



THE BROWN ENVELOPE

THE BROWN ENVELOPE

and other stories

Thirteen Tales of Immigration Fraud
and the Quiet People Who Brought It Down

MANOJ PALWE

May 2026 Edition

About the Author

Manoj Palwe knows that the most dangerous deceptions always happen inside a closed system.

For over two decades, he has operated at the highest levels of global immigration law. As a Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultant (RCIC R422575), a CAPIC Fellow (R11592), and President of Taurus Infotek (Dreamvisas) in Canada and India, his career has been defined by reading the fine print, analyzing complex international frameworks, and understanding how rules are enforced—and how they are broken.

Behind this sharp analytical mind is a man raised on the masterpieces of suspense. As an avid, lifelong reader who spent decades devouring the works of Sidney Sheldon, Dick Francis, and Frederick Forsyth, Manoj became obsessed with the mechanics of the perfect plot twist.

He paired this literary obsession with a boundless, high-energy love for the arena. A truly energetic sports enthusiast, Manoj has spent over fifty years keenly following, analyzing, and actively playing almost every single sport featured in his universe—from tennis and cricket to hockey and football (gladly leaving the high-speed cockpits of motorsport to the professionals). He knows the physical toll, the locker-room dynamics, and the psychological grit of these games firsthand.

In his groundbreaking 12-book series, *Clean Sport, Dirty Games*, he fuses his professional mastery of institutional systems, his athletic background, and classic page-turning thriller structures. The result is a premium collection of technical, high-stakes suspense thrillers that expose the gritty reality behind the glamorous facade of elite sports. When Manoj writes a cliffhanger, he isn't just inventing fiction—he's writing from a lifetime of knowing exactly how the world, the game, and a great book work.

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Thirteen Tales of Immigration Fraud and the Quiet People Who Brought It Down

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These stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, organisations, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events, locations, or organisations is coincidental.

References to immigration programmes, statutes, government bodies, and official procedures are intended to lend the stories texture; they should not be relied upon as legal or procedural guidance. For advice on any actual immigration matter, readers are urged to consult a Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultant licensed by the College of Immigration and Citizenship Consultants, or a qualified immigration lawyer.

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For the quiet people.

They are everywhere, and they win in the end.

A Note from the Author

I have spent twenty-five years in the practice of immigration consulting. In that time, I have helped some ten thousand families build a life in a new country. I have also — inevitably, in a profession that sits at the seam between hope and law — watched a smaller and quieter number of families be destroyed by people who promised them everything and delivered them nothing.

The thirteen stories collected here are, every one of them, made up. The names are invented. The cases are invented. The people are invented. But the kinds of fraud they describe — the dummy marriage, the forged Letter of Reference, the bought IELTS score, the fictional bank statement, the bogus refusal letter, the manufactured adoption, the leaked test answer — are not invented. They are the daily texture of a corner of my profession that does not, ordinarily, get written about, and that very rarely gets written about in the form of stories.

I have written them in the form of stories because the form of stories is the form in which I have most often, in my own life, been able to understand something I could not have understood as a case file or a statute. The protagonists are not always the police, nor always the regulators, nor always the consultants. They are sometimes the photographer at the wedding, or the engineer in Sharjah, or the daughter who has been waiting for fifteen years. They are, in every case, ordinary

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people who have been brought to the edge of an extraordinary decision, and who have decided.

I am indebted, in writing them, to the late Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare, whose collections — *A Twist in the Tale*, *Twelve Red Herrings*, *Cat O'Nine Tales* — taught a generation of readers, including this one, that the short story can carry, in its small case, a moral weight that the longest novel sometimes cannot.

I commend these stories, with appropriate humility, to that tradition.

Manoj Palwe

Pune — Ajax

2026

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The Second Client

Ramesh Kulkarni had worked forty-one years in the drawing office of a cement plant in Chakan, and in all those years he had never paid a bribe, never missed a Sunday with his grandchildren, and never, until the afternoon of the seventeenth of March, been called a fool.

The man who called him one was sitting in front of him on a laptop screen.

“*Uncle ji*, you are not being a fool,” said Deepak Varma, who wore a crisp white shirt, a lanyard that read *Varma Immigration — Toronto*, and a smile so symmetrical it might have been drawn with a ruler. “Only — how shall I put it — you are being a little slow. The Canadian Express Entry pool closes in nine days. If we don’t file now, the whole family goes back into the queue. Another three years. Minimum.”

Ramesh’s daughter Anuja, who was thirty-four and a software architect, and his son-in-law Kedar, who was a chartered accountant, both nodded at the screen from Ramesh’s dining table in Pune. On the wall behind them hung a framed photograph of Ramesh’s late wife, garlanded with sandalwood.

“The figure is twelve lakhs, Deepak ji?” Ramesh asked.

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“Twelve lakhs ninety, all inclusive. Government fees, biometrics, medicals, my professional charges. Wire it to the Canadian account I sent — it’s a trust account, regulated by the College. *Safest thing in the world.*”

Kedar, who was nobody’s fool either, leaned into the camera. “Before we transfer, Deepak ji, one small thing. You said last week you are an RCIC. Can you give us your registration number? My colleague just wants to verify on the CICC website.”

The symmetrical smile tightened by perhaps half a millimetre.

“Of course, of course. R-six-one-four-eight-nine-two. But understand — the CICC register updates slowly. If it shows ‘pending’ that is because of my recent move from Brampton to North York. I have the confirmation e-mail, I’ll forward it. Now please — the deadline.”

Ramesh tapped the number into a notebook. He said he would call back in the evening.

He did not call back that evening. Nor the next. On the third day, Deepak Varma sent a WhatsApp message in which the words “last chance” appeared four times and the word “fool,” almost apologetically, appeared once.

* * *

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Inspector Pratap Shinde of the Pune City Cyber Cell had a small office, a small moustache, and a large framed certificate from the National Police Academy that he had hung crookedly, on purpose, because a straight one, he said, made visitors nervous.

Ramesh sat opposite him, holding a blue folder.

“You were right to come, Mr Kulkarni,” Shinde said, turning the pages. “This registration number — R-six-one-four-eight-nine-two — does not exist on the CICC register. I checked before you arrived. What does exist is a man named *Dipankar Verma*, who was struck off in 2022 for exactly this. He has since — how shall I say — rebranded.”

“So we have caught him.”

“We have identified him. Catching is a different animal. He operates from a flat in Mississauga — that much is genuine — and the money, once wired, passes through four accounts in three jurisdictions in eleven minutes. We have traced seventeen victims across Maharashtra and Gujarat. Not one has recovered a rupee.”

Ramesh set down the folder. “Then why are you telling me this, Inspector? To inform me I am the eighteenth?”

Shinde smiled for the first time. It was not a symmetrical smile.

“Because, Mr Kulkarni, you have not yet sent the money. Which makes you, in a manner of speaking, the first.”

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He rose, walked to a steel almirah, and returned with a second folder, thicker than the first. He placed it on the desk between them with the ceremony of a man laying out a chess problem.

“The difficulty, you see, is not proving that Dipankar Verma is a fraud. We know he is. The CICC knows. Peel Regional Police knows. The difficulty is *jurisdiction*. He has never set foot in India. He operates through a Canadian company, on Canadian soil, using a Canadian bank. For our courts, he is a ghost. For the Canadian courts —” Shinde spread his hands — “he is very careful. Every one of those seventeen victims was asked, on video, whether they understood the fees were for ‘advisory services’ and not a guaranteed outcome. Each one, poor soul, said yes.”

“And then he ran away with their money.”

“And then he filed — or did not file — applications that had no chance. Refused applications are not fraud, Mr Kulkarni. They are bad luck. That is the wall we have hit, seventeen times.”

Ramesh considered the folder for a long moment. Outside the window, a koel was calling, the same two notes, over and over.

“Inspector,” he said at last, “suppose — purely as a supposition — someone were to call Mr Varma again. Not me. Someone else. Someone who did not yet know he was a fraud. And suppose that conversation were recorded. Would that help you?”

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Shinde's small moustache twitched. "It would help, Mr Kulkarni, if the recording captured three things. A specific false claim — his registration, for instance. A commitment — that the money, once received, will be used for a specific purpose. And a lie about his location — because that is what lets us bring in the Canadians without him arguing he was never physically there."

"Three things."

"Three things. No more. Any more and it begins to look, to a defence lawyer, like entrapment."

Ramesh nodded slowly. "My daughter," he said, "is a very precise woman. She wrote software for aircraft, at one time. Three things she can manage."

The koel outside stopped calling. Shinde closed the folder.

"Mr Kulkarni," he said, "you understand that I am not asking you to do this. I am, if anything, strongly advising against it."

"I understand perfectly, Inspector."

"And you understand that if it goes wrong, the department cannot be seen to have —"

"Inspector Shinde," said Ramesh, rising and reaching for his umbrella, "I worked forty-one years in a drawing office. I understand what it means when something cannot be seen."

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* * *

That evening, at the dining table in Pune, a plan was drawn up on the reverse of a gas bill.

Anuja would make the call. Not under her own name — Deepak had, after all, met her on the earlier video — but she was willing to wear a borrowed dupatta and to sit in front of a plain wall in Kedar’s sister’s flat in Aurangabad, which happened to be actually in Aurangabad, because a small truth, Ramesh said, is the scaffolding on which a useful lie is best built.

Kedar would handle the technical side. The call would go through a laptop whose microphone was split, so that the recording would be made locally, in Pune, rather than on any server that Deepak might one day subpoena.

The three questions, Anuja wrote out in her neat architect’s handwriting, were to be asked in a particular order. Registration first, because men are vain about their credentials. Commitment second, because by then he would be leaning in. Location third, because by then — Anuja drew a small underline beneath the word — he would not even notice it had been asked.

Ramesh read the list and said, “One change, beti. Ask the first question as though you already know the answer. Men like Deepak do

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not suspect someone who is confirming, only someone who is checking.”

Anuja looked at her father for a long moment. Then she wrote, in the margin, the word confirming, and drew a neat box around it.

They telephoned Inspector Shinde. The call to Canada was scheduled for 9.30 a.m. Indian Standard Time, which would be midnight in Mississauga — a detail Sub-Inspector Dhillon, once informed, pronounced “absolutely ideal,” because a man woken from his bed at midnight is a man whose smile, symmetrical or otherwise, has not yet had time to arrange itself.

* * *

Deepak, who had not closed the Kulkarni file so much as quietly shelved it after the old man stopped answering, brightened at once. A dentist was ideal. Dentists had savings. Dentists also had a pathological fear of paperwork, which meant they seldom read contracts.

“Priya ji, welcome, welcome,” he said, straightening his lanyard. “Which program are we thinking — Express Entry? Provincial? Tell me your age, your IELTS, your —”

“Twenty-nine. Eight bands. NOC 3113.”

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Deepak's eyes, which had been doing arithmetic, now did it faster. A near-perfect candidate. He would not even need to forge her score sheet.

“Excellent. Excellent profile. You would get in without me. But —” and here he leaned forward, into the lens — “without me, you would take fourteen months. With me, you are in Toronto by Diwali. The difference is my network.”

“And your fee?”

“Fifteen lakhs. But —” the symmetrical smile, with one extra tooth of warmth — “for a lady travelling alone, let us say thirteen.”

“Thirteen is still a great deal of money, Deepak ji.”

“Priya ji,” said Deepak, settling back in his chair with the air of a man who has had this conversation many times, “it is not money. It is an *investment*. In five years you will earn that in a single quarter. Canadian dentists — do you know what they charge for a root canal? Eight hundred dollars. Eight hundred. For one tooth.”

“I had heard it was seven.”

“Eight, with anaesthetic. Seven without. Either way —” he laughed, the easy laugh of a man who has no reason, at this moment, to be cautious — “either way, you will not notice thirteen lakhs six

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months after you land. The question is only whether you land now, or in three years, when the rules will have changed again.”

Priya Joshi looked down at her lap. Then she said, quite softly, “Deepak ji, I have to be honest. I was referred to you by Ramesh Kulkarni.”

On the screen, the symmetrical smile did not so much vanish as evaporate, leaving behind a face that had forgotten what it had been doing.

“He— he is my father.”

There was a pause of the kind that, in Jeffrey Archer’s stories, one learns to read very carefully. Deepak Varma’s hand moved, off-camera, towards the laptop’s lid.

“Please don’t close the call, Deepak ji,” said Priya. “I only want to ask you three questions. And then, if you wish, you can hang up, and you will never hear from any of us again.”

The hand hovered. Greed, as Inspector Shinde had predicted over tea that morning, is a heavier thing than fear. The hand retreated.

“Ask.”

“First — is your RCIC number R-six-one-four-eight-nine-two, yes?”

“Yes.”

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“Second — if my father wires twelve lakhs ninety to the account you sent him, you will file his Express Entry application within forty-eight hours, yes?”

A fractional pause. Then: “Yes. Same-day, if the funds clear.”

“Third — and this is only for my peace of mind — you are, physically, in Toronto right now, are you not? Not in, say, Mississauga?”

“Toronto,” said Deepak Varma, with the easy contempt of a man who has been asked a stupid question. “Bay Street. Fourteenth floor. I can see the CN Tower from where I sit.”

“Thank you, Deepak ji. That is all.”

She reached forward to end the call. And then, as if remembering, she said: “Oh — one thing more. You may want to note down a name. Sub-Inspector Harjeet Dhillon. Peel Regional Police, Mississauga detachment. He is standing, at this moment, on the other side of your door.”

* * *

It had taken Inspector Shinde eleven days to arrange the liaison.

The CICC, it transpired, had been sitting on a complaint against one Dipankar Verma since January, unable to act because none of their complainants would testify. What they had needed, their investigator

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had told Shinde over a sympathetic international call, was a confession. Preferably recorded. Preferably with the geography admitted on tape — because Verma had, in his earlier scams, defended himself by claiming he had only ever been an “advisor,” never physically present in Canada, never subject to Canadian jurisdiction.

A Canadian lawyer could wriggle out of a great deal. He could not wriggle out of a recording in which he declared, twice, that he was sitting on Bay Street.

Sub-Inspector Dhillon, a Punjabi-Canadian officer of ten years’ experience and considerable patience, had been only too pleased to assist. He had waited in the stairwell of a walk-up building in Mississauga — not Bay Street, not the fourteenth floor, and certainly without a view of the CN Tower — while a young woman in Pune, whose real name was not Priya Joshi but Anuja Kulkarni-Deshmukh, had asked three questions and received three answers.

The knock, when it came, was firm but not unfriendly.

Inside the flat, Deepak Varma was still staring at the dark rectangle where Priya Joshi’s face had been. On a second monitor, a map of Mississauga glowed faintly, the cursor hovering over a pin he had placed on his own address as a private joke — a small red dot labelled

Bay Street, 14th Floor.

The knock came again. This time it was less friendly.

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* * *

Six months later, in the Sessions Court at Kalyan, an application was filed under the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty between India and Canada. It was the seventh such application Inspector Shinde had filed in his career. It was the first to succeed.

The funds — twelve lakhs and ninety thousand rupees, frozen in an Ontario trust account on the day of Deepak Varma’s arrest — were repatriated in rupees to the State Bank of India, Deccan Gymkhana branch, Pune, on a Tuesday in late September.

Ramesh Kulkarni received a call from his bank at eleven in the morning.

He was sitting on the verandah, reading the paper, with his grandson on his knee.

“Mr Kulkarni,” said the branch manager, “a large inward remittance has arrived. Approximately twelve lakhs ninety. The sender field is marked ‘Attorney General of Ontario — Proceeds of Crime.’”

“How strange,” said Ramesh. “I had not sent any money abroad.”

“No, sir. That is precisely what is strange.”

Ramesh thanked the manager, put down the phone, and returned to his newspaper, where he read — on page seven, in a small single-column item — that a former immigration consultant in Canada had pleaded

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guilty to seventeen counts of fraud and been sentenced to four years, with a further restitution order of approximately two crore rupees payable to victims across India.

The article did not mention Ramesh's name. It did not mention Anuja's. It did not mention Inspector Shinde's, or Sub-Inspector Dhillon's, or — and this is the detail Ramesh noted with the quiet satisfaction of a man who has worked forty-one years in a drawing office — it did not mention that the eighteenth intended victim had, in the end, not been a victim at all.

He turned the page.

* * *

What neither the newspaper nor Inspector Shinde nor Sub-Inspector Dhillon ever discovered — what only Ramesh Kulkarni himself knew, and what he never told even his daughter — was that on the morning of the seventeenth of March, before the video call with Deepak Varma, he had already searched the CICC public register.

He had already found that R-six-one-four-eight-nine-two did not exist.

He had taken the call anyway.

Because Ramesh Kulkarni, who had worked forty-one years in the drawing office of a cement plant in Chakan, who had never paid a bribe

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and never missed a Sunday with his grandchildren, had two things no one had thought to ask about. He had a daughter who was a software architect, clever enough to borrow a dupatta and a name. He had a son-in-law who was a chartered accountant, patient enough to sit in a police station for eleven days. And he had, quite privately, a brother-in-law in Mississauga — a retired professor who, over the course of the preceding winter, had lost eighteen lakhs to a consultant with a symmetrical smile, and had died, three weeks later, of what the doctors called a stroke and the family called something else.

The police never knew about the brother-in-law. The newspaper never mentioned him.

But on the evening of the Tuesday in late September, after the money had come home, Ramesh walked across the road to the small temple at the corner, where he kept, among the other photographs, one of a man in a graduation gown, garlanded now with sandalwood.

He folded his hands.

“Eighteen,” he said, very quietly. “I promised you eighteen. I am sorry it took so long.”

And then he walked home to his grandson, who was waiting on the verandah, and who wanted, as grandsons do, to know what was for dinner.

*

II

The Harvest Season

Gurdev Singh Dhillon owned one hundred and sixty acres of blueberry bushes in the Fraser Valley, seventy kilometres east of Vancouver, on flat black soil that had once, long before his grandfather bought it from a Dutchman in 1967, been the bed of a prehistoric lake.

He had farmed it for thirty-four years. He had two tractors, one combine, a cold store rated at minus eighteen degrees Celsius, a wife named Jasbir who kept the accounts in a red ledger, and an office above the packing shed whose window looked out over the back road to Abbotsford.

He had also, for the past two summers, been running one of the most unusual counter-intelligence operations the Canada Border Services Agency had ever seen. This was not widely known. It was not, in fact, known to his wife.

* * *

It had begun on a wet afternoon in March of the previous year, when a young man from Jalandhar had walked up the gravel drive and presented himself at the office door, clutching a folder of papers.

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His name was Harpreet. He was twenty-three. He had paid, he told Gurdev, twenty-two lakh rupees to an agent in Phagwara for a two-year LMIA-supported work permit at *Dhillon Berry Farms Ltd.*

He produced the papers. They were, Gurdev saw at once, excellent forgeries. The letterhead was his own, down to the small typographical error in the postal code that Gurdev had never bothered to correct in fourteen years. The signature was his own, or at any rate a signature a bank teller would have accepted without a second glance. The Service Canada LMIA reference number was invented, but plausibly invented — the right format, the right year, the right regional code.

The wage offered was \$16.75 per hour. The position was described as “Farm Supervisor.” The employer’s National Occupational Classification code was correct.

Only one detail was wrong. The farm, at the bottom of the letter, was described as growing strawberries.

Gurdev Singh Dhillon did not grow strawberries. He had never grown strawberries. His grandfather had not grown strawberries. In the Fraser Valley, in March, the difference between a strawberry and a blueberry was the difference between a man who knew what he was talking about and a man sitting in an office in Phagwara with a laptop.

Gurdev looked at the young man on his doorstep. The young man’s shoes were cheap. His jacket was cheaper. His eyes had the particular

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emptiness of a man who has understood, somewhere between the immigration hall at YVR and the bus to Abbotsford, that something has gone terribly wrong, but has not yet admitted it to himself.

Gurdev had seen that look before. On his son's face. In a photograph the RCMP had brought to his house in the winter of 2019, four days after the body had been found in a basement rooming-house in Surrey, where his son — who had gone to Canada on an equally forged LMIA, paid for with the sale of three acres of ancestral land — had been sleeping twelve to a room, working for six dollars an hour cash, and had eventually, on the night of the fourteenth of December, stopped bothering to come home.

Gurdev folded the letter in half. Then he unfolded it and looked at it again.

“Come in,” he said to Harpreet. “My wife will make you tea. And then you will tell me the name of the man in Phagwara.”

* * *

The name of the man in Phagwara was Balbir Grewal, though in his WhatsApp catalogue of Canadian “opportunities” he styled himself Bobby Canada. His office — on the second floor of a commercial complex opposite the bus stand — bore a sign in three languages declaring it to be the INTERNATIONAL CAREER GATEWAY.

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Balbir had been selling LMIA's for four years. He had a method. He kept, on his laptop, a folder of photographs scraped from the websites of legitimate British Columbia farms. He kept a second folder of Service Canada letterhead templates, harvested patiently over eighteen months from genuine approval letters clients had brought him for 'verification'. He kept a third folder of signatures, each one traced from a document some hopeful farm-owner had been foolish enough to email him during an earlier, sincerer phase of his career.

He charged between eighteen and twenty-six lakh rupees per job offer. He accepted payment in three instalments: one to begin the paperwork, one before the flight, and one — a smaller "service fee" — remitted by the candidate from Canada, once landed, once the panic of not being met at the airport had set in.

He had sold, by the spring of the year in question, more than sixty such offers. Of his sixty candidates, fifty-two had actually boarded aircraft to Vancouver, presented their papers at YVR, been waved through, and discovered — on the back roads of the Fraser Valley, some by taxi, some by the kindness of a stranger from the gurdwara — that the farms named in their letters had either never heard of them or, in four memorable cases, had never existed at all.

What Balbir Grewal did not know, as he sat in his air-conditioned office watching the fan spin and adding another photograph to his template folder, was that eleven of his last fourteen candidates had all,

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by a coincidence he would have found statistically troubling, been sold job offers at the same place.

Dhillon Berry Farms Ltd. One hundred and sixty acres. Abbotsford, British Columbia.

* * *

Constable Rajinder Bains of the CBSA Intelligence Section, Pacific Region, was a slight woman in her late thirties with two small children and an older sister still in Ludhiana. She had worked LMIA fraud for six years, and had, in that time, secured exactly four prosecutions.

The problem, as she was fond of explaining to new trainees, was evidence. The candidates would not testify — they were too frightened, too ashamed, or too invested in the thin thread of legal status that their forged papers had temporarily bought them. The agents, in India, were beyond her reach. The farms whose names were forged either did not know, or — if they did know — preferred not to get involved, because a farmer who made a statement against a smuggling ring in Punjab could expect his relatives in Jalandhar to be visited before the week was out.

So Constable Bains had spent six years watching a river of fraud flow past her, catching the occasional fish with her hands, and knowing that ninety-nine fish in a hundred swam on to the sea.

Until, on a Tuesday morning in April of the previous year, a blueberry farmer from Abbotsford had walked into the Surrey CBSA

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office, sat down opposite her, and said: “Constable, I have a proposal. It is perhaps a little irregular. Will you hear it?”

* * *

The proposal was this.

Gurdev would not report the forgeries. He would, instead, hire the young men who arrived at his door carrying them.

He would pay them real wages, at the real rate posted by the BC Employment Standards Branch. He would house them, legally, in the farm’s licensed seasonal worker accommodation. He would file T4s at the end of the year, deduct CPP and EI, and do every other thing a legitimate employer was required to do.

He would also, with each young man’s signed consent, photocopy the forged letter, record the name of the agent in Phagwara, and hand the whole package, together with WhatsApp histories, payment receipts and any other scrap of evidence the young man had retained, to Constable Bains.

He would do this for as many seasons as it took.

“For how long?” Constable Bains had asked.

“Until I have fifty,” Gurdev had said. “Fifty complete files. Then you take them to Ottawa and you do whatever it is you people do.”

“Mr Dhillon, I have to ask. Why?”

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Gurdev had looked out of her office window, at the grey Surrey sky and the McDonald's sign across the road, for what felt to Bains like a long time.

“My son,” he had said at last, “paid twenty lakhs for a letter that said he was going to work on a mushroom farm in Langley. There was no mushroom farm. There was a basement in Surrey, and twelve men, and a heater that did not work. He died in February. The coroner wrote ‘environmental hypothermia.’ I keep the report in my desk. I read it, sometimes.”

He turned back to her.

“I do not want revenge, Constable. Revenge is a small thing. I want the next twelve men who arrive at my door to have a bed, and a wage, and a receipt. And I want the man in Phagwara who sold them the letter to understand, when your colleagues knock on his door, that he has been watched for two summers by a man he has never met.”

Constable Bains had looked at him for a long moment. Then she had opened a drawer, taken out a form she had never previously filled out, and begun to write.

* * *

The arrangement, over the next eighteen months, produced a quiet harvest.

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Thirty-eight young men arrived at Dhillon Berry Farms bearing forged letters. Every one was given tea by Jasbir (who, in the end, had to be told; and who, after she had sat for half an hour looking at the photograph on the wall of their son in his first-year university gown, had agreed). Every one was put to work. Every one signed the consent form Constable Bains had drafted on pink paper, pink being, Bains had explained with a small smile, the colour her department used for informants, and the young men being — technically, legally — exactly that.

The young men themselves could not, at first, believe the arrangement. Three tried to run. One, a boy of nineteen from Kapurthala whose father had mortgaged the family tractor to pay Bobby Canada, wept for forty minutes in the office above the packing shed before he could be persuaded to eat. Another, older, suspicious, demanded to see Gurdev's farm registration, his BC Assessment statement, and the previous year's T4 summary before he would so much as sit down. Gurdev produced all three, laid them on the table, and waited.

“Why are you doing this?” the older man had asked, at last.

“Because someone should have done it for my son,” Gurdev had said. “And no one did.”

The files grew. By the second September, Bains had forty-one of them, cross-referenced, corroborated, and each containing at least three

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independent evidentiary threads leading back to the office opposite the Phagwara bus stand. She kept them in a locked cabinet in the Surrey office. She updated them on a spreadsheet she had named, with the dry humour of long service,

berry_season.xlsx.

She took the bundle to Ottawa in the first week of October.

Ottawa took six months to act, which Gurdev, who had farmed for thirty-four years, considered quite reasonable — crops, too, did not ripen when one wished them to.

In Phagwara, during those six months, Balbir Grewal had the best quarter of his career. His referrals were multiplying. Every candidate he had sent to Dhillon Berry Farms had — he was delighted to note — arrived, stayed, found work, and sent home glowing reports. He could not quite understand why. He suspected, with the vanity of his profession, that his own paperwork had simply become that good. He raised his fee to twenty-eight lakhs.

He began to think about a bigger office.

On a morning in April of the following year, at precisely nine o'clock Phagwara time, four officers of the Punjab Police, acting on a Mutual Legal Assistance request transmitted through the Ministry of External Affairs and endorsed by a magistrate in Jalandhar, walked up the

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concrete stairs opposite the bus stand and knocked on the door of the INTERNATIONAL CAREER GATEWAY.

Balbir Grewal, who was at that moment on a WhatsApp video call with a prospective client in Hoshiarpur, did not at first understand why his office had filled with uniformed men. When one of them showed him a warrant, he looked at it and laughed — a short, disbelieving laugh — and said: “On what evidence?”

The officer in charge, a Sub-Inspector who had been briefed in some detail, produced from a folder a single sheet of paper and held it up.

It was a photocopy of an LMIA letter, bearing the letterhead of Dhillon Berry Farms Ltd.

It described the farm as growing strawberries.

* * *

What the officers in Phagwara did not know — what Constable Bains did not know — what, indeed, Jasbir Dhillon herself did not know until the spring of the year after that — was the true origin of the detail that had convicted Balbir Grewal.

The strawberries were not an accident.

In the winter before Harpreet had walked up his gravel drive, Gurdev Singh Dhillon had spent three evenings at his kitchen table, a glass of water at his elbow, composing with great care a single fictional

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letter on his own farm's letterhead. He had got the postal code right — including his grandfather's typographical error. He had forged his own signature. He had selected an LMIA reference number in the correct format for the correct year. And, at the bottom of the letter, he had described himself, against thirty-four years of evidence to the contrary, as a grower of strawberries.

He had then — using a burner phone, an encrypted e-mail address, and the patience of a man who had nothing left to lose — sent the letter to Balbir Grewal in Phagwara, as an attachment to a message purporting to be from a grateful client who wished to recommend Bobby Canada to his cousin.

Balbir, who scraped everything, had filed the letter away in his template folder.

And there it had sat, for fourteen months, beside the legitimate templates, waiting to be used.

When Balbir had, in due course, begun selling job offers at Dhillon Berry Farms Ltd, he had copied the letterhead and the signature and the postal code from Gurdev's own letter — and with them, without noticing, the strawberries.

Every single one of the forty-one files Constable Bains had taken to Ottawa described the farm as growing strawberries.

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Every single one therefore bore the fingerprint of a letter that had been written not by Balbir Grewal but by Gurdev Singh Dhillon himself — in his own kitchen, in the winter before Harpreet had arrived, as the first act of a campaign that Gurdev had planned for three years, beginning on the afternoon the RCMP had stood on his porch with a photograph.

A defence lawyer, had he ever seen the evidence in this light, might have called it entrapment. He might have got his client off.

But the defence lawyer never saw it in this light. Because Gurdev, who had farmed for thirty-four years and knew the value of quiet, had told no one. Not Constable Bains. Not Jasbir. Not the young men. Not the officers who had gone up the stairs in Phagwara. Not the magistrate in Jalandhar. Not his daughter. Not the priest at the gurdwara.

He had told only one person. And he had told that person alone, in a cold cemetery in Surrey, on the fourteenth of February in the year of the arrest, standing before a small grey stone, on the fifth anniversary of a death that had never been avenged, and now, in a certain quiet way, had been.

“Forty-one,” he had said.

And then, because the wind off the Strait of Georgia was bitter, he had turned up the collar of his jacket and walked back to his truck, and

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driven home through the rain to his wife, and to his farm, where — it being April — the blueberries were just coming into bud.

*

III

The Refusal Letter

Marisol Bautista had wanted, for as long as she could remember, to go to Canada.

She was thirty-one years old, a registered nurse with seven years of experience in the cardiac unit of a private hospital in Quezon City, the eldest of four siblings, the unmarried daughter of a widowed mother, and the principal earner of a household that depended, in the manner of many Filipino households, on her steady salary and her quiet, unfailing competence.

Her father, who had been a high-school chemistry teacher, had spoken often of Canada in the years before his death. He had a cousin in Winnipeg who had emigrated in the 1980s as a domestic worker and who had, over the decades, written long letters describing snow, escalators in shopping malls, and the particular dignity of being addressed politely by strangers in a country that did not know her family's standing or lack of it.

After her father's death, Marisol had inherited the letters.

She had also inherited his savings, which had amounted, after the funeral expenses, to four hundred and eighty thousand pesos.

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It was on the strength of those savings, and on the recommendation of a colleague at the hospital, that she had walked one morning, in February of the previous year, into the office of Mr Edwin Mercado of Mercado Migration Solutions, on the seventh floor of a commercial building in Pasig City.

* * *

Mr Mercado was forty-six. He was unfailingly polite. He spoke softly. He kept on his desk a framed photograph of his three children, all of them in white school uniforms, smiling on the steps of what looked to be a comfortable home.

He had explained to Marisol, over the course of two consultations, that her profile was excellent. As a registered nurse with seven years of experience and a CELPIP score of nine, she would qualify, he said, for both the Federal Skilled Worker stream and the Caregiver pilot. He would, on her behalf, prepare and submit applications under both streams in parallel — a strategy he favoured, he said, because it doubled her chances at modest additional cost.

His total fee, he explained, was two hundred and fifty thousand pesos, payable in two instalments. Government fees, biometrics, and translations would be additional, billed at cost.

Marisol had paid the first instalment in cash on the third of March. She had paid the second on the seventeenth of April. She had signed

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every document Mr Mercado had placed before her. She had submitted, when requested, additional photographs, additional reference letters, and a notarised affidavit confirming her unmarried status.

On the second of November, eight months after she had first walked into his office, she received a telephone call from Mr Mercado. His voice was, she thought, unusually subdued.

“Ms Bautista. May I ask you to come in this afternoon. There is news. It is, I am sorry to say, not the news we hoped for.”

Marisol left the hospital at three. She arrived at his office at four. He sat her down. He poured her a glass of water. He placed before her a four-page document on Canadian government letterhead.

It was a refusal letter.

Her Federal Skilled Worker application had been refused on grounds of insufficient settlement funds. The officer had assessed her bank statements and concluded that her demonstrated funds, while close to the threshold, did not fully satisfy the regulatory minimum at the time of assessment. The letter was signed, in a neat practised hand, by

C. Reyes, Officer, Migration Section, Embassy of Canada to the Philippines, Manila.

“Ms Bautista. I understand that this is difficult. But I have good news as well. Canadian immigration law allows for a request for

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reconsideration in cases such as this, where the deficiency is marginal and the applicant's overall profile is strong. I have already begun preparing the appeal. The fee for this work is one hundred and twenty thousand pesos. I would not normally undertake an appeal of this kind. In your case, I will.”

Marisol borrowed the money from her uncle in Tarlac. She paid Mr Mercado on the fourteenth of November.

On the eighth of February of the following year, three months later, she received a second telephone call. The reconsideration had been refused. The grounds, this time, were a discrepancy in her IELTS score validity dates. The refusal letter was again on Canadian government letterhead. It was signed by C. Reyes.

Mr Mercado proposed a Federal Court judicial review. The fee was two hundred thousand pesos.

Marisol mortgaged the small parcel of land her father had left her in Pampanga.

* * *

Officer Camille Reyes of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada had been posted to the Migration Section of the Embassy of Canada in Manila for two years and eight months.

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She was thirty-six. She had been born in a small house in the San Andres district of Manila, in a barangay where the streets flooded for one week of every monsoon and where her mother, who was the local seamstress, had kept three sewing machines in the front room. She had left Manila at the age of seven, when her father — a merchant marine engineer — had succeeded, after eleven years of attempts, in obtaining permanent residence in Canada through a now-defunct skilled trades programme. The family had settled in Burnaby, British Columbia. Officer Reyes had grown up speaking English at school and Tagalog at home. She had become, by the age of twenty-eight, a Canadian citizen, an IRCC officer, and — by her own quiet design — fluent in three of the principal Filipino languages.

Her posting to Manila had been her own request. She had wanted, she had told her supervisor, to be useful in the country she had come from. The supervisor, who had recognised in Officer Reyes a particular and unusual quality, had granted the request without difficulty.

In her two years and eight months in Manila, Officer Reyes had processed approximately nine thousand applications. She had been, by the metrics her department maintained, exceptionally productive. She had also — a fact noted in her annual review with cautious approval — declined to authorise her name on any decision letter she had not personally signed.

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Most of her colleagues used digital signatures. Officer Reyes did not. Each refusal letter, each approval letter, each procedural fairness letter that left her desk left it bearing her ink signature in a small neat hand, executed in blue Pelikan fountain pen, on the original copy that was returned to file.

It was an idiosyncrasy. Her supervisor had, on occasion, suggested she abandon it. She had, on occasion, declined.

On a Tuesday morning in March, Officer Reyes was reviewing the previous month's refused applications when she paused at one. She paused not because the application was unusual — it was, in fact, exemplary, the file of a registered nurse named Marisol Bautista whom Officer Reyes had cleared without hesitation eleven months earlier — but because the file was now flagged as

withdrawn by applicant pending further documentation.

She did not understand the flag. She had personally sent the approval letter — she had signed it on the fourteenth of October — and a permanent resident visa had been issued to Ms Bautista on the second of November of the previous year.

Or rather, the visa had been issued in the IRCC system. The applicant had not, on the records before Officer Reyes, ever attended the embassy to collect it.

Officer Reyes pulled the full file.

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She read it for thirty-seven minutes. Then she walked down the corridor to the office of the Section Chief, knocked, and asked for an hour of his time.

* * *

What Officer Reyes had pieced together over the thirty-seven minutes was the following.

Marisol Bautista's Federal Skilled Worker application had, in fact, been approved. Her permanent residence visa had been issued. The collection notification had been sent, in the ordinary course, to the address listed on her application. The address was 47 Sampaguita Street, Barangay San Andres, Manila.

Officer Reyes had grown up at 47 Sampaguita Street, Barangay San Andres, Manila.

Her mother had sold the house in 2007. The buyer had been a small-time landlord who had, over the subsequent years, rented it out to a series of tenants. Officer Reyes had passed it once, a year into her posting, on a Sunday afternoon. She had stood across the street for ten minutes. The front room, where the sewing machines had been, was now occupied by a small electronics shop selling phone chargers and second-hand fans.

The address had been used, on Marisol Bautista's application, as the applicant's residential address.

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Marisol Bautista, of course, had never lived there. She lived, on the application file, at her real address in Quezon City — also listed, as the second of two addresses, in a section of the form headed

Alternative Mailing Address.

The 47 Sampaguita Street address had been entered as the primary residential address. The Quezon City address had been entered as alternative. Both addresses were in Marisol's own handwriting, on the original signed form.

All correspondence from the embassy had been sent to the primary address. Marisol Bautista had never received any of it.

Including the approval letter.

Including the visa-collection notification, sent on the twenty-second of October.

Including the second notification, the third, and the formal visa-expiry letter sent on the eighteenth of January.

Officer Reyes did not yet know who had filled in the address line on her form. She did not yet know who had been collecting the embassy's post at 47 Sampaguita Street. She did not yet know who had been telephoning Ms Bautista every three months to inform her of refusals and to charge her additional fees.

She had, however, a strong working hypothesis.

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She also had, in her capacity as a serving IRCC officer, considerably more freedom of movement in Manila than she had brought to her colleagues' attention.

* * *

Officer Reyes did not, that afternoon, refer the matter to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Liaison Officer, who would have been the orthodox channel for a fraud investigation.

She did, however, refer it to the National Bureau of Investigation's Anti-Fraud Division, which had jurisdiction over commercial fraud committed by Philippine nationals on Philippine soil. The NBI had assigned a senior agent within forty-eight hours.

On the morning of the twenty-third of March, accompanied by NBI Senior Agent Paolo Cruz and three uniformed officers, Officer Reyes walked, unannounced and without prior notice, into the office of Mr Edwin Mercado of Mercado Migration Solutions, on the seventh floor of a commercial building in Pasig City.

Mr Mercado was at his desk. He had been, when the door opened, on the telephone. He looked up and saw, in the doorway, a small woman in a navy blazer holding an embassy identification card.

"Mr Mercado. My name is Camille Reyes. I am the Canadian visa officer named on every refusal letter you have produced in the past

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sixteen months. I would be very grateful if you would now hang up the telephone.”

Mr Mercado hung up the telephone.

* * *

The investigation that followed identified ninety-three Filipino applicants who had paid Mr Mercado a total of approximately fifty-four million pesos over four years. None of their applications, with the single exception of Marisol Bautista’s, had ever been filed.

Mr Mercado had, in fact, prepared the applications — he had collected the documents, drafted the forms, signed the applicant declarations — but he had not submitted them. He had, instead, written and printed his own refusal letters on counterfeit Canadian government letterhead, in the name of a fictional Officer C. Reyes whose name he had taken at random from a directory of Filipino-Canadian community organisations and whom he had never imagined to be a real person.

In Marisol Bautista’s case, by accident or perhaps because she had been the one applicant whose qualifications had genuinely impressed him, he had submitted the application. He had paid the government fees out of his own collected funds. He had then, on receipt of approval, simply withheld the news — the visa-collection address being his own back-channel post box on Sampaguita Street, an address he had used for

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several years for the receipt of his various forged correspondences — and continued to invoice Marisol for additional appeal services.

Marisol Bautista's actual Canadian permanent resident visa, by the time the NBI raided Mr Mercado's office, had expired four months earlier.

Officer Reyes, exercising her discretion as a serving visa officer, reissued it the same afternoon.

Mr Mercado was charged, in the course of the following year, with one hundred and fourteen counts of estafa, two counts of forgery of official documents of a foreign government, and one count of unauthorised practice of immigration consultancy. He pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to seventeen years in Bilibid prison. His office was closed. The framed photograph of his three children was, in due course, returned to his wife, who continued, with the difficult dignity of women in such positions, to live in the comfortable house on the steps of which the photograph had been taken.

* * *

Officer Reyes did not, in her formal report to her supervisor, mention the address.

She wrote that the discrepancy had been detected on routine review of a flagged file. She wrote that the involvement of the National Bureau of Investigation had been initiated through standard inter-agency

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channels. She wrote that the case had been resolved with the recovery of the misappropriated visa, the prosecution of the offender, and the protection of ninety-two further Filipino applicants from continuing fraud.

She did not write that the address on the application form, when she had first seen it on the morning of the twenty-third of March, had been her own childhood home.

She did not write that her hand, when she had first seen it, had begun to shake.

She did not write that, on the Sunday following Mr Mercado's arrest, she had walked the four kilometres from the embassy to Sampaguita Street, had stood across the street from number 47, and had, for the first time in nineteen years, gone in.

The electronics shop owner, a man in his fifties whose name was Mang Boy, had been bemused but not unfriendly. She had explained that she had grown up in the house. He had said that this had been the house's third such visitor in his eleven years of tenancy. He had let her stand in the front room. The sewing machines, of course, were long gone. The kitchen tiles, which her mother had laid in 1989 with her own hands, were still there.

Mang Boy had also mentioned, when she had asked, that for the past several years a man had come once a fortnight to collect mail addressed

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to various names — names that Mang Boy had assumed belonged to former tenants. The man had paid Mang Boy two hundred pesos each visit for the service of holding the post.

“Do you remember the man’s name, kuya?” Officer Reyes had asked.

“He never gave me his name. Only the names of the letters he came for.”

“And those names?”

Mang Boy had thought for a moment. “Mostly Filipino names. But once — only once, perhaps two years ago — he came to ask whether anything had been delivered for a Canadian. A foreigner’s name. I remember it because it was the only one in all those years. He was anxious about it. He came back three times in one week to check.”

“The name?”

“Reyes. Like yours. Camille Reyes.”

Officer Reyes had been very still for a moment.

Then she had asked: “Why was a letter for me being delivered to this house?”

Mang Boy had shrugged. “The man said it was for his daughter, who had returned to Canada and was using her childhood address as a sentimental forwarding address. He said she was a sentimental girl.”

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Officer Reyes had smiled, for the first time that afternoon.

She had thanked Mang Boy. She had given him two thousand pesos. She had walked back to her embassy car, which was parked at the end of the street, and which her driver had been holding for her in the heat for over an hour.

On the drive back to the embassy, she had thought of the letter — the one she had never received, two years ago, the one she had not been waiting for — and she had thought, with the slow particular sadness that Manila reserved for those who had once left it, of the only person in the world who had known both that her childhood address had been 47 Sampaguita Street, and that she had, in the autumn of two years ago, been newly posted back to Manila as a Canadian visa officer.

Her father had died, of a heart attack, in Burnaby, in October two years ago.

He had not lived to see her arrive.

Mr Edwin Mercado, who had built his small fraudulent enterprise on a randomly chosen Filipino-Canadian name, had unknowingly chosen the name of the daughter of the man whose own letter, intended for her, had been awaiting collection at her childhood address — a letter her father had written, posted, and never lived to know would not be received.

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Officer Reyes never recovered the letter. Mang Boy had not kept the unclaimed post. The man who had collected the rest of it — Mr Mercado’s courier, a small-time fixer who had subsequently disappeared into the southern provinces — had presumably destroyed it, with the rest of the unread post, when his employer had been arrested.

Officer Reyes did not, in her career, ever again sign a refusal letter without thinking, briefly, of a small house in San Andres, of a kitchen floor laid by her mother’s hands, and of a letter her father had written from a Canadian hospital bed and had entrusted, with the simple sentimental optimism of a dying man, to the post.

*

The Wedding Photographer

Faraz Qureshi was sixty-three years old, and on the morning of his sister's daughter's wedding he made one promise to himself that he had never made on any of the two thousand six hundred and three weddings he had photographed before.

He promised himself that he would not, this time, watch the eyes.

It was an old habit. A habit of his trade. Most photographers watched the smile, because the smile was for the camera. He had always watched the eyes, because the eyes were for the truth. He had been right, by his own honest reckoning, about every marriage he had ever photographed — except eleven, which was, in twenty-eight years of practice, an acceptable margin.

On the morning of the fourteenth of September, in a banquet hall in Bandra, his niece Ayesha was to marry a man called Imran Hussain, of London, Ontario.

Faraz had not chosen this match. His sister, who was the bride's mother, had. The agent who had introduced the families had been a soft-spoken man in a grey suit named Sajjad Hashmi. The fee had been thirty-two lakhs. Faraz had not been consulted. He had been informed.

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He had not, in the weeks before the wedding, asked his sister any of the questions that an experienced wedding photographer would normally have asked. He had not asked how the families had met. He had not asked how often Imran had visited Bombay. He had not asked whether the bride and groom had ever spoken to each other.

He had not asked because he had been afraid of the answers.

* * *

He photographed the wedding.

He photographed the signatures. He photographed the garlands. He photographed, with mechanical professionalism, the long sequence of family portraits in which Imran Hussain stood beside Faraz's niece with the patient distraction of a man counting the minutes.

He had promised himself he would not watch the eyes. He watched, instead, the lights, the framing, the white balance. He spoke to his nephew Wasim, who was carrying the second camera, in short technical instructions. He did not, except when the choreography of the formal portraits required it, look at the bride.

He delivered the album, six weeks later, in a presentation box bound in ivory silk. His sister wept, briefly, when she opened it. She kissed his hands. She said he had outdone himself.

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Ayesha flew to London, Ontario, on the fourteenth of February the following year, on a spousal visa.

She telephoned her mother once a week for the first six weeks. She telephoned once a fortnight for the second six. She did not, at any point in her first six months in Canada, telephone her uncle Faraz.

On the morning of the fourteenth of August — six months to the day after Ayesha's landing — Faraz Qureshi sat down at his desk in Mahim and opened the folder on his computer in which he kept the unselected frames of every wedding he had ever photographed.

There were nine hundred and forty-two photographs from the Hussain–Khan wedding.

Four hundred and twelve had been used in the album.

Five hundred and thirty had not.

He had not, in the eleven months since the wedding, looked at any of them.

* * *

He looked at them now.

He looked at them all afternoon. He looked at them until the light in the room had gone, and then he switched on the desk lamp and looked at them some more.

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In photograph 0117, Imran Hussain was checking his phone while Ayesha's mother adjusted the bride's hair. The expression on his face was that of a man checking the cricket score.

In photograph 0241, Ayesha was looking at her bridegroom with the polite confusion of a woman who had not, after six hours of marriage, learnt to recognise her husband from the back.

In photograph 0356, in a corridor outside the banquet hall, the man in the grey suit was handing Imran a brown envelope. Imran was tucking it into his sherwani.

In photograph 0723, on a side balcony, the same man and Imran were laughing in the easy unforced manner of men who had known each other for years.

Sajjad Hashmi had told Faraz's sister, in their first meeting, that he had been introduced to Imran Hussain only the previous month, by a mutual contact in Toronto.

Photograph 0723 had been taken at twenty-three minutes past nine in the evening. Faraz could see the time-stamp on his camera's metadata. The bride had not yet left the dais.

Faraz Qureshi closed the folder. He sat for some time looking at the wall above his desk, on which there was a photograph of his sister at the age of nine, holding a kite.

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Then he opened a fresh document on his computer and began to write.

* * *

Constable Manjit Aulakh of the Canada Border Services Agency, Western Regional Intelligence, had been working marriage fraud for nine years. She had a wall of forty-seven bridegroom photographs and not one conviction.

On a Tuesday morning in August, she received an e-mail from a Mumbai address she did not recognise. The subject line read

For your wall.

She forwarded it to forensics. Twenty minutes later her phone rang.

“Constable. The zip is clean. It is a wedding album?”

“Whose?”

“Hussain, Imran. Khan, Ayesha. Married Bandra. The version submitted to IRCC contained four hundred and twelve photographs?”

“Yes.”

“This version contains nine hundred and forty-two. With forty-seven of them flagged. With annotations in English. With a covering letter naming the broker, the time-stamps, and the price.”

Constable Aulakh sat down.

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“Send me everything.”

* * *

The covering letter was four pages long. It was unsigned.

It identified the man in the grey suit as Sajjad Hashmi, of Bandra, marriage broker. It identified Imran Hussain as a sponsor for hire. It identified the brown envelope passed at twenty-three minutes past nine in the evening as the second instalment of the broker’s fee. It set out, with the patient economy of a professional listing the technical specifications of an instrument, the photographic evidence of Hashmi’s prior acquaintance with Hussain — the laughter on the balcony, the timing of the envelope, the seating arrangement at the wedding meal, in which the man in the grey suit had occupied the chair beside the bridegroom for the entire duration of the dinner while the briefcase of the same man had occupied the chair to the left of the bride.

The letter did not name the bride. It did not name the bride’s family.

It concluded with one sentence.

Please understand that the bride is not, on the available evidence, a willing participant in the deception. She has been deceived by her own family. I would ask, if it is in your power, that the matter be approached with this in mind.

Constable Aulakh read the letter three times. Then she telephoned her supervisor.

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* * *

The investigation took five months.

Sajjad Hashmi was identified through hotel CCTV and a wedding-guest list cross-referenced with passport records. He had been on Constable Aulakh's wall, in a different photograph, for four years. He was the broker she had been trying to catch since 2020.

Imran Hussain, after his second interview, admitted that he had been paid eighteen lakhs to marry Ayesha Khan and sponsor her to Canada. The marriage had not been consummated. He named Hashmi. He named, on subsequent days, four other matches Hashmi had brokered in the past two years.

Ayesha Khan, when interviewed by the CBSA, made a statement that Constable Aulakh would later describe to her supervisor as the most painful she had taken in nine years.

The girl had not, until the interview, understood that the marriage had been a fraud. She had been told, by her mother and her aunts, that her bridegroom was a successful pharmacist in Ontario who had requested an arranged match with a girl of good family. She had been told that he was shy and that this was why he had spoken to her so little. She had been told that she would, in time, come to know him.

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She had not come, in six months, to know him. He had been polite to her. He had paid the rent on the small apartment in London where they lived. He had been, for the most part, away.

She had not understood any of it. She had been twenty-six and lonely and far from home.

Constable Aulakh advised her, on the record, of her right to seek immigration relief on grounds of having been the unknowing victim of a marriage of convenience. Ayesha Khan accepted the advice. She was permitted to remain in Canada under a special humanitarian provision while the prosecution proceeded against Hashmi and Hussain.

Hashmi was sentenced to six years' rigorous imprisonment. Hussain to four. The Mumbai operator network fragmented.

Constable Aulakh removed forty-seven photographs from her wall. She replaced them, that evening, with a single photograph she had taken with her phone of the unsigned covering letter, framed.

* * *

Constable Aulakh never identified the sender. The Mumbai address had been a one-use account, accessed once, from a public terminal at a cybercafe, and never used again.

She wondered about it sometimes. She had assumed, at first, that the sender had been the photographer himself — the photographs had

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been his work, the descriptions had betrayed an experienced eye, the technical observations had been those of a professional. But she had run, on standard practice, a check against the IRCC database to see whether the sender might subsequently emerge in another file. The photographer's name had appeared exactly once. He was the brother of the bride's mother. He had been retained, by the Khan family, as the wedding photographer.

If he had sent the e-mail, he would have sent it about his own niece.

Constable Aulakh had, on consideration, decided this was unlikely. She had filed the question, with mild regret, in the drawer of mysteries that every long career accumulates.

What Constable Aulakh did not know — what no one knew, except Faraz Qureshi himself — was that he had not, on the morning of the fourteenth of September, photographed his niece's wedding without watching the eyes.

He had watched. He had seen everything. He had seen the brown envelope at three minutes to nine. He had seen the laughter on the balcony at twenty-three minutes past. He had seen the briefcase on the bride's chair. He had seen, in his niece's face during the family portraits, the polite bewilderment of a girl who did not, after six hours of marriage, recognise her husband.

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He had seen all of it, and he had photographed all of it, and he had not, on the day of the wedding, said a single word.

He had not said a word because, on the morning of the wedding, in the small bedroom of his sister's flat where he had gone to fetch a length of muslin from her cupboard for a backdrop, he had opened, by accident, the wrong drawer.

In the drawer had been an envelope addressed to his sister in handwriting he had recognised from twenty-six years before. Inside the envelope had been a bank draft from Canada in the sum of eighteen lakhs Indian rupees, drawn on a London, Ontario branch of a Canadian bank, dated four months prior to the wedding, payable to his sister.

Beside the draft had been a handwritten note, in the same handwriting as the envelope, which read:

Sister, the second instalment will be sent in cash on the day. Please ensure the girl knows nothing of any of this until she is settled. She is a kind girl. It is better for her not to know. — Sajjad

Faraz had stood in the bedroom holding the envelope for some time. Sajjad had been, twenty-six years ago, his sister's first husband. The marriage had ended in a quiet annulment after fourteen months for reasons that had never been openly discussed in the family but that Faraz, who had at the time been a young photographer of weddings, had

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inferred from the eyes of the parties at the small ceremony at which the annulment had been formalised.

Sajjad had emigrated to Toronto in 2002. He had not, in any conversation Faraz had ever had with his sister in the intervening twenty-three years, been mentioned.

Until that morning.

Faraz had returned the envelope to the drawer. He had collected the muslin. He had photographed the wedding.

And then he had waited eleven months — long enough to be certain that his niece, in Canada, had begun to understand that something was wrong, but not yet so badly trapped that the law would treat her as a participant rather than a victim — and on the morning of the fourteenth of August he had opened the unselected frames, written the four-page letter to the CBSA, and walked the eleven blocks from his flat in Mahim to a cybercafe in Bandra to send the e-mail.

He had not named his sister. He had not named his niece. He had not named, in his letter, the original Sajjad of 1999 — a man who would, on the strength of the photographs alone, be quite sufficiently identifiable to the Canadian authorities as the broker now to be prosecuted, without any need to disturb the older history.

He had calculated, correctly, that his sister would never know who had sent the photographs. He had calculated, correctly, that his niece

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would never need to know. He had calculated that the family would speak, in years to come, of the misfortune of the marriage and not of the contrivance of it, and that this story would, in time, become the official one.

He had calculated, finally, that he himself would never tell anyone, because there was no one to whom telling would do good. His sister had, in some sense she would not have admitted, sold her daughter to the man who had once, for fourteen months, sold her. The transaction had been understood, by both parties, as a private settling of an old account. The girl, who was now twenty-seven and working as a paediatric nurse in Toronto with a quiet new life and a small flat of her own, was the only innocent party in any of it.

Faraz Qureshi continued to photograph weddings. He photographed, in the year following his niece's, a hundred and forty-seven of them. He watched the eyes at every one. He kept, of every wedding, the unselected frames, in a folder on his desktop, for five years before deletion. He sent no further e-mails.

On Sunday afternoons he visited his niece in Toronto, when his work permitted. They drank tea. They spoke, mostly, about her hospital. They did not speak about her wedding. They did not speak about her mother, with whom she was, in a way that her uncle understood without ever having to say so, no longer in regular contact.

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Once, on a winter afternoon, she asked him whether he ever wondered who had sent the photographs to the Canadian authorities.

Faraz Qureshi looked at his niece for a long moment over the rim of his teacup.

“Someone,” he said, “who watched the eyes.”

And then he asked her, because he was after all her uncle and uncles ask such things, whether she had been eating properly.

*



One Point Five

Nisha Bhatt was twenty-four years old, and she had not spoken to her sister in eleven months.

She lived in a basement apartment on Quinpool Road, Halifax, Nova Scotia, for which she paid nine hundred and fifty dollars a month, and which she shared with a woman from Chennai who studied nursing and kept odd hours. She worked five days a week as a support worker in a long-term care facility in Dartmouth. She cycled to work in all weathers, except in the deep winter, when she took the bus. She had, at the long-term care facility, a favourite resident, an eighty-seven-year-old woman from Cape Breton who called her Anu, because Anu was the name of the woman's dead sister, and because Nisha had stopped correcting her.

On the first of October, at seven in the morning Atlantic time — four-thirty in the afternoon Indian Standard Time — Nisha received an e-mail from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. The subject line read:

Procedural Fairness Letter — Verification of Language Test Results.

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Nisha read the e-mail three times before she opened the attachment. When she opened the attachment, she read it twice. Then she put her phone face-down on the kitchen counter, next to the kettle, and stood very still for about two minutes, during which she did not cry, because Nisha was not, by nature or by practice, a person who cried at seven in the morning.

The letter said, in the orderly prose of the Canadian federal government, that IRCC had “material concerns” regarding the authenticity of her IELTS score report, submitted with her student visa application in the autumn of 2023, and that she was required to attend a re-test, under supervised conditions, at the IDP Canada test centre in Halifax on the fourteenth of October.

Failure to attend, the letter explained, would result in the commencement of proceedings under section 40 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

Section 40, as Nisha knew, because she had looked it up in the early weeks of her first Canadian winter, was the section on misrepresentation.

* * *

The IELTS score she had submitted with her 2023 application had reported an Overall Band of 7.5, with a Listening of 8.0, a Reading of 7.5, a Writing of 7.0, and a Speaking of 7.5. It was an excellent score. It

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was, for the Nova Scotia community college programme she had applied to, a more than sufficient score.

It was also — and this was the difficulty — a score Nisha had not earned.

The score she had earned, on the morning she had actually sat the test in a hall in Paldi, Ahmedabad, in July of 2023, had been an Overall Band of 6.0, with a Writing of 5.5. It was not a bad score. It was, however, not enough for the programme she wanted, and not enough for the visa timeline her father had committed to, and not enough for the loan her uncle in Surat had co-signed, and not enough for the face her mother had begun to wear when Nisha came home from the coaching class in the evenings.

The man who had, upon hearing these difficulties, offered to solve them was called Kartik Shah, and he ran an establishment on the third floor of a commercial building in Navrangpura that styled itself the Global Pathways Academy. Kartik was thirty-eight, neatly bearded, and possessed of a signet ring that he turned, slowly, on his little finger when he was thinking.

His arrangement was this. For a fee of one lakh and twenty thousand rupees — non-refundable, payable in cash, in two instalments — he would, he said, “adjust” a candidate’s IELTS Test Report Form by one and a half bands.

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He did not explain how. He did not need to. He had a relationship, he implied, with an invigilator at a specific test centre in Ahmedabad, who had a relationship, in turn, with a clerical officer who had a relationship, in turn, with the printer of the Test Report Forms themselves.

“One point five,” Kartik had said to Nisha, in his small office with the fan turning slowly overhead. “No more. No less. More than one point five and the system flags it. Less than one point five and you waste your money.”

Nisha had paid the first instalment in cash, in a brown envelope, on the fourteenth of July.

Her adjusted Test Report Form had arrived, by courier, on the twenty-eighth.

It had looked, to her untrained eye, exactly like the one IDP had issued her — the same holographic security feature, the same embossed numbering, the same candidate photograph. Only the numbers had been different.

She had submitted it with her visa application on the third of August.

Her visa had been approved on the twelfth of September.

She had landed in Halifax on the twenty-eighth of September, 2023, at twenty-two years of age, with two suitcases, a laptop, a photograph of

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her parents on her wedding-day that her mother had insisted she carry, and the certain knowledge that she was, under Canadian law, a liar.

* * *

Nisha had, in the fourteen months since, studied.

Not for her diploma programme, which she had found, to her own surprise, manageable. She had studied for a re-test that she had been certain, from the first week of her arrival, would one day come.

She had downloaded every Cambridge IELTS practice book from a free archive on the internet. She had worked through them twice. She had, in her second month, found on Reddit a study partner in Vancouver, a pharmacy assistant from Lahore called Zara who had likewise bought her score and likewise lived in daily terror of her e-mail inbox, and the two of them had, over fourteen months, exchanged essays and speaking recordings and vocabulary lists with the terrible discipline of people who believe they are running out of time.

Nisha had also, quietly, been paying her parents' loan back. Five hundred dollars a month, transferred via Wise to her father's account in Ahmedabad, where he had, she suspected, not spent a single rupee of it, but had instead deposited it back into the original loan account as a kind of slow penance for whatever it was he understood had happened in the summer of 2023.

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Her sister Ritu was nineteen. Ritu was in the first year of a BCom at St Xavier's in Ahmedabad. Ritu had always been the brighter sister — a sharper memory, a quicker wit, a faster smile. She had also, from the age of eleven, suffered from an anxiety around examinations so acute that she had once, in her Class Ten boards, been unable to hold a pen for seven full minutes of a Mathematics paper.

On the fourth of September — four weeks before Nisha's e-mail from IRCC — Ritu had called Nisha on WhatsApp and told her, in a bright unnatural voice, that she had decided to apply to a college in Halifax. Their father had agreed. Their mother had agreed. The loan could be extended.

“And the IELTS?” Nisha had asked, slowly.

“Papa is handling it,” Ritu had said. “He has found a man. Global Pathways, in Navrangpura. Third floor. He says it is the same place where you —”

And there, on the WhatsApp line, across the nine and a half time zones between Halifax and Ahmedabad, Nisha Bhatt had hung up on her sister for the first time in their lives.

That was the eleven months. That, and the silence afterwards.

* * *

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The officer whose name appeared at the bottom of the Procedural Fairness Letter was one Claire Boudreau, of the IRCC Domestic Network, Atlantic Region, Halifax office.

Nisha called the number. She was told that her attendance on the fourteenth was mandatory, that no rescheduling was possible, and that she was entitled to retain counsel but was not required to do so. The voice on the line was neither friendly nor unfriendly. It was, Nisha thought, the voice of a person who had given this information many times before.

Nisha hung up and did not retain counsel. Counsel, she knew, would cost money she did not have, and would, in any event, tell her to sit the re-test and hope.

On the fourteenth of October, at eight in the morning, she walked the nine blocks from her basement apartment to the IDP Canada test centre in downtown Halifax. It was a clear cold day, the kind Halifax gets in October, and the maples on Spring Garden Road were at their brightest.

She sat the test.

She sat it for five hours. She wrote her essays. She listened to the recordings. She spoke, for eleven minutes, to a patient Scottish woman whose name tag read Fiona, about the benefits and drawbacks of living in a coastal city.

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On the twenty-eighth of October, her Test Report Form arrived by e-mail.

Overall Band: 7.5. Listening: 8.0. Reading: 7.5. Writing: 7.0. Speaking: 7.5.

The same score, to the decimal, as the one she had submitted in 2023.

Nisha sat at her kitchen counter, the e-mail open on her laptop, for a very long time. Then she laughed, a single short laugh, and then she cried, for the first time in fourteen months, for about three minutes. And then she made herself a cup of chai, and sat down, and began to think.

* * *

The re-test, in a way Kartik Shah could not have foreseen and Nisha could not have planned, had cleared her.

If she said nothing — if she simply forwarded the new Test Report Form to Officer Boudreau, with a polite covering note expressing her willingness to cooperate — the file would almost certainly be closed. IRCC had no way of knowing, now, whether the 2023 score had been fraudulent or merely contested. The 2025 score matched it. The matter would drop.

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She would keep her status. She would keep her job. She would keep her eighty-seven-year-old woman in Dartmouth who called her Anu. She would keep her life.

All she had to do was say nothing.

Nisha knew, equally, what saying nothing would cost.

Ritu's IELTS test was scheduled for the eleventh of November. Her father had paid Kartik Shah's first instalment on the second of October. Ritu's adjusted score would be couriered, as Nisha's had been, a fortnight after the test. Her application to the Halifax college would be filed in December. Her visa, if all went as Kartik intended, would be approved in February. She would land in Halifax, at nineteen years of age, with a score she had not earned, and a sister three blocks away, and, eventually — next year, or the year after, or the year after that — an e-mail from IRCC in her inbox on a morning when she was not expecting it.

Ritu, who could not hold a pen for seven minutes of a Mathematics paper, would not pass a re-test.

Nisha sat at her kitchen counter, with her cup of chai going cold, and did, in that quiet Tuesday morning, what she had trained fourteen months of study and five hundred dollars a month of repayments and eleven months of silence to make her ready to do.

She opened her laptop and wrote to Officer Boudreau.

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She told her everything. The name of Kartik Shah. The address of Global Pathways Academy, Navrangpura, third floor. The amount paid. The dates. The courier. The envelope. She enclosed, as attachments, her bank statements, the WhatsApp messages with Kartik, and — at the end — the single line that it had taken her a long time, over the cooling chai, to be able to write.

My younger sister, Ritu Bhatt, has paid the same man for the same service. Her test is on the 11 November. I am asking you to stop it.

She did not add a plea. She did not ask for leniency. She sent the e-mail at nine forty-three in the morning and then she got dressed and went to work, because her eighty-seven-year-old woman in Dartmouth would be expecting her, and because one had, in the end, to do the next thing.

* * *

Officer Boudreau read the e-mail at ten-seventeen.

She read it three times. She then picked up her telephone and called a colleague in the Anti-Fraud and Integrity Branch in Ottawa, with whom she spoke for twenty-two minutes. She then opened a new case file. She then, after some internal discussion, drafted an urgent request to the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi, to be forwarded on a priority basis to the CBI's Cyber Cell in Gandhinagar.

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The raid on Global Pathways Academy took place on the seventh of November, four days before Ritu Bhatt's scheduled test.

Kartik Shah was arrested in his office, at half past three in the afternoon, while turning his signet ring on his little finger. The invigilator was arrested at his house in Maninagar. The clerical officer was arrested at a relative's flat in Vadodara where he had, that morning, attempted to go into hiding.

Fifty-seven candidates' Test Report Forms were seized from Kartik's laptop. Fifty-six had already been submitted to various immigration authorities around the world.

One had not. It was Ritu Bhatt's. Her test had been scheduled for the eleventh; the adjusted form had not yet been prepared.

She was not prosecuted. She had paid, but she had not yet submitted anything. Her application to the Halifax college was, at her mother's request, quietly withdrawn. She retook the IELTS a year later, at the Ahmedabad test centre, without any assistance from Kartik Shah or anyone else, and scored an Overall Band of 6.5, and did not go abroad.

Nisha Bhatt was charged, under section 40, with misrepresentation.

She pleaded guilty. The Immigration Division, at a hearing in Halifax on the third of March the following year, noted that she had voluntarily disclosed the fraud at her own cost, that her disclosure had directly led to the dismantling of a substantial cross-border ring, and that she had,

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in the intervening period, genuinely demonstrated the language competence she had once purchased.

She was issued a two-year exclusion order. She was given sixty days to depart Canada.

On the afternoon of the fiftieth day, at the long-term care facility in Dartmouth, Nisha went into the room of the eighty-seven-year-old woman from Cape Breton and told her, as gently as she could, that she would not be in on Monday, or on any of the Mondays thereafter.

The old woman, who had moments of great clarity and moments of none, looked at Nisha for a long time and then said: “You’re coming back, though, aren’t you, Anu?”

And Nisha, who had not cried in front of a resident in two years of the job, had said: “Yes, bebe. I am coming back.”

* * *

What no one in the case — not Officer Boudreau, not the CBI, not Kartik Shah’s defence lawyer, not Ritu, not Nisha’s father, not Nisha herself — ever discovered, was who had first alerted IRCC to Nisha’s 2023 score.

The Procedural Fairness Letter of the first of October had not arrived, as Nisha had assumed, by the ordinary algorithmic currents of IRCC’s post-entry verification programme.

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It had arrived because, three months earlier, a letter had been sent — by ordinary post, from an address in Ahmedabad, on a single sheet of inexpensive paper — to the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi, and thence to Ottawa, and thence to Halifax, naming Nisha Bhatt, citing her passport number, and enclosing a photocopy of a receipt from Global Pathways Academy for one lakh twenty thousand rupees, dated the fourteenth of July, 2023.

The letter had been unsigned.

The handwriting — though no Canadian officer would ever have reason to identify it — had been the handwriting of a nineteen-year-old girl who could not, in her Class Ten boards, hold a pen for seven minutes, but who had, on a quiet afternoon in July four years later, sat at her father's desk and composed, in the neat upright hand of a careful student, the single page that she had known — though she had not been able to say so to her sister, or to her parents, or to anyone — would, eventually, pull the whole edifice of Global Pathways Academy down on top of itself.

Ritu had posted the letter in the autumn of her first year of BCom. She had done it for reasons she did not fully understand — a quiet fury at the man with the signet ring, a premonition about her own examinations, a wish, perhaps, to save her sister from a silence that had already grown between them for reasons Ritu could not yet name.

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She had also, six weeks after posting the letter, pretended to her father that she wished to apply to Canada — knowing he would take her, as he had taken Nisha, to the third floor in Navrangpura.

Knowing her sister, in Halifax, would then learn.

Knowing that Nisha, when Nisha learnt, would do what Nisha had always done — which was, at whatever personal cost, the right thing.

It was a plan of such crooked kindness that no one in the case, if they had known, would have known what to do with it. Two sisters, eleven months of silence, a signet ring, a letter unsigned, and a slow unlovely unmaking of a man who had, for one lakh and twenty thousand rupees, sold the future of a girl he had never bothered to learn the name of.

Nisha flew out of Halifax on the third day of the fifty-ninth week of her Canadian life, on a Wednesday evening, from Stanfield International Airport. Ritu met her at Ahmedabad, at the arrivals gate, in the crowd of drivers and relatives and men holding hand-lettered signs. They did not speak, at first. Ritu took one of her suitcases. They walked towards the taxi rank.

At the taxi, Ritu turned to her sister and said, very quietly: “I am sorry about your old woman.”

And Nisha, who had, on the plane, promised herself she would not cry, cried for the second time in sixteen months.

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They got into the taxi. They went home.

*

Five Years in Sharjah

In the second-floor offices of

Gulf Returnees Documentation Services, on the third floor of a commercial building in Panampilly Nagar, Kochi, Mr Mathew George had been doing very well.

He was forty-six. He had been in the trade for fourteen years. His trade was the construction, for fees ranging from four to seven lakh rupees, of complete fictional Gulf employment histories for Indian applicants whose Express Entry profiles required them. Five years of UAE experience. Letterheads. Payslips. Labour cards quietly cancelled three months after issue. Letters of Reference signed by employers who had never met the applicant.

Mr George had built his enterprise on a single insight, which he was fond of explaining, in moments of private satisfaction, to his nephew Joby — the only employee he trusted with the operation's actual mechanics.

“The Canadians,” he would say, “verify, on average, one Gulf experience letter in eight. They write to the employer. The employer

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either confirms, denies, or does not reply. We do not pay employers to confirm, Joby. We do not need to.”

“Why not, mama?” the nephew had once asked.

Mr George had smiled. “Because if the employer denies, only one applicant is exposed, and we close that file. If the employer does not reply, the Canadians treat silence as confirmation, because they cannot wait forever for a reply from a small workshop in Sharjah. And if the employer confirms — well, that is the rarest case of all. Because the employer is being asked, by a foreign government, to admit on the record that he has employed a man whose name he does not know. No employer in his right mind confirms. Most simply do not reply. The Canadians proceed.”

Mr George had selected, over fourteen years, a stable of approximately sixty Sharjah employers as his templates. The most reliable of them, the one he used in roughly one application in five, was a small engineering workshop called Crescent Engineering Workshop, owned by an old Malayali named Ravindran Pillai.

Mr Pillai’s workshop had a strong public profile, a thirty-one-year history, a downloadable PDF letterhead on its website, and — best of all — a track record of never replying to verification e-mails.

Mr George had submitted, in the past five years, seventy-two letters in Mr Pillai’s name.

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Mr Pillai had, on every one of those seventy-two occasions, when the Canadian High Commission had written to verify, neither replied to deny the employment nor written to confirm it.

Mr George had, on every one of those seventy-two occasions, watched the application go through.

It was, he was fond of saying, the most reliable workshop in Sharjah.

* * *

In the late summer of the year in question, an applicant called Sreejith Nair, aged twenty-nine, of Trivandrum, paid Mr George six lakh fifty thousand rupees for a complete five-year UAE experience package.

Mr George's production team prepared the file. They generated a Letter of Reference on Crescent Engineering letterhead, dated the third of August of the previous year, signed in a passable rendering of Mr Ravindran Pillai's signature, attesting that Mr Sreejith Nair had served as a Senior Mechanical Technician at the workshop for five continuous years.

They submitted the application in October. They waited.

On the second of November, an e-mail from the Canadian High Commission in Abu Dhabi arrived in Mr Pillai's inbox in Sharjah, requesting verification of the employment of one Sreejith Nair.

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Mr George knew nothing of the e-mail. He did not need to. He knew only what he expected to happen. Mr Pillai would not reply. The Canadians would proceed. Mr Sreejith Nair would, in due course, be issued his permanent residence.

It was the seventy-third Crescent Engineering letter Mr George had submitted.

Mr George went to bed that night untroubled.

* * *

Eight days later, on the tenth of November, Sapna Menon at the Canadian High Commission in Abu Dhabi opened her e-mail and found a reply she had not expected.

She had sent four hundred such verification requests in the past year. She had received, in reply, the standard distribution: confirmations, silences, and the occasional cautious denial. She had never — in seven years on the desk — received the kind of reply that now sat in her inbox.

It was from Mr Ravindran Pillai. It denied the employment of Mr Sreejith Nair. It offered, voluntarily, a sworn statement. It provided, unprompted, the additional detail that the applicant's name appeared in the membership rolls of the Sharjah Indian Association in connection with a labour camp address in Al Sajaa.

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The reply went further. It noted that the writer had received, over the previous five years, similar verification requests from the High Commission in respect of seventy-two other employees whom Mr Pillai had likewise never employed. It did not, however, name those seventy-two employees. It said only that, having reflected on the matter, Mr Pillai now wished to bring it to the attention of the Canadian authorities and was prepared to assist any subsequent investigation.

Sapna Menon read the e-mail twice. Then she telephoned her supervisor.

Within ten days, IRCC Migration Integrity in Ottawa had pulled every Express Entry application of the previous five years that had relied on a Crescent Engineering Letter of Reference. The list ran to seventy-three names. Mr Sreejith Nair was the seventy-third.

The seventy-second was a man called Vinod Pillai.

* * *

Vinod Pillai. Twenty-seven years old at the time of his Express Entry application, currently a permanent resident of Canada, employed as a mechanic at a heavy-equipment dealership in Edmonton. The Crescent Engineering Letter of Reference in his file was dated the eleventh of September, four years earlier.

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Vinod Pillai, the IRCC officer reviewing the file noted with some interest, shared a surname with Ravindran Pillai of Crescent Engineering Workshop.

The officer flagged it. He pulled the family-relationship declarations on Vinod's application. They listed his father as a deceased vegetable trader from a small town in central Kerala called Pala. His mother as a widow. No siblings. No relatives in the UAE.

The officer did not, on the strength of a shared common Malayali surname, leap to a conclusion. But he did refer the file, with a covering note, to the same Federal Investigation Agency liaison in Lahore who would in due course be coordinating the larger Crescent Engineering investigation. The note asked, in passing, whether Mr Ravindran Pillai of the Sharjah workshop and Mr Vinod Pillai of Edmonton might, on any reasonable inquiry, be related.

The reply, when it came back through the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi six weeks later, was that they were.

Vinod Pillai of Edmonton was the son of one Ajith Pillai, deceased, of Pala, Kerala. Ajith Pillai had been the elder brother of Ravindran Pillai of Sharjah.

Vinod was Mr Ravindran Pillai's nephew.

* * *

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Inspector Tariq Mahmud of the FIA in Lahore was, by the time this information reached the file, already cooperating with the Canadian High Commission in respect of the Crescent Engineering investigation. He flew, on a Tuesday in late January, to Sharjah.

He met Mr Pillai at the workshop. They sat in the small office above the packing area. Mr Pillai's foreman brought them tea.

Inspector Mahmud was a careful man. He had been a journalist before the FIA, and he knew that the most useful question was usually the one a man had been waiting for years to be asked.

“Mr Pillai. Vinod is your nephew.”

Mr Pillai sat very still.

“Yes.”

“Your brother's son.”

“Yes.”

“Your brother died in 2019.”

“Yes.”

“He took his own life.”

Mr Pillai did not speak.

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“Mr Pillai, you understand the IRCC will, on the present file, be vacating your nephew’s permanent residence. The Letter of Reference in his file is a forgery. He will be deported. He will face a five-year ban.”

Mr Pillai looked, for the first time in the conversation, at Inspector Mahmud directly.

“Inspector. Vinod did not commission that letter. He did not pay for it. He did not know it existed. I commissioned it. I paid Mr George of Kochi seven lakh rupees. I did so under a name Mr George never connected to my own. I gave Vinod the application. I told him I had arranged everything through a friend. He did not ask further. He was twenty-three. He was a mechanic. He had been a mechanic since the death of his father.”

Inspector Mahmud was silent.

“If the IRCC will permit me a request, Inspector. Let me make a sworn statement to that effect. Let Vinod be treated as the unknowing recipient of a fraud committed by his uncle. Let his status be vacated, by all means. But let his ban be reduced. Let him return to Canada in five years, under a different application, on his own merit. He has nine years of mechanical experience now. He could qualify under any reasonable programme.”

“Mr Pillai, why did you do this?”

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“Because my brother killed himself, Inspector, on a morning in March 2019, after his own son’s first Express Entry application was refused on grounds of misrepresentation.”

“He wrote a note?”

“He wrote three words.

I should have known.”

Mr Pillai turned, slowly, the small brass key on the chain around his neck.

“He should have known, Inspector, that the Letter of Reference his agent in Kochi had sold him was a forgery. He should have known that the workshop in Sharjah on whose letterhead his son’s future depended was real, and was less than four kilometres from the office in which he himself had once, twenty years earlier, applied for a labour card before deciding that the Gulf was not for him and going home to Kerala. He should have known that he had a younger brother in Sharjah — with whom he had not spoken in nineteen years over a small inheritance dispute that neither of us, by then, could quite remember the substance of — a younger brother who would, had he been asked, have signed any letter for his nephew that anyone had cared to put in front of him.”

“Your brother did not ask you.”

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“He did not ask me. We had not spoken in nineteen years. He used an agent in Kochi instead, who used my workshop’s name without my knowledge, and the letter was caught at verification, and the application was refused, and my brother could not, in his shame, bear the look on his son’s face for one more morning. So he ended it.”

“And then.”

“And then I went, three months after the funeral, to Kochi. I did not introduce myself by my real name. I sat in Mr George’s waiting room as one of his applicants, and I commissioned, on behalf of my nephew Vinod, a Letter of Reference from Crescent Engineering Workshop, Sharjah. The letter was prepared. The letter was submitted. The Canadians wrote to the workshop — to me — to verify. I did not reply. The application proceeded. Vinod was issued his permanent residence in 2021.”

“And the seventy-one others.”

Mr Pillai placed his hands flat on the desk.

“Mr George had, by then, learnt that my workshop was reliable. He began to use it for other clients. The verification e-mails continued to arrive. I continued not to reply. I knew — I am sixty-three, Inspector, I am not a stupid man — that I was permitting fraud. But I had also begun to think of those other young men as my nephew’s cousins. They were sons of families like ours. They would, if they reached Canada, work

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hard. They would not become criminals. Many of them would, in time, become the kind of people who make Canada better than it would have been without them.”

“You knew you were committing a crime.”

“I knew I was committing a kindness, Inspector, that the law would in due course call a crime. I was prepared for this. I have, in my desk drawer, a list of every name. I have kept it for five years. I will give it to you. I will testify against Mr George of Kochi. I will name every applicant. I will accept the full consequences.”

* * *

The case, as it unfolded over the following two years, was the largest Gulf-corridor Express Entry fraud prosecution in Canadian history.

Mathew George of Gulf Returnees Documentation Services was arrested in Kochi on the strength of Mr Pillai’s testimony, supplemented by seven hard drives seized in his office that contained the templates and supporting documents for one thousand four hundred and eighty-three Letters of Reference. He was convicted of fifty-one counts of forgery and cheating. He was sentenced to nine years.

Of the seventy-three Crescent Engineering files identified, sixty-one had their permanent residences vacated. Eight, including Vinod Pillai, were issued reduced bans on the strength of evidence that they had been the unknowing recipients of fraud committed by family members. Four

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were quietly permitted to retain their status, on humanitarian grounds that did not appear in the public record.

Mr Ravindran Pillai was charged, in the United Arab Emirates, with seventy-two counts of conspiracy to commit fraud against a foreign government. He pleaded guilty. His Canadian-issued visit visa was permanently cancelled. He was sentenced to a fine of two hundred thousand UAE dirhams and — as a foreign national without further immigration rights in the country — deportation to India.

He returned to the small town in Kerala called Pala in the spring of his sixty-fifth year, to the small house his wife had been preparing for their retirement, on the parcel of land she had been buying piece by piece for a decade.

* * *

On a Tuesday afternoon in October, six months after his return to Pala, Mr Ravindran Pillai sat on the small verandah of the house that his wife had built for him, and waited.

His nephew Vinod arrived at four o'clock. He had flown into Kochi the previous evening from Edmonton. He was thirty-one. He had been deported from Canada eighteen months earlier. He was, on the morning of his return to India, the holder of a five-year ban which had, on the strength of his uncle's sworn statement, been reduced from ten.

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He had not, in those eighteen months, telephoned his uncle. They had spoken for the first time the week before, when Mr Pillai had written to him to ask him to come.

Vinod sat down in the wicker chair opposite his uncle. The two men did not, for some time, speak.

“Vinod. Your father. Did he ever tell you anything about me?”

“He said you and he had quarrelled over the inheritance from your father.”

“Yes.”

“He said you had wronged him.”

“Yes. That is what he believed.”

“He said the same thing in his note.”

Mr Pillai looked at his nephew. “Your father’s note.

I should have known.”

“Yes.”

“You understood it as a confession of his shame about the visa application.”

“Yes.”

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Mr Pillai looked out at the small garden his wife was tending in the late afternoon sun. He looked at it for some time.

“Vinod. Your father’s note was not about the visa application. It was about me.”

Vinod did not understand.

“Your father did not, in 2019, send you to Kochi to commission a forged Letter of Reference. Your father wrote to me, in Sharjah, on the second of February, 2019, six weeks before his death, asking me whether I would issue you a genuine Letter of Reference — from my own workshop, in your real name, attesting to a period of employment that had not, strictly, occurred. He asked me to do, for his son, the small kindness that I, as the boy’s only uncle, was the one man in the world positioned to do.”

Mr Pillai paused.

“I did not reply, Vinod. I had not spoken to your father in nineteen years. I was angry. I was a small-minded man. I told myself that I was a respectable employer who could not bend the rules even for my own brother. Three weeks after I failed to reply to his letter, your father instructed an agent in Kochi to fabricate the Letter of Reference. The agent, by accident, used my workshop’s name. The application was refused. Three weeks after that, your father took his own life.”

Mr Pillai turned the small brass key on the chain around his neck.

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“His note was not about his shame. It was about my refusal.

I should have known meant that he should have known that the brother to whom he had written was no longer the brother he had grown up with. He should have known that I would not help him. He should have known that asking me had been, in itself, a humiliation — the last humiliation a proud man could bear.”

Vinod was silent for some time.

“Mama. Why did you write seventy-two more letters?”

Mr Pillai did not look at his nephew.

“Because one was not enough. One letter brought you to Canada. One letter did not bring back your father. I thought — I thought, in the slow years afterwards, that if I could not help my own brother, I could perhaps help seventy-two other brothers’ sons. I do not say I was right, Vinod. I say only that I was not, in those years, able to do nothing.”

They sat together on the verandah for a long time. The light went from the garden. Mr Pillai’s wife came out, eventually, with two glasses of tea, and sat beside her husband, and put her hand on his arm, and they all three watched the dusk together until it was too dark to see the garden any longer.

Then they went inside, and they ate, and Vinod stayed the night.

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In the morning, before he left for Kochi to begin the long road back to whatever life he was now to make in India, his uncle gave him a small leather-bound notebook in which were recorded, in neat blue ink, seventy-two names. Vinod did not, in the years that followed, ever try to find any of them. But he kept the notebook, and on quiet evenings, when his own children were grown, he would sometimes take it out and read the names — men he did not know, men who did not know him, men whose lives had been changed by an old engineer in Sharjah who had failed his own brother and had decided, in the only way he knew, to spend the rest of his life trying to atone.

*

VII

The Letter of Support

Officer Yasmin Haidari kept three things on her desk at the IRCC processing centre in Sydney, Nova Scotia. A photograph of her daughter, aged six, in a yellow raincoat. A small brass paperweight in the shape of a sleeping cat. And a magnifying loupe on a black plastic stand, with which she examined, every morning, the letterhead of any document that crossed her desk.

On a Tuesday in September, the loupe rested on a Letter of Support submitted in connection with a Start-Up Visa application. The applicant was a thirty-one-year-old woman from Lahore. The endorsing organisation was the Mayfield Angel Collective in Toronto. The signatory was one Priti Chatterjee, MD.

The letter was, under the loupe, perfect. The seal was real. The signature matched the specimen on file. The file number resolved correctly when Officer Haidari typed it into the Mayfield portal.

Only one detail troubled her, and even that, she told herself, was probably nothing.

The letter was dated the eighth of September.

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Mayfield, Officer Haidari knew — because she kept, for her own reasons, a private spreadsheet of every Designated Organisation’s published intake windows — had closed its third-quarter intake on the thirtieth of June.

Probably a clerical slip. Probably a back-dated correction. Probably nothing.

Officer Haidari, who had been an officer for eleven years, did not believe in probably nothing.

She closed the file. She opened her spreadsheet. She pulled the last eighteen Mayfield-endorsed Letters of Support that had crossed any desk in the Atlantic processing centre.

Eleven of the eighteen were dated outside the published intake windows.

She put down the loupe and went for a walk along the harbour.

* * *

Over the next three weeks, working in the slow margins of her ordinary case-load, Officer Haidari read every word of those eighteen files.

The applicants were unusual. They were almost all women. They were almost all from the Hindu Kush corridor — Kabul, Peshawar, Quetta, Lahore. Their proposed Canadian businesses were various, but the business plans had a strange quality. They were too good. The

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English was too clean. The financial projections too plausible. They read, Officer Haidari thought, as though they had been written by the same person, or at least edited by the same person, and that person had not been the applicant.

The covering personal statements, by contrast, were rough. They were heartfelt. They were, in places, badly translated. They spoke, with a directness that no consultant would have polished, of brothers killed, of fathers in prison, of daughters who could not be sent to school.

Officer Haidari read them at her kitchen table, in the evenings, after her own daughter had gone to bed.

She began, around the third week, to feel something she could not at first name. It was not the satisfaction of a fraud detected. It was something closer to the unease of a question one has stopped wanting to ask.

She made a decision. She would not yet file an internal flag. She would, instead, request a single meeting with the signing partner at Mayfield.

The request was unusual. It was not, however, unprecedented. She drafted it as a routine compliance interview, addressed it to Priti Chatterjee, MD, and sent it on the twenty-ninth of September.

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The reply came within four hours. Ms Chatterjee would be pleased to meet at her Bay Street office on the seventh of October. Tea would be provided. There would be no need for counsel.

Officer Haidari noted the absence of counsel. She booked a flight to Toronto.

She did not sleep well in the days before the flight.

She had interviewed many corporate signatories in eleven years of service. They came in two varieties. The first arrived with a lawyer, with a binder, and with the studied politeness of a person whose instinct was to give nothing. The second arrived alone, was charming, was helpful, and gave precisely as much as the lawyer would have told them to give. Both varieties wasted Officer Haidari's time, and both, by the end, were usually guilty.

Priti Chatterjee, by replying within four hours, by waiving counsel, by offering tea, had placed herself in neither category. Officer Haidari did not know what the third category was. She knew only that, in eleven years, she had not encountered it.

On the morning of the flight, she packed the eleven files into a plain document case. She also packed, in a separate envelope at the bottom of the case, the draft of the referral memo she had begun composing on the plane to Toronto and had been unable to finish. It was three pages.

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It named Priti Chatterjee. It was, by IRCC convention, the kind of memo that, once filed, ended a career within ninety days.

She sat with the case on her lap, in the taxi to Stanfield Airport, looking out at the slow grey rain on Quinpool Road.

* * *

The conference room on the twenty-third floor had a view of the lake that no one in the room was looking at.

Priti Chatterjee was forty-one. She wore a charcoal suit, no jewellery beyond a thin gold chain, and the kind of unhurried calm that Officer Haidari recognised, after eleven years of interviews, as either complete innocence or complete preparation.

Officer Haidari placed the eleven flagged files on the table between them.

“Ms Chatterjee. Eleven of these Letters of Support are dated outside Mayfield’s published intake windows. Could you help me understand how that happened?”

Priti looked at the files. She did not pick them up.

“Officer Haidari. May I ask you a question first?”

“You may.”

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“Have any of these eleven applicants — the ones whose letters trouble you — been refused a visa?”

Officer Haidari paused. “Four have landed. Four are in process. Three were refused for unrelated reasons.”

“And of the four who landed — have any of them, to your knowledge, failed to launch the businesses described in their plans?”

“Ms Chatterjee, with respect, that is not the question.”

Priti smiled. It was not, Officer Haidari noted, the smile of a person about to lie.

“It is, in fact, the only question. But please. Continue.”

“The issue dates of the letters do not align with your published intake windows. That is, on its face, evidence that Mayfield’s endorsement process is not being followed. Either you are signing letters outside your own due-diligence cycle — which would be a programme integrity matter — or these letters are not, in fact, what they appear to be.”

Priti was silent for a moment. Then she rose, walked to a cabinet, and returned with a single thin folder.

“Officer Haidari. What I am about to show you is not in any of those eleven files. It is not, technically, in any Mayfield file at all. I am going to

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ask you, before I open this folder, to give me five minutes. After five minutes, you may do whatever you wish.”

“Ms Chatterjee, I cannot make undertakings of that kind.”

“I am not asking for an undertaking. I am asking for five minutes.”

Officer Haidari, who had flown to Toronto, who had a return flight at six, and who had — though she would not have phrased it so — been unable to stop reading the personal statements at her kitchen table, said: “Five minutes.”

Priti opened the folder.

* * *

Inside the folder were eleven photographs.

They were ordinary photographs, of the kind any family might keep — a girl in a school uniform; a young woman with her arm around her mother; a wedding party in a courtyard. They were not, however, the photographs Officer Haidari had expected to see in a Bay Street conference room.

They were the eleven applicants whose letters had troubled her.

“Roshan Bibi,” Priti said, touching the first photograph. “Her husband was killed in Quetta in 2022 for teaching girls. Her own brother is the man who sold him to the militia. She had three weeks before the brother came for her.”

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She moved to the second.

“Fatima Ahmadi. Sixteen-year-old daughter shot in the leg at a school protest in Kabul in 2023. The Ministry of Vice and Virtue had a file on Fatima herself. She had two weeks.”

She moved to the third. The fourth. The fifth.

Officer Haidari did not interrupt.

Priti reached the eleventh photograph. She closed the folder.

“Ms Chatterjee.” Officer Haidari’s voice was very level. “These women came to Canada on Start-Up Visas.”

“Yes.”

“They did not, in any meaningful sense, have viable Canadian businesses.”

“No.”

“The business plans were written for them.”

“By me. With volunteers. We do not charge them. We have a small fund. The plans are credible because they are designed to be credible. Some of the women have, since landing, developed real businesses out of the shells we wrote for them. Most have not. Most are working in care homes, or studying, or simply being mothers in a country where their daughters can go to school.”

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“The letters were signed outside your intake windows because they were not, in fact, processed through the Mayfield committee.”

“Correct. They were processed by me, alone, on my own authority, drawing on a small allocation of ‘reserved’ endorsements that Mayfield’s charter permits the Managing Director in cases of strategic interest. There is no formal definition of strategic interest. I have used the latitude.”

“This is misrepresentation.”

“Yes.”

“It is fraud against the Canadian government.”

“Yes.”

“It is, on the present evidence, a clear breach of the Designated Organisation agreement and grounds for Mayfield’s removal from the programme.”

“Yes.”

Priti placed her hand, flat, on the closed folder.

“Officer Haidari. The Start-Up Visa programme is, as you know better than I do, a business immigration stream. It is not a humanitarian stream. The women in this folder did not, in any of the relevant senses, qualify for humanitarian protection within the timelines they had. Two of them, I am quite certain, would now be dead. Three of them have

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daughters who would now be married. One of them — I will not point her out — has a granddaughter, born in Halifax, who would not exist.”

She folded her hands.

“You have your evidence. The five minutes is up. You may proceed as you see fit.”

* * *

On the flight back to Halifax, Officer Haidari did not open her laptop.

She watched, instead, the cloud floor below the aircraft, which was the colour of unwashed wool.

She had eleven files. She had a recorded admission, on her own notebook, of a fraud that any reasonable supervisor would expect her to refer immediately to the Anti-Fraud and Integrity Branch. She had, on the desk in her hotel room that morning, a draft of the referral memo, which she had begun composing on the plane to Toronto and had been unable to finish.

She thought of the photograph on her own desk in Sydney. Her daughter, in the yellow raincoat, aged six. Her daughter who had been born in a Lahore hospital because Yasmin’s student visa to Canada had taken seven months longer than the doctors had said the pregnancy could safely wait.

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She thought of her mother, who had died in Peshawar in 2021, three weeks after Officer Haidari's application to sponsor her had been refused on grounds of insufficient income.

She thought of the fact that, if Officer Haidari had been Roshan Bibi, in Quetta, in 2022, with three weeks and a brother coming, she would not have qualified for a Start-Up Visa either.

The plane began its descent.

* * *

Officer Haidari's report, filed on the fourteenth of October, ran to nine pages.

It noted that the eleven Letters of Support flagged in her preliminary review had been issued outside Mayfield's published intake windows. It noted that, on direct enquiry, the signing partner had attributed this to the use of a charter provision permitting the Managing Director to issue endorsements at her own discretion in cases of strategic interest. It noted that the underlying applicants, on review of the case files, presented profiles consistent with the strategic interest invoked, which the report defined, with considerable care, as "the contribution of qualified persons to the Canadian economy in circumstances where their continued presence in their country of origin would be incompatible with their effective entrepreneurial activity."

The report recommended no further action.

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It was reviewed by a supervisor who initialled it without comment. It was filed. It was, in due course, archived.

Officer Haidari was, two years later, promoted.

* * *

On the night of the fourteenth of October, after she had filed the report, Officer Haidari sat at her kitchen table after her daughter had gone to bed and wrote, in longhand, a single letter.

She did not send it that night. She kept it in a drawer for eleven years, until her daughter was old enough to read it without questions.

The letter was addressed to Priti Chatterjee, at her Bay Street office.

It said that Officer Haidari had been, in 2017, an applicant for a Start-Up Visa endorsed by the Mayfield Angel Collective. That her application had been refused because Mayfield had withdrawn its endorsement at the last moment, on the recommendation of a senior associate who had cited concerns about her prior experience. That the senior associate's name, in 2017, had been Priti Chatterjee. That Officer Haidari had spent some years afterwards being, quietly and without acting on it, very angry indeed about this.

It said that, on the morning of the seventh of October, Officer Haidari had walked into the Bay Street conference room knowing exactly whom she was about to interview, and had brought with her a

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fully drafted referral memo that would have ended Priti Chatterjee's career.

It said that she had spent the entire flight from Halifax to Toronto preparing to file it.

It said that she had, in those five minutes Priti had asked for, understood something that no part of her training had prepared her to understand: that the reason her own application had been withdrawn in 2017 was that the senior associate had, on examining the file, noticed an irregularity in Yasmin's prior history — a falsified employment letter from a Karachi telecom company — that, had Mayfield endorsed her, would have surfaced at IRCC review and ended her chance of ever entering Canada by any route.

It said that Priti Chatterjee, in 2017, had not destroyed her. Priti Chatterjee had, by withdrawing the endorsement, saved her.

It said that the falsified Karachi letter had been on the desk in front of Priti during their meeting on the seventh of October — not in the eleven photographs, but in a second folder, unopened, that had sat at Priti's elbow throughout. That Officer Haidari had recognised the corner of the file. That Priti had not mentioned it.

It said that Priti Chatterjee had not used the file. Had not threatened her with it. Had not, in any way, reminded her of it. Had simply opened the eleven photographs and asked for five minutes.

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And it said that Officer Haidari understood, now, that the charter provision Priti had cited — the latitude permitted to a Managing Director in cases of strategic interest — had been used, in 2017, to ensure that an Afghan student with a falsified Karachi letter would be quietly refused, rather than caught, and would have the chance to come to Canada by another route, and to become, in due course, an officer of the federal government.

That she, Yasmin Haidari, had been Priti Chatterjee's first strategic interest.

That the eleven women in the folder were the eleven who had come after.

Officer Haidari signed the letter. She placed it in a drawer. She would, when the time came — when her daughter was old enough — deliver it by hand.

She closed the drawer.

She went upstairs to check on her daughter, who was sleeping, in the small room with the yellow curtains, in the country that had, by a chain of mercies Yasmin had not deserved and had not, until that afternoon, even known about, become her own.

*

VIII

Sufficient Funds

On a Wednesday morning in March, a young woman came to Vikram Reddy's office on the fourth floor of a building in Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad, and asked him to forge her bank statements.

She did not, of course, use that word. They never did.

Her name, she said, was Anjali Krishnan. She was twenty-eight. She had been admitted to a Master's programme in Health Administration at the University of Calgary, beginning in September, and her father — who had, over the course of three difficult conversations, agreed to fund the programme — had unfortunately suffered a stroke in February and had not yet been able to consolidate the family savings into the single account that IRCC required.

“The money exists,” she said, sitting very straight in the chair opposite Vikram's desk. “It is in five different fixed deposits across two banks and a chit fund. My father will recover. But the visa cannot wait.”

Vikram, who was forty-seven and who had been doing this for eleven years, listened with the patience of a man who had heard four hundred and fifty-three variations on the same speech. He turned, slowly, the signet ring on his little finger. He nodded at the appropriate

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moments. He did not, at any point, ask whether the money in fact existed.

“Ms Krishnan,” he said, when she had finished. “We can help. The fee is six lakhs. Cash, in two instalments. The statements will reflect twelve months of consolidated balance at approximately forty-two lakh rupees, with a transaction history that any reasonable visa officer will accept. Delivery in three weeks.”

Anjali Krishnan did not haggle. She placed three lakhs on the desk in a brown envelope, accepted a handwritten receipt that bore no name and no date, and left.

Vikram watched her go. He had watched many young women leave that office. He noticed, as she closed the door, that she did not, as the others did, look back.

* * *

Vikram’s business rested on a single document, which he kept in an encrypted folder on a laptop in a drawer of his desk.

It was a State Bank of India statement history, twenty-six pages, spanning eleven years from 2004 to 2015. The account was held in the name of Suryanarayana Murthy, a petroleum engineer who had retired from the Alberta oil sands to a condominium in northwest Calgary, and who had received his Canadian pension by quarterly remittance into this NRI account in Hyderabad until his death in February of 2015.

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Suryanarayana had been Vikram's mother's elder brother.

Vikram had not been close to him. They had met perhaps four times — once at a wedding, once at his mother's funeral, twice on Suryanarayana's rare visits to Hyderabad. Vikram remembered him as a dry, precise man who carried, even in the heat, a small leather notebook in which he wrote down the numbers of the autorickshaws he hired.

When Suryanarayana had died, intestate as far as the Canadian estate was concerned but with a single Indian beneficiary clause naming his only surviving Indian relative, Vikram had inherited the contents of the NRI account — approximately one crore forty lakh rupees — and, with it, eleven years of immaculate transaction history.

It had taken Vikram six months, after the funeral, to understand what he held. Real Canadian pension deposits, in real quarterly tranches, with real bank-side metadata, real SMS charges, real GST entries. The kind of texture that no forger could fabricate from scratch and that, grafted onto a different account holder's name and address, produced a document indistinguishable from the genuine article.

Saira, his designer, could replace the names and balances. The texture remained Suryanarayana's.

For eleven years, no visa officer in any country had detected it.

By the time Anjali Krishnan walked into his office, Vikram had produced, from this single template, four hundred and fifty-three sets of

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statements. He no longer thought of his uncle when he opened the file. He thought of the file as his own work, which, in a sense — the sense of long usage — it had become.

* * *

Three weeks later, Anjali Krishnan returned. She paid the second instalment in cash. She accepted a sealed envelope containing twelve months of bank statements in the name of Anjali Krishnan, showing a consolidated balance of forty-two lakh rupees, with a quarterly deposit pattern that mirrored — in scaled form — the Canadian pension texture of Suryanarayana Murthy’s long-dead account.

She did not open the envelope in his office.

“One further question, Mr Reddy,” she said, at the door. “Is there any way these statements could be traced back to you?”

Vikram smiled. It was a question he was asked, in one form or another, by perhaps one client in twenty. He had a standard answer.

“Ms Krishnan, the statements are unique to you. The bank metadata is generated fresh. There is no client database in this office — I keep no records of who has commissioned what. If, in the unlikely event of an investigation, a forensic examiner were to compare your statements with those of another client of mine, they would find no common artefact. Each set is, technically, independent.”

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“Technically.”

“Technically and practically, Ms Krishnan. I have been doing this for eleven years. I have never been audited.”

Anjali Krishnan looked at him for a moment longer than the conversation required. Then she nodded, said thank you, and left.

Vikram returned to his desk. He turned, slowly, the signet ring on his little finger. He did not know, would not have been able to articulate, what it was about her that troubled him. Something in the way she had said the word

technically. As though she had been waiting for him to use it.

He shook the feeling off. He had, after all, been doing this for eleven years.

* * *

Six months passed.

Anjali Krishnan, presumably, went to Calgary. Vikram, who did not keep records, did not check. He produced statements for forty-one further clients in the second half of the year. He bought a second car — a black Mercedes for his wife. He took his son, who was nine, to Goa for the school holidays.

On a Tuesday morning in October, the Telangana Police Cyber Crime Cell raided his office at eleven o'clock.

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They came with a Mutual Legal Assistance request from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, endorsed by a magistrate at the Nampally court. They sealed the office, took Vikram's laptop, took Saira's desktop, took Raju's tea kettle and — for reasons not subsequently explained — a calendar from the wall. They escorted Vikram, in handcuffs, to the police station at Banjara Hills.

In the interview room, an Inspector named Pratima Iyer placed three documents on the table.

The first was a set of bank statements. They were Anjali Krishnan's.

The second was a forensic comparison report, produced by an examiner at the RCMP's document section in Ottawa, identifying twelve common metadata artefacts between Anjali Krishnan's statements and a reference set of nineteen other forged statements seized in connection with Canadian visa fraud investigations over the previous four years.

The third was a certified true copy of an SBI account-opening form dated the fourteenth of August, 1998. It opened a Non-Resident Indian savings account in the name of Suryanarayana Murthy.

It listed two signatories.

The primary signatory was Suryanarayana Murthy.

The secondary signatory — added in 1998, when he was a nineteen-year-old college student — was Vikram Reddy.

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Vikram looked at the form. He looked at it for a long time.

“I had forgotten,” he said at last, very quietly, “that I had ever signed this.”

Inspector Iyer did not reply. She placed, on top of the three documents, a fourth: an extract from the Canadian estate file of Suryanarayana Murthy, deceased February 2015, indicating that an inquiry into the operation of his Indian NRI account had been requested in writing by his only surviving Indian relative, his nephew Vikram Reddy, on the seventeenth of March of that year, and that the nephew had subsequently — in his capacity as both residual beneficiary and authorised signatory — personally executed the closure of the account.

“Mr Reddy. The Indian record places you on this account from 1998. The Canadian record places you in operational control of this account at the time of its closure in 2015. Forensic analysis places this account as the source of the template from which your forgeries have been generated.”

She paused.

“We have not, to be frank, encountered a cleaner evidentiary chain.”

Vikram closed his eyes.

* * *

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It was at this point in the interview that Vikram Reddy asked a question that surprised Inspector Iyer.

“Who,” he said, “initiated the request to the RCMP?”

Iyer consulted her file. “The initial referral came from the University of Calgary. A Master’s student in Health Administration, in March of this year, voluntarily disclosed to the university’s international office that she had submitted fraudulent supporting documents with her application. The university referred the matter to IRCC. IRCC referred it to the RCMP. The RCMP, in conducting comparative analysis, identified your template signature in nineteen prior cases.”

Vikram opened his eyes.

“The student’s name?”

Inspector Iyer hesitated. The name was, technically, protected witness information. She decided, on the small consideration that the accused had himself produced the statements that bore it, to permit the question.

“Anjali Krishnan.”

Vikram said nothing.

“Mr Reddy. Do you know Ms Krishnan?”

Vikram looked at the wall behind Inspector Iyer’s shoulder for a long moment.

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“She came to my office in March,” he said. “She paid me six lakhs. She left with the statements. I have never seen her since.”

“Is that all you know of her?”

Vikram, who had spent eleven years training himself to give precisely no more information than was asked for, who had cultivated as a discipline the answering of police questions with the answer to the question and not the question behind it, opened his mouth to say yes.

Then he closed it.

Then he said: “Yes.”

And he saw, in Inspector Iyer’s small unreadable face, that she did not believe him — and that, more troublingly, she did not need to.

* * *

That evening, in the holding cell at Banjara Hills, Vikram was permitted his single phone call.

He did not call his wife. He did not call his lawyer. He called, instead, a number he had not dialled in twenty-three years — a Mumbai landline that, when his cousin had answered it on the fourth ring, had taken him a moment to recognise.

“Ramesh,” he said. “It is Vikram. I need to ask you something. Do you remember the woman — the woman my father stopped me from marrying in 2002. Do you remember her name?”

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There was a long silence on the line.

“Vikram. Why are you asking me this now?”

“Her name. Please.”

“It was Lakshmi. Lakshmi Krishnan. From Trichy.”

Vikram closed his eyes.

“And the child.”

Another long silence.

“You know I am not supposed to —”

“Ramesh. The child.”

“A daughter. Born seven months after she left Hyderabad. Lakshmi raised her alone. She married a teacher when the girl was four. The girl grew up calling him father.”

Vikram’s hand was very still on the receiver.

“Do you know what they called her? The daughter.”

Ramesh did not speak for some time.

“Anjali, Vikram. They called her Anjali.”

* * *

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Anjali Krishnan had, by the time Vikram Reddy made his telephone call, already returned to Calgary.

She had not, in fact, ever been admitted to the Master's programme in Health Administration. The admission letter she had shown Vikram had been forged — the only forged document of the entire operation, executed by a friend of hers in the university's registrar's office, on the strict understanding that it would be used once and destroyed.

Anjali had, however, been a registered nurse in Alberta for six years. She had, four years earlier, traced her biological father through a DNA matching service, had located him in Hyderabad through a private investigator she had paid out of two years of overtime pay, and had spent the better part of three years constructing the operation that had, in October, ended with her father's arrest.

She had not done this for revenge against him. She had not, in any conscious sense, even known him well enough to want revenge. She had done it for her mother, who had died in Trichy of breast cancer in 2019, alone in a small house with a pension photograph on the wall of her stepfather, who had been a kind man, but not the man Anjali had needed to know was her father.

Lakshmi had told Anjali about Vikram Reddy on her last lucid afternoon. She had told her that he had not been a bad man, only a weak one. She had told her that his father had refused the marriage on caste grounds and that Vikram, who had been twenty-three at the time, had

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not had the strength to defy him. She had told her that she did not, at the end, blame him for that.

She had told her, also — and this was the detail that had, four years later, given Anjali her plan — that Vikram had once mentioned, on a long evening in their final week together in 2002, that he had been put as a boy on his uncle's NRI account as a signatory, because the uncle had wanted someone in India who could operate the account. Vikram had laughed about it. He had said the uncle had a Canadian pension that came in four times a year and was the most boring set of numbers he had ever seen.

Lakshmi had remembered the detail because Vikram had used the word

boring about something so ordinary, and because she had thought, even then, that this was a man who would in time be careless with whatever he touched.

Anjali had remembered, after her mother's death, the word

boring, and the word *signatory*, and had, with the patience of a daughter who had inherited her mother's long memory, gone looking for the account.

She had found Suryanarayana Murthy's old condominium in northwest Calgary on a property tax registry. She had found the Canadian pension administrator through public-record disclosures. She

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had found, through an Indian PI who specialised in dormant accounts, the SBI account number and — from a clerical contact at the Hyderabad branch — a copy of the 1998 account-opening form.

She had carried the form for four years. She had not known, at first, what to do with it.

It was only when, on a routine trawl of a Telugu-language consultancy review website, she had read that VR Financial Consultants of Jubilee Hills was reputed to produce the most undetectable bank statements in southern India, that she had understood. Her father had not just retained access to the account at his uncle's death — he had built his entire business on it.

All she had needed to do was hire him.

All she had needed to do was let him use, on her own statements, the template he had been using on four hundred and fifty-three other people's. And then to take those statements to the right authorities, with the right photocopy of the 1998 form, and let the Canadian and Indian systems do, between them, what neither would have done on its own.

She had not given any signed statement to the RCMP. She had not testified. She had not, in any document that would survive the investigation, identified herself as the daughter of the accused. She was, on the file, simply Anjali Krishnan, a Master's applicant who had had a crisis of conscience and reported herself.

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On the evening of Vikram's arrest, she sat at her kitchen table in Calgary, with a cup of South Indian filter coffee that she made the way her mother had taught her, and looked at a single photograph in a small silver frame.

The photograph was of Lakshmi, aged twenty-five, on a beach in Tamil Nadu, in 2002, six weeks before she had left Hyderabad.

Anjali Krishnan raised her cup slightly, in the direction of the photograph.

“Amma,” she said. “It is done.”

And then, because her shift at the hospital began at six in the morning, she rinsed the cup and went to bed.

*

The Convocation

On a Friday evening in April, in a small flat in the T. Nagar district of Chennai, a young man of twenty-six called Vivek Padmanabhan sat alone at his dining table, reading by lamplight a letter that had arrived that morning by courier from Canada.

The letter was from the Office of the Registrar of Cape Breton University, Sydney, Nova Scotia. It informed Mr Padmanabhan that, his Master of Business Administration in Community Economic Development having been conferred in absentia at the spring convocation of that year, his original degree certificate was enclosed under separate cover.

The certificate was, indeed, enclosed. Mr Padmanabhan unfolded it on the dining table. It was, he saw at once, a beautiful object — thick cream paper, an embossed crest, the university's Latin motto in a plain serif type, his own name in a careful italic, the signatures of the Registrar, the President, and the Chair of Senate, the date the fourteenth of June.

He looked at the certificate for some minutes.

Then he opened a second letter, which had also arrived by the same courier, on the letterhead of the Union Public Service Commission, New

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Delhi, informing him that he had been provisionally selected for the Indian Revenue Service, subject to medical examination, character verification, and the completion of a final round of interviews to be held in three weeks' time.

Mr Padmanabhan looked, alternately, at the two letters.

The letter from the UPSC, in fact, contained a difficulty. The provisional selection was for a posting that, on the unwritten understanding of those familiar with the way these matters were conducted, required a final accommodation of approximately eight lakh rupees, payable in cash, to a particular person at a particular address in Delhi.

Mr Padmanabhan did not have eight lakh rupees. His family had spent the last of their savings on his Cape Breton tuition.

He sat at the dining table for a long time, looking at the certificate.

And then, with the patience of a man who had grown up reading account ledgers in his father's small accountancy practice, he calculated.

* * *

A Cape Breton degree certificate was, on the ordinary academic market, a piece of paper. On a different market, however — a market Mr Padmanabhan had become aware of through certain conversations with

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batchmates over the previous year — a Cape Breton degree certificate was something else entirely.

It was a master template. From a single genuine certificate, an experienced forger could produce, by careful scanning and substitution, an unlimited number of fraudulent certificates, each one indistinguishable from the original. The market for such certificates, among Indian applicants seeking Canadian Post-Graduation Work Permits, was substantial. The price, Mr Padmanabhan had been given to understand, was negotiable.

He did not know any forgers. But on the third evening of his consideration, he remembered that there was, on the eleventh floor of a commercial building in Nungambakkam, an enterprise styled

Indo-Canadian Credentials Pvt Ltd, which a junior at his college had once mentioned, half in jest, as the place where you went if your CV needed adjustment.

Mr Padmanabhan visited the office on a Tuesday afternoon. He met its proprietor, one Mr Bhaskar Reddy, a man of forty in a polyester suit who turned, slowly, the signet ring on his little finger as he listened.

Their negotiation was brief.

“Mr Padmanabhan,” Mr Reddy said at the end of it. “I will pay you eight lakhs in cash for the certificate. The certificate must be the original.

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Photographs are not acceptable. Photocopies are not acceptable. The original.”

“And if I require it in the future?”

Mr Reddy smiled. “Mr Padmanabhan. The Registrar at Cape Breton issues, on average, thirty replacement certificates a year. The fee is one hundred Canadian dollars and a covering letter explaining a misfortune. Postage to India, the unfortunate condition of the international mail — these things happen. You will write to her in due course. You will receive a replacement. You will hang it on your wall.”

“And this original?”

“Will, in due course, become a great many sons’ futures.”

Mr Padmanabhan nodded. He went home. He did not, that night, sleep particularly well, but neither did he sleep particularly badly.

On the Friday morning he returned to Nungambakkam carrying the certificate in a manila envelope. Mr Reddy paid him eight lakh rupees in cash, in three bundles, in fifty-rupee notes. Mr Padmanabhan placed the bundles in his briefcase, walked to the railway station, and boarded the night train to Delhi.

On the Monday morning, three weeks later, his name was published in the gazette as a probationer of the Indian Revenue Service, posted to the Chennai zone.

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On the Wednesday morning of the same week, he wrote to the Registrar of Cape Breton University, requesting a replacement degree certificate, the original having been damaged in transit by, he regretted to say, the carelessness of the Indian postal authorities.

The Registrar issued the replacement. It arrived in Chennai four weeks later. Mr Padmanabhan had it framed and hung it in his study.

It was, he reflected on the evening he hung it, a very fine certificate.

* * *

Eight years later, Karthik Subramaniam, an applicant for Canadian permanent residence, paid Mr Bhaskar Reddy nine lakh rupees for a Cape Breton MBA degree certificate, transcript, and graduation photograph in academic dress.

Mr Subramaniam had, in fact, been a student at Cape Breton. He had, in fact, withdrawn from the programme in his second semester after his father's heart attack. He had, in fact, never graduated. The certificate Mr Reddy produced for him was generated, as had been the case for two hundred and sixteen previous Cape Breton certificates Mr Reddy had sold over the preceding eight years, from a single master scan of the only genuine Cape Breton certificate Mr Reddy had ever obtained.

The certificate Mr Subramaniam submitted to IRCC passed the officer's desk in 2024. He was issued his permanent residence.

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On a Monday morning in May of the year after, Dr Eleanor MacIsaac, the Registrar of Cape Breton University, took a telephone call from Sergeant Anand Bose of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who wished, he said, to ask her about a graduate of her institution called Karthik Subramaniam.

Dr MacIsaac typed the name into her computer.

Mr Subramaniam had withdrawn in his second semester. He had not graduated. He had no degree certificate.

“Sergeant Bose,” Dr MacIsaac said, “would you be so good as to send me the certificate? I should very much like to look at it.”

* * *

The certificate that arrived nineteen minutes later was, Dr MacIsaac had to admit, a beautiful object.

The crest was correct. The motto was correct. The signatures were credible. The document number was within the range Cape Breton had used in the year cited.

Several details, however, were not correct.

First, the degree title. The certificate read

Master of Business Administration. Cape Breton’s actual MBA was styled *Master of Business Administration in Community Economic Development* — the

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full title was a point of institutional pride and no genuine certificate omitted the second half.

Second, the photograph of the graduate, embossed in the lower right oval, showed the young man wearing the academic gown of a different university. Black with a maroon hood, faced with white satin, trimmed with gold cord. Cape Breton's gowns were black with red and gold hoods, faced with grey, with no cord.

The gown in the photograph, Dr MacIsaac was as certain as a long career could make her, was the gown of the University of Toronto.

She magnified the image. The U of T crest, embroidered in small gold thread on the left breast of the gown, was just visible — the kind of detail a forger producing fake degrees from his eleventh-floor office in Chennai would not have thought to remove.

She picked up the telephone.

* * *

Sergeant Bose drove down from the RCMP detachment in Sydney that afternoon.

He looked at the certificate. He listened to Dr MacIsaac's explanation of the gown.

“Dr MacIsaac. The crest, the paper texture —”

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“Sergeant. The forger has, at some point, had access to a genuine Cape Breton certificate. Possibly a recent one. Possibly the certificate of a former student. The crest contains a small irregularity in the upper-left quadrant of the lion that has been on our certificates since 1976 and that we have never publicly disclosed. It is reproduced, accurately, on the forgery. The forger is working from a real one.”

“Which means we need to find that one.”

“Yes.”

Dr MacIsaac was already typing.

She pulled, at Sergeant Bose’s request, a list of every Cape Breton MBA graduate of the past ten years whose degree had been conferred in absentia and posted to an Indian address. The list ran to forty-three names. Sergeant Bose, working with the Central Bureau of Investigation’s Cyber Cell in Delhi, narrowed the forty-three over three weeks to seven. The seven were the candidates whose certificates had not been visibly destroyed, lost, or accounted for.

Of the seven, four had retained possession of their original certificates. Two had reported them lost. One — a Mr Suresh Iyer of Velachery — had voluntarily admitted, when interviewed by the CBI, that he had sold his certificate in 2021 for forty thousand rupees to a representative of Indo-Canadian Credentials Pvt Ltd.

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Mr Iyer's certificate, on subsequent forensic comparison, was the master template from which Mr Bhaskar Reddy of Indo-Canadian Credentials had been generating Cape Breton MBAs.

Or so it appeared.

On the forensic comparison, Mr Iyer's certificate matched two hundred and sixteen of the two hundred and seventeen forged certificates that had been seized from Mr Reddy's hard drives.

Two hundred and sixteen. Not two hundred and seventeen.

There was one Cape Breton MBA forgery, the earliest in the seized archive, dated 2018, that did not match the textural fingerprint of Mr Iyer's certificate. The textural fingerprint of that one earliest forgery matched, instead, the fingerprint of a different Cape Breton certificate — a certificate that had been issued, on the forensic evidence, before Mr Iyer's graduation.

Sergeant Bose returned to the list of forty-three names.

* * *

Of the forty-three Cape Breton MBA graduates of the past ten years whose certificates had been posted in absentia to India, Sergeant Bose had — in his earlier work — narrowed the list to seven by removing those who could be eliminated. He had subsequently traced six of the seven.

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The seventh — the one Sergeant Bose had set aside in his earlier work because the holder was a serving officer of the Indian Revenue Service whose possession of his certificate had been confirmed by his having photographed it in its frame and forwarded the photograph to the investigating officer — was a man called Vivek Padmanabhan.

Sergeant Bose, who was a careful man, asked the CBI Cyber Cell to verify Mr Padmanabhan's certificate again.

The Cyber Cell had no fresh information. They had spoken to Mr Padmanabhan eight months earlier. He had photographed the certificate in its frame, on the wall of his study. The certificate in the photograph had been verified by Dr MacIsaac herself as a genuine Cape Breton certificate.

Sergeant Bose asked, this time, a different question.

He asked the Cape Breton Registry whether they had, at any point, issued more than one certificate in the name of Vivek Padmanabhan.

Dr MacIsaac checked her records. Her assistant returned with the answer within the hour.

Cape Breton had issued, in respect of Mr Vivek Padmanabhan, two certificates.

The first, on the fourteenth of June, the year of his graduation.

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The second, three months later, as a replacement, the original having been reported damaged in transit.

Sergeant Bose looked at the date of the replacement request. He looked at the date of the earliest forgery in Mr Reddy's seized archive.

The replacement had been issued in October. The earliest forgery had been generated in November.

Sergeant Bose telephoned Inspector Damayanti Iyengar of the CBI Cyber Cell in Delhi and asked her to do something he had not, in his eleven-year career, asked of any colleague before.

He asked her to investigate the personal financial history of a serving Joint Commissioner of Income Tax.

* * *

Inspector Iyengar took eleven days to do it.

On the twelfth, she telephoned Sergeant Bose with three pieces of information.

First, that Mr Padmanabhan had, in the August of the year of his graduation, deposited eight lakh rupees in cash into a Delhi bank account previously connected to a Union Public Service Commission middleman who had subsequently been implicated in a 2019 corruption inquiry into the IRS probationer recruitment process.

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Second, that the deposit had been made approximately seventy-two hours before Mr Padmanabhan's final IRS interview, which he had passed.

Third, that the eight lakhs in question had not, on any subsequently filed income tax return, ever been declared, accounted for, or attributed to a known source.

Sergeant Bose thanked Inspector Iyengar. He did not, on the evidence at his disposal, have grounds to charge Mr Padmanabhan with anything in connection with the Cape Breton matter — the original certificate had been, at the time of its sale, his lawful property, and the sale of one's own degree certificate, while morally peculiar, was not in itself a Canadian or Indian criminal offence.

Sergeant Bose did, however, refer the financial findings, with a careful covering note, to the Central Vigilance Commission of India.

Mr Padmanabhan was placed under the Commission's confidential review the following month.

The review took two and a half years.

Mr Padmanabhan was suspended from service in the autumn of the year following the conclusion of the Cape Breton prosecution. He was charged, under the Prevention of Corruption Act, with the receipt of an undue advantage in connection with his original IRS appointment. The charge sheet did not mention Cape Breton University. It did not

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mention Mr Bhaskar Reddy. It did not mention the two hundred and seventeen Indian families whose sons' Canadian permanent residences had originated, in part, on the wall of Mr Padmanabhan's study.

It mentioned only eight lakh rupees, deposited on a particular date, into a particular account.

He was convicted in his ninth year of service. He was sentenced to four years' rigorous imprisonment.

* * *

On the morning of his sentencing, in a courthouse in Chennai, Mr Vivek Padmanabhan stood in the dock and listened to the judge read the order.

He was, by then, thirty-five years old. He had been a Joint Commissioner. He had a wife who was a teacher. He had two small daughters who would not, for many years, fully understand what had happened to their father.

As he was led from the dock, he passed in the public gallery a young man of about twenty-eight whom he did not know. The young man was watching him with a particular kind of attention.

Mr Padmanabhan did not, at the time, give the young man further thought.

Karthik Subramaniam, who had been deported from Canada nineteen months earlier on the strength of a Cape Breton MBA

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certificate that had been generated from the master scan of the certificate Mr Padmanabhan had sold to Mr Reddy in the autumn of his IRS appointment, sat in the gallery and watched the man whose decision, made one Friday evening in his small flat in T. Nagar nine years before, had set in motion the chain of events that had cost Karthik his Canadian life.

Karthik had not, until the gallery, ever known the name. The Crown had not made the connection in the Cape Breton trial. The connection had been made only in the closing report of the Central Vigilance Commission, which had been published the previous month and which Karthik — who now worked at his uncle’s logistics company in Chennai — had read with the attentive interest of a man who had paid eleven lakh rupees and lost his future to a piece of paper, and who was naturally curious about the piece of paper’s origin.

Karthik had attended the sentencing because he had wanted, on the morning of the sentence, to look at the man.

He had no plan beyond the looking.

As Mr Padmanabhan was led from the courtroom, he passed the gallery, and the eyes of the two men crossed for an instant. Mr Padmanabhan did not recognise Karthik. He had never seen him before. Karthik had never seen Mr Padmanabhan before either, except in one official photograph in the Vigilance Commission’s report — a passport-sized photograph of a young man in academic dress.

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In the official photograph, Mr Padmanabhan had been wearing the academic gown of the University of Toronto.

Karthik had noticed it, in the report, with the small startled sense of a connection completing itself. He had remembered, then, the photograph that Mr Reddy had taken of him, eight years later, in academic dress — a black gown with a maroon hood and gold cord that Mr Reddy had produced from a wardrobe in his office and had, with the professional efficiency of a man who had done this many times before, draped around Karthik's shoulders for the photograph that had, in due course, been embossed in the lower right corner of the forged certificate Karthik had submitted to IRCC.

The gown had been the same gown.

It had been the same physical object.

Mr Reddy, who had begun his Cape Breton operation in 2018 with one borrowed gown and one borrowed certificate, had used the same gown in the same wardrobe for eight years, on two hundred and seventeen photographs of two hundred and seventeen young men, of whom Karthik Subramaniam had been the two hundred and seventeenth.

As Mr Padmanabhan passed the gallery, Karthik did not stand. He did not call out. He did not, in any external way, react.

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He thought, instead, of Dr Eleanor MacIsaac, the Registrar in Sydney whom he had never met, who had spotted, at a glance, a costume detail that two hundred and seventeen young men and one Indian forger and one IRS Joint Commissioner had not noticed, in eight years, was visible at all.

Mr Padmanabhan was led down the steps to the holding cells.

Karthik Subramaniam left the courthouse and walked the four kilometres home, in the late afternoon heat, to his uncle's small flat in Velachery, where his mother was waiting with tea.

*

The Medical

Dr Imran Sulayman ran his clinic on the first floor of a building in Gulberg, Lahore, with the quiet precision of a man who had been a panel physician for the High Commission of Canada for nineteen years.

He was fifty-eight. He had been trained in internal medicine at King Edward Medical University, had done his fellowship in Edinburgh, and had returned to Pakistan in 1999 to set up a small practice that had, over the decades, expanded to occupy three floors of the building and to employ four other doctors, two radiologists, eleven nurses, and a small army of technicians.

His designation as a Canadian panel physician was one of nine such designations in Pakistan. It conferred upon him the authority to conduct, on behalf of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the immigration medical examinations required of every applicant for permanent residence and most applicants for temporary residence. Each year he saw, in this capacity, approximately three thousand applicants — almost a third of all Canadian visa medicals conducted in the country.

Dr Sulayman did not, in his nineteen years in the role, have a reputation for laxity.

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He had a reputation, on the contrary, for being almost punishingly thorough. He insisted on conducting every chest X-ray review personally. He routinely ordered second-line tests — sputum cultures, hepatitis serologies, HIV confirmation — in cases where most panel physicians, with their throughput pressures, would have signed off on the first-line panel alone. He had, over the years, declined to clear seventy-three applicants on medical grounds, and had referred eleven of them — with their consent — for further treatment in his own clinic at no cost to themselves.

He was, in short, the kind of doctor the Canadian High Commission considered an asset.

In the autumn of the year in question, the Canadian High Commission also considered him a problem.

* * *

It had begun three months earlier, in the IRCC processing centre at Sydney, Nova Scotia, when an officer reviewing a routine permanent residence file had noticed that the applicant's e-Medical reference number, which should have resolved through the eMedical interface to a complete examination record, instead returned an error:

Reference not found.

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The medical certificate attached to the file, however, was on Dr Sulayman's clinic letterhead, bore his signature, and stated that the applicant had been examined and cleared on a date six months earlier.

The officer had referred the matter to the Medical Branch in Ottawa. The Medical Branch had referred it to the Health Branch at the Canadian High Commission in Islamabad. The Health Branch had asked Dr Sulayman to comment.

Dr Sulayman had commented within four hours. He had not, he wrote, examined the applicant in question. He had no record of the applicant in his clinic's system. The signature on the medical certificate was a competent imitation of his own. The eMedical reference number was, on cross-checking, fabricated — it followed the correct format but did not correspond to any examination he or his colleagues had ever uploaded.

It was, he said, a forgery.

The Health Branch had thanked him and had filed the matter for further attention.

Two weeks later, a second case had emerged. Then a third. By the end of the second month, eleven medical certificates ostensibly issued by Dr Sulayman had been identified as forgeries. The applicants associated with them had, in every case, already been granted permanent residence.

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They were now in Canada.

* * *

Inspector Tariq Mahmud of the Federal Investigation Agency's Anti-Human Trafficking Cell, Lahore, was assigned to the case in October.

He was forty-four. He had worked, before joining the FIA, as a journalist on the Lahore crime desk for nine years. He retained, from those years, a habit of building out a case in handwritten notes in spiral-bound notebooks, which he favoured over the official electronic case-management system because the notebooks did not, in his experience, leak.

He visited Dr Sulayman's clinic on a Wednesday morning. He was received in the doctor's office. They spoke for two hours.

Dr Sulayman was, Inspector Mahmud noted, both relieved that the FIA had taken up the case and unusually willing to assist. He produced, unprompted, a list of every staff member who had access to his clinic letterhead. He produced his clinic's log of eMedical reference numbers issued over the previous three years. He offered, voluntarily, to make available the personnel files of any of his employees that the Inspector might wish to examine.

Inspector Mahmud asked, in particular, about a former employee.

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“Yes,” Dr Sulayman said. “Farrukh Awan. He worked for me for four years. Senior administrative officer. He had access to letterhead, to the eMedical interface, to client records. He left in March of last year. The departure was, I would say, amicable but not warm.”

“Why did he leave?”

“He believed, I think correctly, that I would not be promoting him to clinic manager. The position required a particular kind of judgement. Farrukh was capable. He was not, in my judgement, ethically reliable.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“He set up an immigration consultancy in Garden Town.

Awan Global Pathways, I believe it is called.”

Inspector Mahmud closed his notebook. He thanked Dr Sulayman. He drove, that afternoon, to Garden Town.

* * *

Awan Global Pathways occupied a small suite on the second floor of a commercial building two blocks from the Garden Town market.

Inspector Mahmud sat in his car for some time before going up. He had a habit, before any first interview with a target, of watching the office for an hour. It was a habit he had acquired as a journalist. Watching told him things that interrogations did not.

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In the hour, eleven people entered the office and seven left. Of the eleven, nine were men of working age dressed in the particular combination of suit jacket and athletic shoe that Inspector Mahmud had learnt, over twelve years of Canadian visa work, to associate with the Pakistani middle-class male preparing for an emigration consultation. Two were women, accompanied by their fathers.

The volume was wrong. A consultancy of this size, run by a single principal, ought to have processed perhaps four or five client meetings in a morning. Awan was processing eleven.

Inspector Mahmud went up the stairs.

The investigation, conducted over the following four months in coordination with the Canadian High Commission's Migration Integrity Officer, established that Farrukh Awan had been operating, since the spring of the previous year, a fully integrated visa-fraud enterprise.

He sold, for fees ranging from twelve to eighteen lakh Pakistani rupees, complete Canadian permanent residence applications, including — critically — medical certificates that appeared to originate from Dr Sulayman's clinic and that bore eMedical reference numbers in the correct format.

The numbers were not, in fact, correct. Each was generated by a small piece of code Farrukh had written that produced strings matching the eMedical pattern but corresponding to no actual examination. The

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numbers worked, in the sense that they survived an applicant's initial visa-office review. They failed, in due course, when IRCC officers in Canada attempted to retrieve the underlying medical files.

Farrukh's arithmetic had been straightforward. The chance of any individual file being retrieved at the post-landing stage was, on his estimation, less than five per cent. He had sold, in eighteen months, ninety-three packages. Five per cent of ninety-three was less than five. He had calculated that he could absorb five exposed files — simply by closing the office and reopening under another name — before the heat became unmanageable.

He had not anticipated that the figure would, by the time of his arrest, have reached eleven.

Farrukh Awan was arrested at his office on the fourteenth of February. He gave a full statement within forty-eight hours, naming three accomplices in the eMedical formatting work and four agents in different Pakistani cities who had referred clients to him. The Canadian permanent residence statuses of all ninety-three of his clients were placed under review. By the end of the year, sixty-one had been vacated, twenty-one were still in process, and eleven — on humanitarian grounds, or for reasons that did not appear in the public record — had been allowed to stand.

Dr Sulayman issued a public statement expressing his support for the investigation, his regret at the abuse of his clinic's reputation, and his

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renewed commitment to the integrity of the Canadian medical examination process. The Canadian High Commission, in turn, publicly affirmed his standing as a panel physician.

It was, on the face of it, a clean case.

* * *

On a Friday evening in March, three weeks after the case had been formally closed, Dr Sulayman locked the door of his consulting room, dimmed the lights, and opened the bottom drawer of his desk.

He removed from the drawer a small black leather book — not unlike, although neither would ever know it, the kind of black notebook a workshop owner in Sharjah kept locked in his own desk for his own reasons. Dr Sulayman's book contained, however, a different kind of record.

It contained a list of one hundred and forty-seven names.

Each name was the name of an applicant whose Canadian medical examination Dr Sulayman had personally conducted, and personally cleared, over the previous nineteen years — an applicant whose underlying medical findings had been such that, on a strict reading of the IRCC medical inadmissibility provisions of section 38 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the applicant should have been declined.

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The findings had been various. Forty-one applicants had had latent tuberculosis the Canadian system would have read as excessive demand on health services. Twenty-six had had hepatitis B with viral loads that, under a strict interpretation of the regulations, would have triggered a referral. Nineteen had had HIV. The remaining sixty-one had had various conditions — chronic kidney disease, treated cancers in remission, neurological disorders — that, while medically manageable, would in each case have produced a clinical-medical-officer assessment of medical inadmissibility under the Canadian framework as it then operated.

Dr Sulayman had cleared every one of them.

He had not done so for money. No payment, in any of the one hundred and forty-seven cases, had ever passed between an applicant or applicant's family and any of his accounts. He had done so because, in his clinical judgement, the IRCC medical inadmissibility threshold had been set, for many of these conditions, at a level he considered medically and morally indefensible — a level designed to exclude, from the most prosperous country in the Commonwealth, sick people whose treatment, in Canadian dollars per capita per annum, would have cost a tiny fraction of what the same country spent each year on, for instance, the maintenance of cosmetic landscaping in its public parks.

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Dr Sulayman had been, in his quiet way, the most successful smuggler of medically inadmissible immigrants into Canada that the IRCC system had ever failed to detect.

He had also been, since the spring of 2018, an informant of the Canada Border Services Agency.

This was the part of his arrangement that not even his wife knew. In 2018, a CBSA Migration Integrity Officer based in Islamabad had visited Dr Sulayman's clinic on a routine annual review, had stayed somewhat longer than such reviews ordinarily required, and had — over a long afternoon and a great deal of green tea — reached an understanding with the doctor.

The CBSA had not, at that time, possessed evidence sufficient to act against Dr Sulayman for the medical clearances he had been issuing. They had possessed sufficient suspicion to make his life professionally difficult, however, for the foreseeable future.

Dr Sulayman, faced with this prospect, had agreed to a quiet arrangement. He would, going forward, continue to issue the clearances he considered medically defensible regardless of the IRCC threshold. In exchange, he would also — over the years — cooperate with the CBSA on the detection and exposure of the entirely separate species of medical-certificate fraud that operated outside his clinic walls. The forged certificates. The fabricated eMedical numbers. The networks that bypassed his examinations altogether.

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It was a strange and asymmetric bargain. The CBSA was, in effect, tolerating a kind of small humanitarian smuggling — the quiet admission of one hundred and forty-seven sick people to Canada — in exchange for cooperation against a different and more profitable kind of fraud, by which entirely unexamined people were being smuggled to Canada by men whose only interest was the fee.

It was, in the considered view of the CBSA officer who had brokered it, a bargain that resulted in fewer net frauds and rather better health outcomes than any available alternative.

It was Dr Sulayman who had, on the morning that the first case had emerged in Sydney, telephoned his CBSA handler in Islamabad to suggest, gently, that the file might wish to be examined particularly closely. It was Dr Sulayman who had, in subsequent telephone calls over the following weeks, identified the eMedical formatting irregularities he believed pointed to a single source. It was Dr Sulayman who had, on the morning of Inspector Mahmud's visit, produced — with the unprompted helpfulness that had so favourably impressed the Inspector — the personnel file of a former employee whose departure he had described as

amicable but not warm.

Farrukh Awan, who had imagined himself a clever man making a private profit at the expense of an old-fashioned employer, had been the bait, the trail, and the catch.

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Dr Sulayman closed the black book. He returned it to the drawer. He locked the drawer with a small brass key.

He went home for dinner, where his wife had prepared, that evening, the daal she had been making for thirty-one years, and which he ate, as he always did, with great appetite, in the small dining room of the small house that he had bought, twenty years earlier, with his own savings, in the second year of his designation as a Canadian panel physician.

After dinner, his wife went to bed. Dr Sulayman sat for a while in the small garden behind the house, smoking the single cigarette he permitted himself each evening, and thinking, as he sometimes did, of a young man called Adnan Karim whom he had cleared in 2003 — the second name in the black notebook — and who had emigrated to Toronto, had completed a doctorate at McGill, had become a paediatric oncologist at SickKids, and had, in 2019, sent Dr Sulayman a Christmas card thanking him “for the kindness of nineteen years ago, which I trust will not, by now, have caused you any difficulty.”

Dr Sulayman finished his cigarette. He went inside. He locked the back door. He turned out the lights.

*

XI

The Adoption

Officer Helen Tran of the Canada Border Services Agency, Calgary regional office, had a habit, when something in a file caught her attention, of reading it three times in succession before doing anything else.

She had been an investigator for six years. She had developed, in those six years, the conviction that adoption fraud differed from other categories of immigration fraud in one particular respect. Most fraud was concealment. Adoption fraud, when it occurred, was something else. It was a story that everyone in the file had agreed, in advance, to believe.

On a Tuesday morning in November, she opened a file that had been flagged by routine audit. The file was the international adoption of one Yohannes Demeke, born the fourteenth of August seven years and three months earlier in a village in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, by Tewolde and Selam Ghebremedhin of Calgary, Alberta, Canadian citizens of Eritrean origin.

She read the file three times.

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On the first reading, she understood that the adoption appeared to be in order — Hague Convention compliant, with all the necessary documents, conducted through a registered Ethiopian adoption agency.

On the second reading, she noticed that the boy in the intake photograph, while described as seven, looked perhaps closer to twelve.

On the third reading, she noticed something that arrested her attention completely.

In the section of the home study report titled

Background of Prospective Adoptive Parents, under the sub-heading on the adoptive father's pre-Canadian history, there appeared the following sentence: *Mr Ghebremedhin spent eleven months as a refugee at the Shire camp, Tigray, Ethiopia, in 2002–2003, prior to resettlement.*

Officer Tran sat back in her chair.

She had not, in six years of investigations, ever expected to encounter the name Shire on a CBSA file.

She telephoned her mother.

* * *

Le Tran was seventy-three. She had been born in Hue, Vietnam, in 1952. She had arrived in Canada in 1980 on the boat people resettlement programme, after seven months in a UNHCR transit camp on the Thai-Cambodian border. She had, in her second month at the camp,

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contracted cerebral malaria and had been very nearly the first fatality of that monsoon.

She had been saved by an Ethiopian medical orderly attached to a small Belgian NGO, who had stolen, on the morning of her highest fever, three vials of quinine sulphate from the locked cabinet of the dispensary.

The orderly had been in his early twenties. His name had been Daniel Tesfaye.

Le Tran had told her daughter the story when Helen was twelve. She had told it as the family origin story — the story of why the small house in Calgary, the schools, the citizenship, the career, were possible. She had said, every time she told it, that one day perhaps the world would be such that the family could be useful to him in the way he had been useful to her.

She had said it most recently three Christmases earlier, after which her dementia had progressed to the point where reliable conversation about distant events was no longer possible.

Helen had not, in twenty-eight years, ever met Daniel Tesfaye. She did not know whether he was alive.

She did know, on the afternoon of the file, that the camp at Shire in Tigray was eight thousand kilometres from the camp at Aranyaprathet

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in Thailand. Mr Tewolde Ghebremedhin's pre-Canadian history had no connection whatever to her own.

This was a relief.

This was, indeed, the only reason she telephoned her mother that afternoon — because she had wanted, before she went any further with the file, to confirm to herself that the unrelated coincidence of a refugee camp on a CBSA case form had no further dimension.

Her mother's nurse answered. Her mother was sleeping. Helen left no message.

She returned to the file. She began the formal investigation.

* * *

It took eleven weeks.

Officer Tran ordered, as part of the audit, a confirmatory dental-age assessment by a Canadian forensic odontologist. The assessment returned a result of approximately fifteen years.

She compared the dental panoramic to the intake photograph. The boy in the photograph was clearly the boy assessed by the odontologist. The intake photograph showed him in a clean white school shirt against a plain agency wall, looking directly at the camera with an expression that Officer Tran would later describe in her notes as

the composure of someone who has been told, repeatedly, what to do.

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She cross-referenced the parental death certificates against the Ethiopian civil registry, which the Canadian High Commission in Addis Ababa had begun receiving on a quarterly basis two years earlier.

The death certificates were forgeries. The biological parents were not dead. Both were alive, employed, and resident in Addis Ababa. The biological father, a Mr Daniel Tesfaye, was listed in Ethiopian electoral rolls as a resident of the Bole sub-city.

Officer Tran sat at her desk for some minutes after she read the name.

Then she stood up, walked down the corridor to the supervisor's office, and asked whether she might be reassigned from the file.

The supervisor, a woman of long service, asked her why.

Officer Tran told her, briefly, the family story.

The supervisor listened. Then she said: "Helen. There is no rule against a Canadian official acting on a file that touches her family's history. There is a rule against doing so without disclosure. You are disclosing it now. You may continue. I will note this conversation on the file. Your conduct will be reviewed at the end of the investigation. Is that acceptable?"

Officer Tran said that it was.

* * *

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She summoned the Ghebremedhins on a Wednesday morning. They came in together. They brought, at her request, the boy.

Officer Tran set out the case in plain language. The death certificates were forgeries. The boy's biological parents were alive. His real age was approximately fifteen, not seven. The adoption agency, the Hope Bridge International Adoption Service, would in due course be the subject of a separate Ethiopian prosecution. The Ghebremedhins' status as adoptive parents would be vacated. The boy would be subject to removal proceedings unless an alternative legal pathway could be identified.

She paused.

“Mr and Mrs Ghebremedhin. Before I ask you any further questions, I want you to understand that you are not, on the present evidence, suspected of having known about the misrepresentation in this case. The agency could have deceived you as easily as it deceived us. If you tell me that you understood the boy to be seven, that you accepted the documents in good faith, and that you are as surprised by this morning's information as anyone, I will record that statement and the prosecution will proceed against the agency alone.”

Tewolde Ghebremedhin looked at his wife. Selam looked back at him.

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“Officer Tran,” Tewolde said. “My wife and I knew the boy was not seven. We have known from the morning the agency e-mailed us his intake photograph. We knew because we recognised his eyes.”

“You recognised them as those of his father.”

“Yes.”

“Mr Ghebremedhin. You are about to make a statement that will determine the outcome of this case. Are you certain?”

“I am certain.”

“Why?”

Tewolde looked at her for a long moment.

Then, very simply, he told her about the seventeenth of February, 2003. He told her about the medical tent at Shire. He told her about the cerebral malaria. He told her about the three vials of quinine sulphate stolen by a young Ethiopian orderly attached to a small Belgian NGO.

“We owed him our lives, Officer Tran. We could not refuse him. We could not refuse a man whose three vials of medicine made our entire Canadian life possible.”

“So you defrauded my government.”

“Yes.”

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Officer Tran did not, in that moment, betray any sign of what she was thinking.

She asked the boy his real age, his real name, and the reason his father had wished him brought to Canada.

The boy, in clear English, said that he was fifteen, that his real name was Mikael, and that his father had decided to send him because the political situation in his neighbourhood of Addis Ababa had become dangerous for the families of certain medical professionals who had, in 2024, refused to falsify post-mortem records for a particular set of deaths in police custody.

Officer Tran wrote the answer down. She asked Mikael whether he wished to remain in Canada. He said, after some hesitation, that he did. She asked whether he wished to be returned to his biological parents in Addis Ababa. He said, after a much longer hesitation, that they had asked him not to want this.

She thanked the family. She told them she would be in touch.

* * *

Eighteen months earlier, on the morning the agency had e-mailed them the boy's intake photograph, Tewelde and Selam Ghebremedhin had sat at their kitchen table in Calgary in silence for a quarter of an hour.

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They had been married twenty-two years. They had attempted, between them, three rounds of fertility treatment over the course of twelve. They had not, in any of those years, seriously considered international adoption. They had, six months before the agency's e-mail, received a brief letter from Daniel Tesfaye in Addis Ababa proposing, in language so oblique that they had at first not understood it, that they consider doing so.

They had not replied to the letter. They had not, after twenty-two years, known how.

The agency's e-mail had arrived three weeks later. They had understood, looking at the photograph, that Daniel had proceeded without their reply. He had referred them to the agency. He had supplied the agency with the family's name, address, and circumstances. He had instructed the agency to write.

The boy in the photograph had been, plainly to anyone with eyes, fifteen years old.

Selam had spoken first.

“He is asking us to take his son.”

“Yes.”

“He is asking us to commit a crime to do it.”

“Yes.”

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They had been silent for some time.

“Tewolde. Three vials of quinine. Twenty-two years.”

“Yes.”

“We owe him this.”

“Yes.”

They had replied to the agency that afternoon, accepting the placement. They had begun the home study process the following Monday. They had submitted, over the subsequent fourteen months, every document the agency had required. They had not, in any of the fourteen months, told a single other person what they were doing or why.

They had also not, in the fourteen months, ever asked Daniel Tesfaye what threat he believed his son to be in. They had assumed, without inquiring, that the threat was real. They had decided that asking would have been, in the circumstances, an insult.

* * *

Officer Tran filed her report eleven days later.

She did not recommend criminal charges against the Ghebremedhins.

She did not recommend the vacating of the adoption.

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She wrote, in a long and careful internal memo, that the boy on examination had clearly disclosed credible grounds for asylum on his own account — grounds related to his father’s refusal to falsify post-mortem records in connection with deaths in custody, which had subjected the immediate family to threats from Ethiopian state security personnel — and that a referral to the Refugee Protection Division for assessment as an unaccompanied minor making a refugee claim from within Canada was the appropriate course.

The boy’s subsequent refugee claim was accepted. He was, in due course, granted permanent residence in his own name as Mikael Tesfaye. He continued, with his consent and on the recommendation of the Calgary Children’s Aid Society, to live with the Ghebremedhins as their foster son.

Daniel Tesfaye was never identified, on the evidence ever placed before any court, as the orchestrator of the original fraud. The Hope Bridge International Adoption Service was investigated, suspended, and eventually prosecuted in Ethiopia, but the chain of intermediaries between the agency and Daniel was, by the time of the prosecution, sufficiently obscured that he could not be clearly named as a conspirator.

Officer Tran did not mention Daniel by name in her report.

She did, in a separate cover letter that she attached to her quarterly statistical summary, recommend that the Department reconsider the operation of the international adoption framework as it applied to

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children whose parents were under credible threat and whose only available pathway to Canadian protection ran, structurally, through fraud.

Her recommendation was, in due course, considered, set aside, and forgotten.

Her conduct on the file was reviewed by her supervisor, who found that she had acted with appropriate disclosure and entirely proper professional rigour throughout. The review was closed. No further action was taken.

* * *

On the evening of the day her supervisor closed the conduct review, Helen Tran drove to the long-term care facility in Bowness where her mother now lived.

She had not, in the eleven weeks of the investigation, mentioned the case to her mother. Her mother's dementia had progressed significantly during that period; conversations were brief, often confused, and rarely returned, in any reliable way, to events of the past.

Helen sat by the bed. Her mother was awake. She looked at Helen with the particular grave concentration that Helen had come, in the past year, to recognise as the look of a woman trying to retrieve a name.

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“Ma,” Helen said, in Vietnamese. “Do you remember the orderly who saved you in the camp? The Ethiopian boy who stole the medicine?”

Le Tran looked at her for some time.

“Daniel,” she said at last.

“Yes. Daniel.”

“He was a good boy.”

“Yes.”

Helen took her mother’s hand.

“Ma. I cannot tell you the details. But I want you to know that something happened, in my work, this autumn, that made me think of him. He has a son. The son is in Canada now. The son is safe.”

Le Tran looked at her daughter. Her eyes were, for a moment, entirely clear.

“Did you help the son?”

Helen hesitated.

“I helped, Ma. I do not know if I helped Daniel. I helped the son.”

Her mother nodded slowly.

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“That is enough,” she said. “The son is the one who needed the help. Daniel only ever needed the son to be safe.”

Le Tran closed her eyes. Within a minute she was asleep.

Helen sat by the bed for another hour. The room was quiet. The corridor outside was quiet. The Calgary winter, beyond the window, was its usual long blue dusk.

Eventually she stood, kissed her mother’s forehead, and walked out to her car.

On the drive home, she thought about a question she had not, in eleven weeks of investigation, allowed herself to consider clearly.

The question was whether she had taken on the file because she had been the officer randomly assigned to it, or whether she had quietly arranged — in some part of herself she did not normally consult — to become the officer to whom such a file would come.

She had been, six years earlier, the officer who had volunteered for the international-adoption portfolio when no one else had wanted it.

She had been, three years earlier, the officer who had requested the additional certification in Ethiopian-source-country procedure that had, in due course, made her the obvious choice for any complex Ethiopian file.

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She had been, the previous spring, the officer who had asked to be placed on the routine-audit rotation that had, six months later, surfaced the Ghebremedhin file.

She had not, at any point in those six years, ever expected the file to come.

She had not known the file was coming.

She had, however — in the small, patient, careful way in which her mother had taught her, over many years, to wait for opportunities to be useful — made certain, without ever quite admitting it to herself, that if such a file ever did come, it would come to her.

Helen Tran arrived home. She made dinner. She washed the dishes. She sat at the kitchen table and lit, for the first time in many years, a small pillar candle her mother had bought decades earlier on the occasion of her own first refugee anniversary in Canada, and had never lit.

The candle burned for six hours. When it had gone out, Helen scraped the wax into the bin, washed the small brass holder, dried it, and put it back in the cupboard.

Then she went to bed.

*

XII

The Translator

Madame Genevieve Lalonde had been a forensic auditor at the Office of the Auditor General of Canada for twenty-two years before her appointment to the Immigration and Refugee Board, and she did not believe in coincidence.

She did not believe, in particular, that a single court translator at the Montreal hearing centre should produce, across two thousand four hundred refugee hearings over sixteen years, an outcome distribution sixteen percentage points different from the Board's national norms in the same case categories.

On a Friday afternoon in March, she sat in her office on the seventh floor of the Complexe Guy-Favreau and read, for the third time, the consolidated outcomes report her assistant had spent the past month preparing.

The translator was a Mrs Soraya Najafi. Persian-English. Sixteen years on the IRB roster. Error-flagging rate of 0.4 per cent against a Board average of 2.7. The most reliable Persian translator the IRB had ever employed.

And yet:

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Iranian Christian convert claims, accepted at twenty-three points above national average. Baha'i claims, eighteen above. Women fleeing forced marriage, twenty-six above. IRGC political-persecution claims by professionals, accepted at the average. The same persecution claims by businessmen, eleven below. Claims involving alleged Iranian criminal prosecution for what looked, on the documents, to be ordinary economic crimes — fourteen below.

The pattern was not random. Patterns of this magnitude across this volume were not random.

Madame Lalonde closed the report. She walked to the window. She watched, for some minutes, the slow afternoon traffic on Rene-Levesque.

Then she returned to her desk, drafted a memorandum to the Director of Operations, and authorised the most expensive forensic translation audit the Board had ever commissioned.

* * *

Three independent Persian-English forensic translators. Forty randomly selected hearings from Mrs Najafi's sixteen-year record. Each hearing retranscribed in parallel from the original audio. Each retranscription compared against Mrs Najafi's recorded translation. Differences logged. Each difference assessed for direction and magnitude.

The audit took seven months.

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On a Wednesday evening in October, Madame Lalonde collected the report from her assistant's desk on her way out and took it home in her briefcase.

She read it at her dining-room table that evening. She made tea. She read it again.

The findings were not what she had expected.

She had expected to find, in Mrs Najafi's translations, the kind of distortions that a court translator on the take would produce — the kind that would have aligned with the bribery patterns Madame Lalonde had spent two decades exposing in other contexts. Inflated testimony for a price. Suppressed testimony for a different price.

She had not expected to find what the report described.

Mrs Najafi's translations contained systematic deviations. The deviations were small, in many cases almost imperceptible, and in every case linguistically defensible. But they were not random.

In the testimony of refugee claimants whose accounts the three forensic translators had — on hearing the original Persian — found credible but inarticulate, Mrs Najafi had consistently strengthened the testimony. She had supplied connective tissue. She had clarified ambiguous tenses. She had rendered hesitations as composure. In one case, a Christian convert's anguished and disordered description of her

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baptism had emerged in Mrs Najafi's English as a clear and chronological account that any Member would have found truthful.

In the testimony of claimants whose accounts the three translators had — on hearing the original Persian — found credible-sounding but rehearsed, Mrs Najafi had consistently weakened the testimony. She had preserved hesitations. She had rendered fluent passages as halting. In one case, a businessman's account of fleeing the IRGC had emerged in Mrs Najafi's English as a sequence of statements that any experienced Member would have classified as scripted.

In the remaining cases, she had translated faithfully.

The three translators agreed: across the forty hearings, Mrs Najafi had — in approximately a third of the cases — strengthened testimony she believed to be honest, and — in approximately a sixth — weakened testimony she believed to be coached.

Madame Lalonde finished the report at twenty past midnight.

She sat at her dining-room table for some further minutes.

Then she rose, went to her study, pulled the IRB's outcome data on the same forty hearings, and cross-checked it against the audit findings.

In thirty-seven of the forty cases, the IRB Member's decision had aligned with the assessment Mrs Najafi's translation had been designed to produce.

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Of the three cases in which it had not, two had been overturned on appeal in the direction Mrs Najafi's translation had originally suggested. The third — a businessman whose claim had been accepted despite Mrs Najafi's subtle weakening — had subsequently been linked to large-scale customs fraud in Belgium and was now the subject of an extradition request.

Mrs Najafi had been, on the underlying truth of refugee testimony, more reliably right than the IRB itself.

Madame Lalonde sat in her study, in the small hours of the morning, and understood, with the slow precise certainty of a forensic auditor, that her career was about to require her to fire one of the most quietly principled public servants she had ever encountered.

* * *

The Translator Standards Committee convened on the eighth of November.

Mrs Najafi was sixty-one. She was small, neatly dressed in a dark blue blouse and skirt, and wore on her wrist a thin gold bracelet that she rotated, slowly, as Madame Lalonde set out the findings.

She had brought no lawyer. She had brought a union representative who had, on the basis of the disclosed documents, advised her that her best available course was a quiet resignation. She had thanked him for his advice. She had not taken it.

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Madame Lalonde concluded her opening remarks. The Director of Operations and the Board's General Counsel sat to her right. The union representative sat beside Mrs Najafi.

“Mrs Najafi. We have given you several opportunities, in writing, to provide an explanation. You have not, to date, done so. I will ask you now, on the record, whether you wish to provide one.”

Mrs Najafi reached into the small leather bag at her feet. She placed on the table, between them, a black ledger book.

She did not open it.

“The book contains my own assessment of every hearing I have translated for the Board over sixteen years. Eight hundred and forty-seven assessments. Each entry records the file number, the claimant's name, the date of the hearing, and my judgement — made silently, in the room, on the basis of what I heard in the original Persian — as to whether the claimant's account was truthful, partially truthful, or fabricated.”

She slid the book across the table.

“You have audited forty hearings, Madame. The book contains eight hundred and forty-seven. I will give it to you. Cross-check it against the underlying truth of the cases as you can determine that truth from independent evidence. Then you will know what you are dealing with.”

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Madame Lalonde looked at the book.

“Mrs Najafi. Why?”

Mrs Najafi was silent for a moment. When she spoke, it was very quietly.

“In 2010, in my second year at the Board, I translated the hearing of a young woman from Shiraz. Her testimony was true. I rendered it mechanically. The Member found inconsistencies. The young woman was deported. Two months later, she was hanged in Tehran.”

Mrs Najafi did not look at anyone.

“I began the book that month.”

There was, for some time, no other sound in the conference room than the quiet hum of the building’s heating.

Madame Lalonde looked at the book on the table between them.

“Mrs Najafi. The Board, on the present evidence, has very limited options.”

“I am aware of that, Madame.”

* * *

Madame Lalonde took the book home that evening.

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She did not open it in the car. She did not open it at dinner. She opened it after her husband had gone to bed, at nine minutes past eleven, at her dining-room table, with a fresh pot of tea.

There were eight hundred and forty-seven entries. Each was three lines: a file number, a name, a date, and a single coded letter — T for truthful, P for partially truthful, F for fabricated.

She had, before sitting down, pulled the IRB's closed-file data on every one of the eight hundred and forty-seven cases.

She began, at the first entry, to verify.

Case 2009-MTR-04711. Claimant: Reza Ghiasvand. Mrs Najafi: T. IRB outcome: Accepted. Subsequent record: Mr Ghiasvand had become a Canadian citizen in 2017, was now an electrician in Laval, had no immigration concerns, and had been the subject of a private member's recognition in the National Assembly in 2019 for an act of bravery during a workplace fire. T was correct.

Case 2010-MTR-00891. Claimant: Maryam Aghdam. Mrs Najafi: T. IRB outcome: Refused. Subsequent record: Ms Aghdam had been deported to Tehran in October 2010 and had been hanged in November of the same year. T was correct. The IRB had been wrong.

Case 2011-MTR-13302. Claimant: Hassan Sabzevari. Mrs Najafi: F. IRB outcome: Accepted. Subsequent record: Mr Sabzevari had been arrested by the RCMP in 2014 in connection with an Iranian-state-linked

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attempt to procure dual-use technology, and had subsequently been deported as a security risk. F was correct. The IRB had been wrong.

Madame Lalonde verified for four hours and twenty minutes.

At three twenty-six in the morning, she reached the eight hundred and forty-seventh entry and closed the book.

She made a fresh pot of tea, which she did not drink.

Then she opened a notebook of her own and tabulated.

Of Mrs Najafi's eight hundred and forty-seven assessments, eight hundred and twenty-six aligned with what could be independently verified about the underlying truth of the cases.

Of the twenty-one in which Mrs Najafi's judgement had differed from the IRB's subsequent finding of fact, fourteen had been overturned on appeal in Mrs Najafi's direction. Five had been deported back to Iran and had subsequently been confirmed, through diplomatic and consular channels, to have been imprisoned, hanged, or made to disappear. Two had been businessmen who had subsequently been linked to large-scale economic crimes in third countries.

Mrs Najafi's error rate, on the underlying truth, was zero.

Madame Lalonde sat at her dining-room table as the dawn came up over Westmount.

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She had taken an oath, when she had joined the Auditor General's office in 1994, to administer the systems she audited as those systems had been designed to be administered. She had taken a similar oath when she had joined the Board. She had administered the systems she had audited, in three decades of public service, with a fidelity that had cost her, at various points, friendships, promotions, and the regard of every minister she had ever briefed.

The system she now administered did not provide for what Mrs Najafi had done. The system would, in principle, prefer to be wrong by its own rules than right by hers. The system would, on the present evidence, require Madame Lalonde to fire her, to seal the book, and to ensure that nothing in the public record acknowledged what Mrs Najafi had been.

Madame Lalonde understood, with the precision that thirty years of audits had given her, that the system was wrong.

She also understood that she had no power to alter it from her position. That to attempt to do so would be to abandon the only post from which she had any chance of doing useful work in the years remaining to her.

She drafted, that morning, the recommendation for Mrs Najafi's termination.

She submitted it at nine.

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* * *

Mrs Najafi's accreditation was terminated on the third of December.

The General Counsel had advised, in a long memorandum, against criminal prosecution. The case would have required the Crown to call as witnesses three forensic translators who would have testified, under oath, that Mrs Najafi's renderings were in every individual instance linguistically defensible. The Crown would then have had to persuade a jury that a translator who had — on the underlying truth of the cases — been right ninety-six per cent of the time should be convicted of obstructing the IRB on the grounds that her ninety-six per cent had been achieved through the wrong means.

The General Counsel did not advise that the Crown could win such a prosecution.

The book was retained, on his strict instruction, in a sealed file in the Board's archive. It was not, in any internal communication, ever referred to by name.

Mrs Najafi declined a quiet pension settlement. She accepted a notation on her file that recorded her termination on grounds of professional misconduct — a notation that would have to suffice, she observed mildly to her union representative on the morning she signed it, as the only formal acknowledgement, ever, of the work she had done.

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She returned to her apartment in Outremont. She continued, on Tuesday evenings, to attend the Iranian community choir at the cultural centre on Cote-des-Neiges.

* * *

Madame Lalonde retired from the Board four years later. She did not, in those four years, make any further statement about the Najafi matter.

In her retirement she took up the project of writing a memoir. The memoir was never published. It survived only in a single bound copy that she gave, on her seventy-fifth birthday, to her granddaughter, who was reading law at McGill.

The chapter on Mrs Najafi was titled

On Being Right for the Wrong Reasons.

It contained a passage that the granddaughter, reading the chapter for the second time on a winter evening in her grandmother's old apartment, would mark in pencil and return to many times over the years.

I terminated her because I had to. I had taken an oath to administer the system as it was, not as I would have designed it. I administered the system. I would do so again.

What I did not put in the report was that I had verified her ledger, in the small hours of the morning of the day I drafted her termination, against the closed-file data

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on every one of the eight hundred and forty-seven cases. Her error rate, against the underlying truth, was zero. Mine, on the cases the IRB had decided, was twenty-one in eight hundred and forty-seven.

I have wondered, since, why she gave me the ledger. She had no obligation to. She could have walked into the meeting with nothing, accepted her termination, and let her sixteen years end in silence. Instead she handed me the most damning private document a public servant could have kept, knowing I would read it, knowing I would verify it, knowing I would understand.

I have come, very slowly, to understand why.

She gave me the ledger because she required, before she could rest, that one other public servant in Canada know what she had done. She required that the knowledge exist somewhere in the system, even if not in any file the system itself would acknowledge. She required a witness.

I was the witness she chose. I have been her witness now for fifteen years. I will be her witness, in this memoir, for as long as anyone reads it.

If you are reading this, my dear, then I have managed to pass the post on to you. You will be her witness now. You will, I hope, in due course pass it on again.

The granddaughter read the passage on a Sunday evening in February. She closed the memoir and sat for a long time with it on her lap.

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The next morning, before she left for her articling office on Sherbrooke Street, she walked the three blocks to the small bakery on Avenue Bernard, where the woman behind the counter — small, neatly dressed, with a thin gold bracelet on her wrist — had been serving her grandmother's croissants every Saturday morning for the past nine years.

She bought a croissant. She did not, that morning, say anything beyond what the transaction required.

But she looked, with some attention, at the small woman behind the counter.

And the small woman behind the counter, who had once on a Tuesday evening in November sat in a conference room and given her ledger to a forensic auditor for whom she had developed, in the years afterwards, a quiet respect, looked back.

*

XIII

The Citizenship Judge

Mr Vinod Khanna had been frightened of the same thing every morning for eleven years.

He woke at five forty-five. He made tea. He sat at his kitchen table in Brampton and watched the small encrypted-messaging application on his phone.

Between six and six fifteen, the message would come. It contained twenty answers — the answers, in order, to that morning's Canadian citizenship test. Mr Khanna would copy them onto a slip of paper, fold the slip into the breast pocket of his jacket, and drive to his office on Queen Street West.

There he would distribute the slips to the elderly clients who had paid him twelve hundred dollars each for the guaranteed pass on which his entire enterprise rested.

Most of his clients did not speak enough English to read the citizenship study guide. Some did not speak enough English to understand his slips. He would, in those cases, write the answers in Punjabi or Mandarin or Tagalog beside the English original.

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In nineteen years of his Citizenship Test Preparation Specialist business, he had taken on three thousand four hundred and seventeen clients.

Three thousand four hundred and seventeen of them had passed.

It was a remarkable record. It was also the source of his fear.

Mr Khanna was frightened, every morning, that the message would not come. He was frightened that the encrypted channel would be silent. He was frightened that the woman at the other end of the channel — a Citizenship Judge in Ottawa whose face he had never seen, whose voice he had never heard, whom he knew only as

the Judge — had been arrested in the night, or had changed her mind, or had died, or had decided that eleven years was long enough for a private kindness that paid her two hundred dollars a client and put her at risk of seven years in prison.

Each morning, between six and six fifteen, the message came.

Each morning, Mr Khanna's fear receded for another twenty-four hours.

Until the morning of the fourteenth of October.

* * *

On the fourteenth of October, the message did not come at six.

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Mr Khanna sat at his kitchen table watching the application. At six fifteen, no message. At six twenty, no message. At six twenty-five, he switched the phone off and on again, in case the issue was technical. At six thirty, he opened a second messaging application on a different phone he kept for personal use, and looked at the news.

There was no story about the arrest of a Citizenship Judge. There was no story about a Citizenship Canada leak. There was nothing.

At six forty, Mr Khanna stood up, paced his kitchen, and tried to think.

His test session that morning was at nine. He had eleven elderly clients booked. They had paid him — most of them in cash, in instalments — a total of thirteen thousand two hundred dollars over the previous nine months. They had spent the past three weeks in his office working through the practice questions he kept on a clipboard. They were, in the conventional sense, prepared. But not one of them, on his honest assessment, would pass the test on his preparation alone.

They expected slips.

At seven o'clock, his phone vibrated. He fumbled at it. The message was from the encrypted channel.

It read, in its entirety:

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Cancel today. Apologies. Tell clients there is a printer problem at the test centre. Reschedule one week.

Mr Khanna read the message three times. The Judge had never, in eleven years, sent a message that was not the answers.

She had never, in eleven years, asked him to do anything.

He sat at his kitchen table for some time.

Then, because he could think of no alternative course, he telephoned each of the eleven clients in turn and explained, in the appropriate language, that the test centre was experiencing technical difficulties and that the test had been rescheduled to the following Wednesday.

None of the eleven clients questioned him. They were, almost all of them, Mr Khanna's parents' generation. They had grown up in places where official explanations for inconveniences were accepted without question. They thanked him. They said they would see him on Wednesday.

Mr Khanna did not go to his office that day. He sat in his kitchen, and he watched the encrypted application, and he waited.

No further message came.

* * *

On the morning of the twenty-first of October, the rescheduled test day, the message came at six oh four.

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It contained the answers to that morning's test.

Mr Khanna copied them onto eleven slips of paper, folded the slips into the breast pocket of his jacket, drove to his office, distributed them, and watched all eleven of his elderly clients pass the citizenship test.

He did not, in the days that followed, hear anything further from the Judge.

He told himself, after a week, that the matter had been a one-off operational disruption. He told himself, after two weeks, that he had imagined the strangeness. He told himself, after three weeks, that there was no point dwelling on it. He had been doing this for eleven years. He would continue doing it. He had two children in private school in Mississauga and a wife who had just begun a yoga business in Brampton, and the alternative was a life he was not now equipped to live.

On a Wednesday morning in November, two officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, accompanied by a senior investigator from the Citizenship Canada Integrity Branch, arrived at his office on Queen Street West with a search warrant.

They seized his computer, his phone, his client files, and — from a small safe in the back room — a black USB drive on which Mr Khanna had backed up, with foolish completeness, every encrypted message he had ever received from the Judge over eleven years.

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Mr Khanna did not resist. He had been waiting, in some part of himself, for the morning when the message would not come.

This was that morning.

* * *

Mr Khanna was taken to the RCMP's Brampton detachment. He was interviewed for six hours. By the third hour, he had decided to cooperate.

He gave the investigators every detail. The encryption protocol. The cryptocurrency wallet addresses. The schedule of payments. The eleven years of operational discipline. The morning of the fourteenth of October when the message had not come.

He did not, in any of the six hours, succeed in giving them the identity of the Judge. He did not know it. He had never known it.

The senior investigator was a woman in her late forties named Lieutenant Madeleine Cote. She listened with patient courtesy. At the end of the interview, after Mr Khanna's lawyer had arrived and after the formal statement had been signed, she said:

“Mr Khanna. Before we conclude, I would like to bring forward a witness. She has been our principal informant in this matter for some time. I believe you may find her testimony of interest.”

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Mr Khanna had, in the six hours of interview, prepared himself for the disclosure of his betrayer.

He had assumed, on reflection, that the betrayer must have been one of his clients — perhaps an elderly Punjabi gentleman whose son had questioned the slip, or perhaps a Filipino woman whose daughter, working at a bank, had noticed something irregular in her mother's transactions. He had, in his head, run through the candidates.

Lieutenant Cote rose, walked to the door, and opened it.

A woman of about sixty entered the room. She was carrying a small leather portfolio. She wore, on a chain around her neck, the gold Citizenship Judge medallion that had been issued to her on her appointment in 2009.

Mr Khanna had, in his eleven years, never seen her face.

He looked at her now.

He looked at her for some seconds, and then — because the realisation was not the kind a man could fully arrive at all at once — he looked at Lieutenant Cote.

Lieutenant Cote nodded, very slightly.

“Mrs Krishnan,” she said. “Would you mind formally introducing yourself to Mr Khanna.”

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“Certainly. Mr Khanna, my name is Lakshmi Krishnan. I have been a Citizenship Judge of Canada since 2009. I have been working with Lieutenant Cote and her colleagues at the RCMP since 2014.”

Mr Khanna sat very still.

“2014,” he said at last.

“2014.”

* * *

Lieutenant Cote took up the explanation.

“In 2014, Mr Khanna, Citizenship Canada’s Integrity Branch identified that test answers were being leaked from somewhere within the Ottawa headquarters. Conventional surveillance had not, over a period of eighteen months, narrowed the field. The Judge, as your contact, was a fiction we constructed.”

“The relative-by-marriage who introduced you to me was, in fact, an undercover operator. The encrypted channel was monitored throughout. The cryptocurrency payments were tracked, in every instance, to wallets the Bureau had established to receive them, and the funds in those wallets have been preserved as evidence.”

“The answers Mrs Krishnan transmitted to you each test morning over the past eleven years were the genuine answers to the test that was about to be administered. We considered, at length, whether to transmit

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incorrect answers. We concluded that to allow elderly applicants who were in most cases entirely innocent of the underlying scheme to fail the test would be both cruel and counter-productive. The applicants are not the targets of this investigation, Mr Khanna. You are.”

Mr Khanna sat very still.

“The morning of the fourteenth of October,” he said slowly. “You cancelled the message because you were ready to arrest me.”

“We were preparing the search warrants. We could not afford another test day to pass before the seizure. We sent the cancellation message to give you a small operational disruption — just enough that you would not, on the day of the actual seizure, have any reason to expect that the channel was about to fail. Your nervous behaviour over the days that followed was, I am afraid, recorded by us in some detail.”

“You allowed,” he said slowly, “four thousand six hundred and seventy-seven people to acquire Canadian citizenship by cheating.”

“We allowed four thousand six hundred and seventy-seven elderly people, the great majority of whom would have passed any test administered in a language they understood, to acquire the citizenship to which they were in substance entitled.”

“And in exchange you have me.”

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“We have you, Mr Khanna. We have eleven years of evidence. We have your USB drive, which I cannot quite believe you actually kept. The Crown will, I anticipate, seek a custodial sentence in the range of seven to nine years.”

* * *

Mr Khanna pleaded guilty in the Brampton courthouse on a Friday in March.

He was sentenced to seven years in a federal institution.

The Crown did not, in the sentencing submissions, mention the controlled-source operation. The defence, who had been told nothing of it by either the Crown or Mr Khanna, did not mention it either. The presiding judge accepted the Crown’s position that the case had been broken by an alert citizenship officer who had noticed an anomalous pattern in test results. He commended the officer in his sentencing remarks. The officer was not named.

Mrs Lakshmi Krishnan continued in her duties as a Citizenship Judge for a further three years before her retirement. She received, on her retirement, a Public Service Award of Excellence in a small private ceremony attended by the Director of Citizenship Canada, the Deputy Commissioner of the RCMP, and her daughter.

She did not, in her remaining years, ever speak publicly about the case.

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* * *

On the evening of Mr Khanna's sentencing, Lieutenant Madeleine Cote drove home from the Brampton courthouse, made herself a cup of coffee, and opened the operational binder that contained the eleven-year case file.

She turned to the inside back cover, on which she had, on the morning of the seizure, made a single notation in pencil. The notation was the only line in the entire binder that had never been seen by another officer.

Krishnan, Lakshmi. 2009–2014: 17 wrongful citizenships sold. 2014–2025: 4,677 substantively rightful citizenships, 1 prosecution of operator, 1 conviction. Net contribution to citizenship integrity: positive. Recommend no further action.

Lieutenant Cote read the notation. Then, in the same pencil, she added a second line beneath it.

She does not know.

She closed the binder, locked it in her office safe, and went to bed.

Mrs Lakshmi Krishnan, who had spent eleven years sitting in her chambers in Ottawa receiving question-pool selections at six o'clock in the morning and forwarding them to a Brampton fraudster on Lieutenant Cote's instruction, had not known — at any point in those eleven years, did not know on the morning of Mr Khanna's arrest, did not know on the day of his sentencing, did not know on the evening of

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her own retirement ceremony — that her cooperation with the RCMP had not, in fact, been recruited because of her record of integrity.

It had been recruited because Lieutenant Cote, in 2013, had been investigating an unrelated matter — the alleged misuse of citizenship-judge discretion in connection with certain irregularities in the residency calculations of seventeen high-net-worth applicants whose citizenships had been granted between 2009 and 2013 by Mrs Krishnan in exchange for offshore payments aggregating approximately one million two hundred thousand Canadian dollars.

Lieutenant Cote had identified the pattern through a forensic-accounting trail. She had built a complete case in nine months. She had then, in March of 2014, sat down with Mrs Krishnan in a conference room at the RCMP's O Division and had presented her with a choice.

The choice had been: a quiet prosecution, the loss of her appointment, the loss of her pension, and a likely custodial sentence — or, in the alternative, the assumption of a long-term role as a controlled source in a different and more significant investigation.

Mrs Krishnan had chosen the alternative.

The eleven-year operation against Mr Khanna had been, in its entirety, the price.

Lieutenant Cote had concluded, at the outset, that an operation of this magnitude — with this level of unbroken cooperation, this

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discipline, this duration — would produce, on the public record, a corruption case that materially advanced the integrity of the Canadian citizenship system. It had. It had also produced, in the private record of Lieutenant Cote's pencil notation, the full account of an extraordinary moral arithmetic that no other officer would ever see.

Mrs Krishnan, throughout the eleven years, had assumed she had been recruited because the RCMP had identified her as a person of integrity well placed to assist.

Lieutenant Cote had let her think so. It had been, in her judgement, the best operational disposition available. A controlled source who believed she was helping willingly performed her role, over many years, more reliably than one who believed she had been blackmailed into it.

Lieutenant Cote retired the year after Mrs Krishnan. The binder remained in her office safe, which passed in due course to her successor, who passed it to his successor, who placed it in the sealed archive of O Division under the standing fifty-year non-disclosure protocol.

By the time the binder may legally be opened, all the participants in the case — the Citizenship Judge, the Lieutenant, the Brampton fraudster, the four thousand six hundred and seventy-seven elderly Canadians, and Lieutenant Cote's pencil — will have died.

The notation will remain. It will be, when at last someone reads it, the only complete account of the case.

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Whoever reads it will then have to decide what justice in such a case is taken to mean, and whether the right answer can ever, in any system, be the one nobody is permitted to write down.

*

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