—we could keep prank-calling him. It's too funny how he gets so worked up. If he were really Big—D or whatever aside—he'd laugh with us over the phone, after realizing our prank. But, whatever, I've been keeping an eye on him for you.

I followed him in different cars to ensure I wouldn't be made. I'm sure a self-involved prick like him wouldn't notice me even if I was on my ATLAS 300!, but I wouldn't be able to keep up with him. And, because Dad and bro were back and Mom and bhabhi were busy, I had four cars

to shuffle around. Okay, okay, no more stalling. In my shadowing of Big D, I made a mistake. A big one. THE REASON things went bad here. I took Mallaika along.

For company, but no excuses. It was wrong of me. I'm so, so sorry. Please, your anger is justified, is righteous, but...I got lonely, man, *donc très solitaire!* I thought *Ooh babeh babeh* and I were friends and I could trust her. But I am dumb and I HOPE YOU FORGIVE ME.

"I thought bangs would be dumb," I said, struggling to check my bangs in the rearview mirror until Mallaika withdrew a compact from her purse and gave it to me. "You sure you want to eat that candy bar?" I said.

"Hmm? You're right," said Mallaika, handing me the Toblerone opened but untouched.

I felt its freshness evaporating. "There's this thing I need to do," I said. "Want to come along?"

I had to pay the nariyal guy. Dada always said, "Never a borrower or a lender be." When Mallaika was there, street vendors treated us like princesses. I knew he'd be nice about the delay if he saw her. He was so nice, he refused money for the coconut that fell when I'd passed by on my ATLAS 300!

"I'd keep the money if I were you," said Big D to me at the Colaba Causeway nariyal stand. I was shocked to see him. But you know how that street works—as soon as we made the turn, he saw us. Still, I should have led us away. However, at that moment, I felt I couldn't.

His John Lennon-glasses friend, who can hack into Hotmail, tried paying for the nariyals Mallaika ordered. I refused. John Lennon was surprised and looked down. In my white T-shirt and black bra, I was flustered. Still, I couldn't tell if he was looking at the ground or...not.

"I think it means more to him than it does to me," I quietly said to Big D and placed the notes on the table. The nariyal guy held them with his wet fingers before they flew away.

"Aww," said Mallaika, wrapping her arm around me. I leaned in. DISGUSTING, I know. I'd become a Britney. Reaching for her nariyal, Mallaika told Big D to hand her a straw.

"You don't even know my name, and you want me to what with a straw?" he said, grinning evilly at her. His other friend, the short one, dark and with braces, sniggered.

"Fine," said Mallaika, huffily extending a manicured hand. Big D quickly poked a straw into her coconut hole. John Lennon strawed my nariyal and inquired after you.

“She’s fine,” I said and sipped. I should’ve asked Big D if he was keeping in touch, you know, to needle him a little. But I couldn’t. There was something in the way Mallaika and he made eyes at each other and looked away in unison that made it impossible.

I wasn’t afraid or embarrassed about you. I am never embarrassed about my best friend! On the contrary, I take great pride in your awesomeness, in how lucky I am that you chose me for your best friend. In the atmosphere of the nariyal stand, I felt it would cheapen you to mention you. It would make you sordid. So I silently drank up as quickly as I could and, as one shovels dung or rotten garbage, shoveled Mallaika into the car.

“Was that the thing?” she asked, pulling my hand out of my mouth.

I frowned at her and resumed biting my nails. “Harbir, please follow them.”

Harbir did. Mallaika complained. She never signed up for this. She never missed class. She felt you and I were crazy. I kept quiet. Then, when Big D’s car entered the odious mansion his family owns in Worli, her tune changed. “Wait, is he the only son of...”

I swear there were dollar—no, not rupee—D\$LL\$R signs in her eyes. I dropped her off at H.R. and went to class at Jaihind and then picked her up and dropped her home. Oh, I gave Harbir the Toblerone. The golden triangles lighting his eyes were deeply gratifying. They warmed me all the way home, where a storm had been brewing since mid-morning.

My report card arrived on the one day bhabhi had a dental appointment and was unable to intercept it. Dad signed for it. He was so mad, yet he wouldn’t talk to me. He whispered things to Mom in their room. Bro, bhabhi, and I tried to eavesdrop, but we couldn’t decipher the words. Given this tension, I couldn’t leave home for college, or Ashoo’s, or Mallaika’s, or Big D’s. Bound to my desk, I pored over my books, praying Dad would walk in and see me.

On the second day of Dad not talking to me and ignoring me, I had one glass of juice all day. Mom tried to cajole me into eating lunch with her. But I wouldn’t. Finally, in the evening, when Mom and bhabhi were strolling at Lovers’ Point and bro was out, Dad came home.

His voice called me into the hall. Dad was sitting nonchalantly, reading the *Times*. Neatly arranged on the dining table were folders. He leafed through the newspaper, and I, through the folders, which had all his prize certificates, medals, and report cards since the first standard.

Dad could have been a doctor, an engineer, an astronaut. He could have, with his average of 98 percent, been anything. Dad CHOSE not to follow in Dada’s footsteps. He wanted to be a businessman. To start

a television network and expand into other businesses spurred by the profit of that first endeavor. Dad's issue with me wasn't that I was failing physics. "It doesn't matter to me if you fail every single exam you take, but it matters that you aren't trying."

I sniffed. My dad is as great as my dada. I just didn't know him as well. It's true, what he said. Lately, I hadn't bothered with studies because I missed you. Dad said that was no excuse. "People think *desi* women need to take care of their looks until marriage and then their husbands and the house while making babies." I knew Mom thought that, but he didn't say so. And then he said what Dada had said many times to me: "You can do anything you set your mind to."

I cried, man. I sobbed. Even now, my eyes are watering. Dad expects great things of me because I can achieve them. "Not me, not your brother, only you can fill Dada's shoes. You have his creativity. I had the work ethic, the brains, but no creativity. It takes all three to be a great medical practitioner who revolutionizes the field. You have all three."

We spent the next week studying. I retook all the physics exams of the year and aced them. Well, I didn't even come close to his 98 percent, but I can honestly say I grasped the concepts and will be able to apply them. Waves and vibrations will never tidally scare me again!

During all this, which went on for a couple weeks, Mallaika didn't call. We didn't talk all the time like you and I do, but every other day. I, impulsively, made Harbir go to Scheherazade. Mallaika wasn't home. Before going to Jaihind—I've promised not to bunk classes again—Harbir drove me by H.R. It was strangely quiet. We had sandwiches from the guy outside. After we washed them down with Energees, I went to H.R.'s gate and talked to the watchman.

In the evening, Mallaika called. After general chitchat, she told me she'd been very busy.

"With college work?"

"Yes."

"But I went by H.R. and learned the holiday break for Diwali already started for you..."

"Oh, come on!" she snapped. "Are you stalking me?"

Of course I wasn't. It was NBD, but she made such a Big Deal about it, I got suspicious. I began stalking her with intent. I parked my ATLAS 300! behind the fruit vendor on the corner right before you enter Colaba Market. You know, the one with the mountains of oranges?

I watched Scheherazade's entrance as the sun got brighter and hotter, beating on me, darkening me; I knew Mom would confiscate my bike. But what is the—hopefully, temporary—loss of a bike, albeit an ATLAS

300!, when your friend, your best friend, is in need? “Nothing,” you would say. “A mere drop!” Dada would have said. Both of you’d be right. Also, I was determined to get to the bottom of my hunch.

A fancy black Cielo pulled into Scheherazade. The driver, invisible behind the custom reflective tinted windshield, beeped his horn. Mallaika, in tall shoes and a miniskirt, ran out, and—man, this is really hard!—Big D came out and opened the door for her. Seeing that was AWFUL ENOUGH. But—sorry to have to write this, but you deserve total honesty—well, it promptly got worse.

His arms encircled her Barbie waist. Her not-that-innocent hands interlaced at the back of his neck. Her thumb stroked his hair, his ear. I still hoped I was wrong. But then, she KISSED him, man! Right there, in public. Then, no “oops!” to it, she *did it again*. She pressed up against him. He kissed her; he cupped her bottom. She smacked him in a *yeah yeah yeah* manner, and, while he held the door open, she laughingly hopped into the passenger seat.

I was frozen, but my body acted of its own volition. It mounted my ATLAS 300! and rode it in the middle of the road, in front of their Cielo. Deliberately, my robot body went slowly. Despite Big D blaring his horn, screeching his tires, coming really close to my back wheel and almost kissing it before braking loudly—my body, perched on my bike, crawled. Consciously, yet unconsciously, I forced their car to go according to the speed I dictated. In my head, a snarl: “You will yield to my ATLAS 300!, DAMMIT!!”

It sounds silly as I write this, but it was the greatest thirty seconds of my life: showing up that *ooh babeh babeh* whore and her small dick. As I cycled and my shoelaces made purple circles in the air. It was like I wasn’t cycling on my ATLAS 300!—rather, we floated as one piece. I can’t do it justice. It was an indescribable feeling. Surely life has a few of those? Whatever—the moment will always stand out because it was so short, yet so fraught.

As soon as I got home, I would burn the white T-shirt and black bra, I would throw the nail file and transparent polish into the sea, I would get a boy’s haircut. But right then, in front of the mob gathered at Colaba Market, I wanted to pull Mallaika out of the Cielo and pound her into the pavement.

Instead, at the intersection—you know the one, right past Shemaroo video store—where Big D could turn and lose us, where he could free himself of the dictates of me and my ATLAS 300!, I paused and turned around. I slipped my purple sunglasses down my nose. I whipped up my hand. I showed them my MIDDLE FINGER. And, before they closed

their stupid mouths, I raced the wrong way up the one-way road leading to Ashoo's, so I couldn't be followed.

I'm so sorry, man. Please, please, please forgive me? Yaar, there was no way I could've known. There was no way I could have foreseen Mallaika's capacity for betrayal. That a boy like Big D—who'd dump her as soon as the next best thing came along—would go for a girl like that over you? I'm sorry, I know you like him, but I'm glad his dickishness is out for everyone to see. And, most importantly, for you to see, but I'm horrified it happened this way. That I had to be the messenger, the instigator, the catalyst for this DISGUSTINGNESS.

But you are right. She is a bitch. She always will be a mega bitch. A backstabbing bitch. Her heart is blacker than the devil himself. I was a moron to believe better of her for even a nanosecond. Death to all Britneys! Please say you'll forgive me? You have to. You just do! Best friends have to weather life together, man. And life brings us bad, good, ugly, and all sorts of mad mad things. Please, I beg you, please, *mille moyens*! Don't leave me alone with the Britneys and their blackness disguised as innocence and light. I swear, if you don't say you forgive me, I'll have to hang myself from the Gateway of India, as I've drawn in the figure below.

Yours hanging, as I wait to hear back.