

DIXIE SALAZAR

Letting Go to Hold On, 2015
Painted collage, 40 x 30 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MALA GAONKAR

Burn 'em in Crates

“I don’t know what she thinks she is doing,” Leela heard her grandmother tell Mrs. Kilpady. “She will not get into this American school. Even if she does, how can we pay? Her school marks are only average. She draws her plants; picks those weeds in the British cemetery for her flower book. Her parents’ ashes, blessings be on them, were scattered back in Ohio, in America, you know, so who knows what the girl is thinking. At first I am thinking it was the grief. If even I can summon the strength, Lord Krishna willing. She is sixteen . . . in a few years . . . an unmarried girl soon stinks like old fish. Do you know she took that flower album to the Wodeyar house?”

Leela, eavesdropping from the house roof, two floors up, could only smell Bangalore: sandalwood, shit, dust, ash. She fed the skinny stray cat some bread; sometimes it was gray, in other lights, a dust brown. It rubbed up against her bare legs.

“Be careful,” Mrs. Kilpady said, happily sipping a sweet milky chai, “That Wodeyar clan is a strange one. They live by their own laws, these onetime princes. The son is a great botanist; that must be the magnet for all the ladies, the advice on flowers,” Mrs. Kilpady smirked now. “These parties are there,” the old lady continued, with an avid glint, her weight creaking the rattan chair, “Foreign style. Stroking of head is there. This Western dancing-embracing is there with these people.”

“Yet the house?” Mrs. Kilpady paused to gulp her tea. “Still unpainted. The old man’s doctor’s fees suck the money away, maybe. The garden is good, though. Lord Krishna’s Vrindavan. Melon-hipped roses. It must be the dung. The wife died while locked away, no? The mind rotten. Sometimes thought she was a tree, the maids say. Does the girl even know that you are not . . .”

“Be quiet. I raised her mother from when she was a baby. She was as much mine as anything I carried.”

“And you, keeping to the sitting room for days to keep the rest of the house clean for her arrival! I remember all you have done,” Mrs. Kilpady soothed her friend.

Leela stood very still. She rubbed a small lobsterish scar on her forearm. She was surprised how little what was said of her seemed to matter. Maybe your parents dying did that to you, she thought; it put you in a glass jar, a specimen apart, merely observing what passed you by? The cat, as it often did, stretched and said, “I have it too, that scar.

The Wodeyar house stood aloof at the very end of that ancient street. It was another India.

It marks our small tribe of two. Plus you were wait-listed at that school before I died; she forgot that!” That the cat spoke to her in her mother’s voice seemed as much a reality as the keening mosquitoes she slapped as they rose in the dusk. It took but a thimble of rain to birth dozens of them as she knew from watching. She went down to the kitchen to help her grandmother with supper, and surprised a large brown palmetto bug skittering off into the corner.

The Wodeyar house stood aloof at the very end of that ancient street. It was another India. At home all was arid, DDT-sprayed verandas, noisy and buzzing with tenants and traffic. While her grandmother’s flat was splintered from a grand mansion, the Wodeyar house, a peeling, once-bright pavilion, stood whole in its splendid garden, festooned with overgrown vines of sampige grown to rain forest proportions. After she woke from her first, foggy days in her grandmother’s flat (it had barely been a year), she fetched her binoculars and stood concentrating in the window of her bedroom. She saw a bright, deep, purple bank of flowers with thick, green, lancet leaves—the rare curcuma ginger in flower.

Beauty struck you stupid; that must be how you knew it.

“Who lives there?” she had asked the pillowy, raisin-eyed Mrs. Kilpady.

Her grandmother poured out each cup of tea precisely and laid out the turmeric-yellow Bombay Mix in small, blue bowls. There was always a great fuss with the old ladies around afternoon tea. They sat straight; custom laced them in its tight corsets. Mrs. Kilpady leaned forward at Leela’s question, as if to say, Here’s an entire cash box of

scandals, hoarded like gold. Leela sensed her grandmother’s pleasurable disapproval, as if she were hearing of the racier pages of a foreign novel, tucked on a high shelf out of harm’s way.

“Masterji, an old man, even older than me. I used to meet him in the days when our own family had some standing. Before Independence. World much better then.”

“Who is he?”

“He is the world’s greatest Carnatic violinist. He will die any day; his heart leaks blood. His son is married to a lunatic. Love marriage. She is dead, I think. The son is some botany professor at the Bangalore University. He would not be there if not for third-cousin-brothers of the Mysore maharaja. He does something with garden design. This revamping of Cubbon Park. Not much money though. But these Great People live by their own laws.”

“They are from the artistic side of the family,” chimed in Mrs. Kilpady disapprovingly. If she had said the “criminal side of the family” it could not have been worse. “And this Cubbon Park redesign? My head is paining even thinking about this. Just heapings of mud everywhere and the new plantings all higgledy-piggledy with none of the flowers matching!”

Leela heard “botany” and swiftly said, “I can draft letters for him, or file.”

“File? Why would he want your help? I am allowing you in there only if you take violin lessons.”

“I could do research, and practice my typing. It will make me more marriageable,” said Leela, sensing compromise.

Her grandmother, her dry, lined cheeks creased in a smile so small it may have been a twitch, said, “Anything to dress up the sow’s ear.”

Some days later the old lady sent a note across the road with some fresh cashew *burfi* to Masterji. She gave a copy of it to Leela. “I am not sure, Leela, if he will accept you for that work. But he knew my family once when we were something before this Gandhiji-independence nonsense. Take your mother’s old violin as a gift for one of the scholarship students. We must offer something. It just gathers dust here.”

Leela’s specimen book and magnifying glass were tucked into the violin case.

That afternoon after school, she walked right past the

sleeping watchman in his creeper-roofed gate box. It was around four in the afternoon, teatime, and the sun was still hot, but in the courtyard it was a cool, mossy green, sprinkled with high sitar notes playing from a room above. She saw the curcuma flowers, their red, comma-shaped bracts, and stopped briefly to look.

“I’ve fallen into a painting,” Leela thought. In the high-ceilinged entrance hall, she felt powerfully invisible. From one end of the hall, she heard the high, metallic sound, an accompanist’s sitar. She went down the other end, from which she could hear a man playing an evening raga—or was it Malhar, the monsoon raga? She had a few tapes she had listened to with her mother in Ohio. The violin notes were high; bright butterflies in the air. Following them into a room, she saw a thin, old man with his eyes closed and head weaving over his fluttering violin bow. He was clad in a white kurta, with a perfectly bald Roman-nosed egg of a head jittering to the notes he played. His kurta was drenched in sweat, she saw, and there were small scurrying electric tremors over his hands and cheeks. He seemed not to be worried by any of this.

She paused, too abashed to explain why there was an instrument case at her feet. “The letter should say it is for the . . . filing work for the professor.”

The old man looked startled. “That is most definitely my son’s department. Why didn’t you say so!” In one gesture, he waved her down the hall and beckoned in several students staring at her from the doorway.

She walked into a small, book-lined study with a blue Persian rug untidily rucked. A tall, thin man, with a gray sheaf of hair, stood up courteously from his desk when she walked to the room’s open rosewood door. She thought at first his black, comma-shaped eyes were lined with kohl, but it was only the shadow of his thick lashes. He wore a thick, raw silk shirt and jeans, which she had not seen on a man since leaving Ohio. His shirt sleeves were rolled back over vein-corded arms. As further evidence of eccentricity, Mrs. Kilpady had said Mr. Wodeyar often took up the spade himself to show the workers in the botanical gardens to lay turf. In public, like a coolie.

“Your grandmother sent us a note you would come.” He was smiling.

“Your garden is very beautiful.” How to put in words that dense, green buzz and croon, the callused trunks

circling her in that forecourt garden? “I can’t count music notes or use the violin, but I do draw. I’ve been collecting flower types in America. Perhaps they may interest you given your work?” She knelt down to wrestle her book from the case. He looked through the book carefully. “These drawings, these are your own? From these two hands?”

“For sure!”

“I’ve injured your pride. The drawings are very good.”

“I can draw,” she said, with careful lightness, “I can fill the park forms and order the plants. After all, you have a lot of research to do at the university?”

He seemed startled. She wondered if she had gone too far. If this audition failed, she would be tossed out into the outer darkness. “I can type,” she added.

“You indeed draw well,” Mr. Wodeyar said. She looked straight at him, like some odd, adolescent Mesmer. He was smiling but looked sceptical. “Maybe, once a week, come and see what there is to do. We can only pay in books from my library but perhaps you will learn something.”

She stopped by his small office every week before her grandmother returned from her work as a Sanskrit teacher at the local primary school. Often, Mr. Wodeyar was not there, and Leela would copy plant types into the garden plans or type out city government forms as instructed on the paper scraps in his sharp, upright hand. When he was there, he was largely silent, a whispering of turning pages or a cough the only sign of him. Sometimes he sang the first few bars of old Hindi film songs under his breath. She thought: This is happiness.

So it had gone, one year.

Then there was the Sunday her grandmother had to attend the building committee session in Mrs. Kulkarni’s flat, whose window lay just below the northeast corner of the roof. Here, Leela lay on her stomach, next to her cat, which asked when the scholarship would come through and when could they leave. Leela said they needed to listen to the neighbors; if they prevailed, where would her mother’s voice go?

“If apartments can put up signs saying pets not allowed, the logic being that they are noisy and messy, then I would argue that they should also ban grown girls taking over the roof with stray animals!” she heard Shanti Kulkarni from the top floor flat shout. “Your girl just stomps around above my head drying weeds and spying on neighbors!”

“The cat is not a pet.”

“I have heard your granddaughter speaking to it and calling it ‘Amma!’ I think she is quite mad.”

“Spying on a girl, are you? My brave girl who came over here all alone and has not caused a whit of worry; I cannot even be thinking what I can be doing to you!”

Leela laughed. She tried to picture her grandmother—a tall, dark woman with thick, white hair braided down her back, a spotless, yellow cotton sari, and gold bangles from wrist to elbow—angrily rapping the knob of her walking stick on Mrs. Kulkarni’s head.

Mr. Nayak of the ground floor flat calmed the ladies down and Leela heard a plate rattle. Her cat brought her a gutted mouse, which she tied to a bit of string and carefully lowered onto Mrs. Kulkarni’s open window ledge.

When her grandmother returned to the flat, Leela had a cup of hot tea waiting for her just the way she knew the old lady liked it.

Her grandmother sat down heavily, drinking the hot sweet tea gratefully.

“Shall I get you the Bombay Mix?”

Her grandmother looked at Leela suspiciously at first, but then smiled.

“No, just sit here,” she said.

They did, quietly.

“Do you think of them much?” her grandmother asked.

They had never discussed what had brought Leela to her grandmother’s house.

“Every day.”

“Is it always in the same way?”

Leela felt her throat close.

“It gets hard,” she forced out, “to remember it exactly as I did before. I am scared one day to forget even one detail.”

“Oh, my girl, every memory is a story we tell ourselves. And every story is an act of love. Did you lower that mouse onto Mrs. Kulkarni’s ledge, by the way?”

The mouse was real. Memory was not real. Leela preferred to pin things down, like meadow trilliums in a book. How do you pin down a voice heard years ago, a glance received from someone who is gone? Her grandmother had defended her. Leela at least could be honest.

“The cat talks to me in Amma’s voice,” she said.

“I think my daughter would do better than a cat!” her grandmother said, as if confirming a transmigration of

souls. That her grandmother did not mock her as silly seemed yet another unexpected kindness, as did the gentle pat on Leela’s head as the old lady took the tea things.

A year into her apprenticeship with Professor Wodeyar, when Leela carefully returned each week’s book, she dared to talk more with him, not just of plants, but about his books—but never of his odd marginalia, examined like a hunter does spools.

“Did your parents read a lot?” he asked.

“My father only had his physics. My mother, her biology. But she liked cryptic crossword puzzles. She loved her gardening.” “Liked,” she had said. Not “like.” Two terrible letters, *-ed*. The last time Leela saw her mother, the morning of the accident back home in America, Leela’s mother put on a robe and walked out with her daughter into the garden to pick flowers for their morning puja. They did this every morning before her mother and father drove together to Ohio State University to teach. Her mother had a small watering can, pouring a bit on a lilac. “H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O and five,” she had told Leela. “Remember, five letters for which H through O would be a clue. I had horrible teachers who made me memorize useless things. I had to memorize all the winter flowers: amaryllis, carnation . . . but you will go to a better school than I . . . mine was a government school.”

“I will pray to Krishna it is so. I’ll figure out the answer,” she told her mother, who frowned at this frivolous address to the gods. Leela could not figure out the answer even over breakfast.

“Always a right answer. If you ask the right questions.” Her mother smiled. Leela remembered nothing of the rest of that day, except the tight gray dress of the tired-eyed woman, buried under layers of pale flesh, who came to her classroom accompanied by a policeman to tell her the news of the crash.

“How are you sure it’s them?” Leela asked sharply, out in the hall.

“We just are, honey,” said the stout woman. “We notified your grandmother in India and she’s arranged for your uncle Ramesh to take you home to her in a week.”

“Can I see them? Have you put them in the right hospital? Do you have the bodies? Maybe they are just confused and wandering! And Uncle Ramesh isn’t really my uncle. He just visits all the time to talk to my mother about books.”

Leela did not tell Professor Wodeyar all of this, though, or why she loved the cryptic crosswords, the meanings scrambled and reconstituted, although it took her days to solve them. She merely gave him the clue and felt happy, as she had those mornings with her mother.

“This is one of those English-style ones where the clue never means what it says?” He wrote the letters down, H to O, and chuckled. It took him only a few minutes: “Water.”

Leela came home smiling. She found herself chuckling, thinking of the afternoon.

A few weeks later, her grandmother accosted Leela. Her granddaughter would soon be seventeen and she was worried.

“I am not so sure about that filing work. Or that Mr. Wodeyar of yours. Where will all this lead? I will tell them you are no longer allowed there. With their ghosts.”

“There is no such thing as ghosts.”

“We have no relatives for you to be the old aunty. No one to keep you. Nothing to keep you with. Maybe ICSC exams, and you can be a bureaucrat somewhere. I saw one district commissioner once in my taluk who was a woman. Big woman with a thick mustache. I am getting old. I can only do so much.”

Leela found herself wanting to tell Professor Wodeyar other things. Of her Saturday visits to the cantonment cemetery where the British were buried in a thicket of tombstones—men, women, and children who had come thousands of miles only to die of cholera and malaria. Oddly there were native plants here you could not find anywhere else. She could show him one day. She told him she was waiting to hear on her scholarship application to a very good New England school, a private school her mother has chosen for her.

“Do you think of Ohio very often still? You must miss it.”

No one had asked Leela this since she had arrived. That it should be the reserved Mr. Wodeyar who cared to do so moved her fearfully close to tears. The evening watchman was closing the outside shutters to the dusk. She bit her lip, gratefully watching a mote lit with the dying sunlight flee across the desk and disappear.

As if noticing this, he swiftly changed the subject. “Shall I show you something?”

He took her to a room with an old gramophone.

“My great uncle’s. One of the first in India to be owned

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by Indians, or so he claimed. The sound was collected by a horn and piped to a membrane, which vibrated the cutting stylus. A singer practically had to bellow in the horn for the notes to be carved into the wax.”

“Mr. Wodeyar,” said Leela, “sometimes I know my parents are still there somewhere, wandering. Amnesia is very common in traffic accidents. The shock. There is nobody to look for them but me.”

It was the first time she had said this aloud to anyone. She worried Mr. Wodeyar would think her crazy.

The woman who had told her about her parents’ accident had had a heavily damp arm around her and had told her to hush. Leela had tried not to shrug it off but squirmed away in the end. Ample, this woman’s arm. Outside a tree blazed red. Syrupy tree chopped up, ample. Chopped up meant there was an anagram. A syrupy tree: Maple. Her mother would have loved that one.

Mr. Wodeyar turned away to put on the old shellac 78 of King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band with Louis Armstrong. They heard the scratches and the piping of tuba and drum. A long floating trumpet, cut into the soft wax so long ago. The windows and doors were thrown open and a few of Masterji’s students walked past the door, peering in, laughing.

He held out both hands.

“Dance with me.”

She hesitated, as she recalled from her old violin lessons how poorly she kept time, but then stepped forward and held his cool, callused hands in hers, lightly and

formally. She looked into his face, rather than down at her feet, following him in a stately, half-time Charleston. She stumbled. His eyes were distant, but happy, listening to the music.

“Count,” he said.

This time, she could count the notes. They may have danced three minutes, but in her life she often came back to that moment: the clear head, the lightness of her feet stepping cleanly to the swinging music—one, two, three, and FOUR, thumped the drums, that fourth beat underlined by some distant wire-brushed snare.

“There,” he said, “You can count, after all. Thank you for that.”

He spoke like someone in the Victorian novels she liked.

They both looked up to see Masterji at the door now, watching them silently. The old man merely shook his head gently and walked on down the hall. Mr. Wodeyar gently let go of Leela’s hands. Leela felt suddenly cold and stepped away.

“Do you like *Great Expectations*?” she asked. She was still learning how to make conversation and just asked what peered from her mind.

He looked at her for a moment, as if assessing what he should say. “Not really,” he said. “He tries to make me sympathize with his money worries. I can’t be bothered.”

She shook her head and frowned, as if disappointed.

“It is not as if there is a right answer to such a question,” he smiled. “We also have our own Indian storytellers. Not every good thing comes from the West. Here, read these stories on Malgudi. R. K. Narayan. He is very good.”

“Thank you. I will return them next week. My scholarship to the boarding school in America will come through soon. I will be leaving.”

Mr. Wodeyar said that sounded exciting. His eyes drifted out the window. In a panic, not ready to go, she told him of her prayers to Krishna, and how, tempted, she had made the first since her parents’ death to come to this house, this garden, and how worried she was that something terrible would happen, now that she was here.

“Terrible things happen; they do not wait for gods.”

Later that week, Leela received a creased manila envelope from Ramesh Uncle; inside, his note said the scholarship committee had decided it could not award her

a grant. He included their letter, and a photocopy of her application, like an unwanted gift. She had given Ramesh’s address to be certain the package would arrive and here it was: a dirty, stamp-bedecked, gaudy thing.

That night she packed her few things in a small overnight bag. Her grandmother was off playing bridge at Mrs. Kulkarni’s, and Leela simply walked to the house at the end of Moyenville Road. The night guard did not know her and was startled. It is not often a girl, nearly seventeen, arrives with her bags in the night. He saw the lovingly braided hair and the sampige flower over the girl’s ear, the pressed blue dress. He rang the bell and ushered her into a room filled with drums.

She stood waiting in Mr. Wodeyar’s drawing room. He came in, elegant even in his evening kurta. She showed him the envelope with her application. He must help. He had asked her how she had missed her home when no one else had bothered. Anyone who paid such attention must care a great deal. Her hopes rose.

He went through the essays carefully, standing all the while. “What is all this nonsense about Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky? The eternal question of Russia dogs us in *The Idiot*? What does that even mean, ‘The eternal question’? Where do you write about your biology specimens or show your drawings?”

“They don’t want stuff like that.”

“They don’t want this either. Clearly. Since when were you pretentious, Leela?” He seemed genuinely irritated.

“My grandmother is right. I should just stick with engineering. I am here to ask for your help.”

“What is it?”

“Will you marry me, Mr. Wodeyar?”

She put on a smile, as if trying a new joke. She heard a deep thump from inside her; her fears, drumming. Mr. Wodeyar frowned slightly. He looked serious, and then he smiled. “I’m an old man. The fountains are dry, the roses blown. You can do better. When you are a very old woman, if you still wish it, then I will happily marry you.”

He was mocking her, she knew.

“One thing is true, Mr. Wodeyar. I will have to run away. I will go to the American embassy and ask for asylum.” She pulled the sampige flower from her braid.

“From what are you running away? Do you even know?”

He spoke to her gravely.

“This country, we do not search for missing children. We sell them. You know nothing of this world yet. You are the smartest child I know, and yet you are hugely stupid this evening.”

“I am not stupid! It is just all my hopes are ash.”

Mr. Wodeyar was silent. Again, she had said too much. People, she was rapidly learning, cannot manage direct conversation. She stood up to go but thought of something.

“I have one last clue: Burn ’em in crates, eight,” she said.

Mr. Wodeyar shook his head at her. He took out his pencil and a scrap of paper.

“I think there are two types of people. Only one type can imagine the world as a place without them. And they tend to be happy. Leela on the other hand only sees what she wants; to go back home to her mother. Leela, do you think it is unique, this loss of yours? When every one of us loses each day to the next?”

She saw she had misunderstood everything and felt a fool. Yes, she had indeed seen what she wanted and now it was further away than ever.

“But I hate lecturing,” continued Wodeyar. “And it’s cremates. The *’em* is indeed in the crates. The whole thing burns. Eight letters. Clever.”

She latched onto the eagerness in Wodeyar’s words. “I don’t have any other clues for you. That was the last one of my mother’s.” She felt she was saying farewell and should have more to offer.

“Look, Leela, you’ve decided, very unimaginatively, that India is either your Fabulous India of Maharajas or Horrible India of Open Sewers. You like these riddles?”

She sat silently, but Wodeyar went on.

“And does the solution ever come upon you when you take to thinking of it furiously? No. Well, then, this is a puzzle too, a problem that can be dismantled like any other. For example, when was it, the last happiness, some excitement?”

She searched his face for irony. It was there, mildly. She would have said, “Whenever I am here,” but stayed silent. “Oh, how silly I have been,” she thought. “One day will all this seem very funny?” she said to no one in particular.

Mr. Wodeyar smiled, the lines round his eyes like a child’s drawn sunrays. He looked as old as he said he was.

“...you’ve decided,
very unimaginatively,
that India is either
your Fabulous India
of Maharajas or
Horrible India of
Open Sewers.”

She looked at the heaped books, the teacups, the cheap bazaar fountain pens, dried leaves, and graphite sticks on his desk.

“Miles to draw before I sleep,” he said.

He took her by the elbow, holding her bag in his other hand, and led her back home through his garden. She floated on his warm, steady arm. She tried to walk as slowly as she could without dangling from it. Under the evening’s jaundiced sodium street lights, she looked, astonished, at hitherto unnoticed things: shadows of people moving to the evening bazaar, further off the dark, blue shadows of the Krishna temple, further still, the white, galactic glow of Jupiter. Her mother was wrong; there were no right answers, only adjustments and estimations. Her grandmother was wrong; there was more for her than serving a life term as wife or bureaucrat. The house was not a painted pavilion, the ragas were not the familiar ones of her childhood, and her plants and books were precious only as far as they let her spend a weekly hour working in Mr. Wodeyar’s study. Leela swept aside her tears impatiently, excited and alarmed by this fresh, unfathomable puzzle. She dug her thumbnails into her fingertips, as if the pain would stop up tears. “Mr. Wodeyar—” she whispered, but was then quiet, as they stood before her gravelled home. The water she tasted was cool, and salty as the sea, the sea separating her from a country as far away as happiness. Mr. Wodeyar

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handed over the flower book she had first brought to show him. “Take this back,” he said, “And extend your collection.” She still saw the glass jar circling over her, but the glass was colored as if in a cathedral. Here, the sound of the tenants having a late-night chat on the roof terrace, the slide of ivory on wood as the carom game counters were flicked across the crisscrossed board. The night wind shifted and brought with it the drunken smells of the flower bazaar. Here was what was left. The cat would not speak again, she knew. Without a word, without looking at her tear-stained face, Mr. Wodeyar handed her a fresh, linen handkerchief with his embroidered initials, before turning home. Her grandmother, waiting in the front room for Leela, merely went up quietly when she saw her granddaughter. Leela still has the handkerchief somewhere, in a drawer, under old things, too trivial to remember each day, and yet too important to discard.

Mala Gaonkar is a trustee of the Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI) and a founding trustee of Ariadne Labs and the Queen Elizabeth Prize for Technology. She is a member of the advisory board of the *Economist* and a trustee of the Paris Review Foundation and of the Tate. In 2015, she co-founded Surgo, a nonprofit organization focused on public health service delivery innovation.

DIXIE SALAZAR

...with no thought in mind of making the release possible, 1999

Oil on canvas, 66 x 48 in



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