

"She wanted out of this skin, out of this life and into another, one that fit her, not one that she had to fit."

The Spaces Between Stars

by Geeta Kothari

WATCHING THE FISH SQUIRM IN EVAN'S GLOVED HANDS, Maya was transfixed by the fish's suffering. It had stopped moving for a second, but now it was struggling, its tail flapping back and forth, as it twisted for freedom, unaware that the hook lodged deep in its gut wouldn't let go.

"It's dying," she said. "We should have pushed down the barbs like that woman in the store told us to."

Evan grunted and peered inside the fish's mouth.

"I know what I'm doing."

Maya knew he was determined to give her a genuine, all-American fishing trip, the kind he used to go on when he was a boy outdoors, and she was a girl indoors, watching TV. Long before Evan, there had been a boy on TV, a boy with long lanky hair that hung across one eye. He had flicked it back impatiently as he baited the hook, explaining to the camera that the "crick" was his favourite place. She remembered that word "crick" because some of the kids at school said it, kids who were unaware of her but whom she observed from a distance.

The small sunfish, a swath of green and gold, glistened in Evan's hand. The sun beat down on the top of Maya's head, searing her scalp. She felt dizzy and a wave of sadness passed over her as she stared at the helpless fish.

"It's dying."

Evan gently placed the sunfish in the water and cut the line. It swam off, seemingly recovered from its near-death experience.

To cook the fish he had caught, the boy on TV dug up some fresh clay, patted it into two flat rounds, stuck the fish between them and

baked it in the flames of his campfire. In her dreams, Maya would camp by that "crick," fish and swim in it and sleep in a tent under the stars. How she would see the stars above her head while sleeping in a tent, she wasn't sure, but even in her fantasy life, she could not see herself sleeping without shelter.

Maya climbed back into the boat. Her line had been cut, and her mission had been achieved. She proved herself able to catch a fish, and now she wanted to go home. She handed Evan a turkey sandwich and looked over the side of the boat. Her fish, red at the gills, eyes bulging, floated towards them.

"Look," she said. "It died anyway."

Evan shrugged. "It was just a sunfish. They're everywhere."

Her guilt pressed against her temples, tightening like a vice around her head. Still she said nothing. She'd been the one who not only agreed but had been excited about going fishing. It had been one of the many activities forbidden to her during childhood. The expedition should have made her feel closer to Evan. Instead, Maya felt as if the parched brown hills surrounding the lake had sprung up between them. The inside of her skin itched, and she wanted to jump out of it, leave behind her body and the pervasive smell of dead fish.

She watched Evan eat his sandwich, oblivious to her inner turmoil as he basked in the sun. He was like that boy on TV. He was resourceful, knew how to do things that were beyond her realm of experience. He could pitch a tent, start a campfire, handle raw meat without feeling sick, open the hood of a car and see things. He could talk to strangers and get his way. Evan assumed he had the right number until told otherwise; he assumed cooperation and satisfaction, even when talking to the phone company about a bill. Making calls from one of her temporary jobs, Maya would begin her sentences with "I'm not sure ..." and end them breathless, gasping for air, as she struggled to find the right words. Eventually, passed from one person to the next, trying to make herself understood, she would give up and leave the task for the next day. What looked like procrastination was something she couldn't begin to explain.

She had wanted to be that boy on TV, but what such boys were seemed hereditary, increasingly out of reach and unattainable. Instead, she forced herself through college and one dismal semester of graduate school. And then she married Evan.

They got home late in the afternoon, just as the thunder started rolling in. Evan shut himself in his study while Maya napped. The heat, the death of the fish, had exhausted her leaving her empty and dry inside.

Later, she made dinner, though she had no appetite or enthusiasm for the aloo gobi¹ and dal.² Nothing smelled or tasted right; the potatoes and cauliflower were mushy and the dal was limp and tasteless. Her shoulders felt sore from the sun, and the smell of blood lingered on her fingers. She felt dirty, stained by the death of the sunfish. She rubbed her fingers with lemon juice until her cuticles burned, and still they smelled.

Evan padded into the kitchen, his blond hair sticking up as if he'd been sleeping and pulled a beer out of the refrigerator.

"Indian food. What's the occasion?" He leaned against the counter and stretched his legs across the narrow passage. Everything about him was long, lean and graceful. Next to him, she felt like a clumsy baby elephant—small, dark, and always in his shadow.

"None. Should there be?"

"You never make it, that's all."

"That's because I can't." Her voice got tighter and she felt a rush of anger, making her face hotter above the steaming pots.

But Evan would not be drawn into a fight. "Don't forget, my folks are coming next week. And they want an answer about the trip."

Maya's stomach dropped. She'd forgotten both the ski trip at Christmas and the Everetts' impending visit.

Fortunately, the Everetts would stay with friends, as they always did. Though they'd never said anything, Maya sensed that she didn't keep house up to their standards. The brass incense holder, the small footstool inlaid with ivory, the embroidered mirror-work cushions, and the orange and red batik wall hangings had been passed on to her by her aunt, Shyamma. They seemed to go well with the reupholstered couch and chair from Evan's parents, but she was sure they didn't find the same comfort in this mixed decor.

Maya checked the cumin-flavoured rice. When she looked up, she noticed that Evan was still in the room, watching her as she moved from stove to sink, counter to kitchen table. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine." He was the psychologist, she thought. Let him figure it out.

"Really?" He came over and kissed the back of her neck while she fluffed the rice. The individual grains had lost their definition and clung together, exactly what the recipe warned against.

"Allergies," she said, shrugging him off. Her long dark hair was coming out of its elastic band, sticking to the back of her sweaty neck.

¹aloo gobi: a vegetable curry, mainly of cauliflower and potatoes

²dal: a dish containing lentils

His lips against her skin reminded her of the fish, gasping for breath. She couldn't tell him. She couldn't admit her failure of will, of heart, in the great American outdoors. It was simply beyond her, to find the words for this thing she couldn't understand.

After dinner, Shyamma called.

First, she complained about the weather.

"Yesterday, I forgot to drink even one glass of water. Can you imagine? I nearly fainted in the kitchen."

"You have to pay attention, auntie." Maya could not call her Shyamma, the way Evan did, not out loud, even though Shyamma had told her to. "The heat isn't your friend, just because you don't like the cold."

Three, four times a week, Shyamma would call with a muted crisis or a question that needed an immediate response. A response, not an answer, Maya finally understood, and she listened, for Shyamma was the only family she had.

"And how is that husband of yours?"

"Fine. He's nearly finished." Evan was working on his dissertation, and it gave Shyamma great pleasure to finally have a PhD in the family. Evan's success made up nicely for the brilliant failure of Maya's academic career.

Maya wondered what Shyamma would say about her aborted conversion into a fisherwoman and her complicity in the death of the sunfish. What was okay for an Everett might be unacceptable for a Sohni. Shyamma was still a vegetarian. She prayed to her blue-faced gods and goddesses,³ and every day at sunset, burnt sweetgrass and sage on a small piece of charcoal, carrying it reverently from room to room in the small house Maya had grown up in.

Shyamma asked about the Everetts, their two daughters, and everyone else under the Everett sun.

"Such a nice family." She sighed.

"Because they invite you to their stupid Christmas party?" Maya chewed a hangnail, enjoying the sharp pain that ran through her finger.

"Yes. And they always send me cards—Halloween, Easter, Christmas."

Holidays Shyamma used to dismiss as "Christian" or "American," having nothing to do with them. Not even a Christmas tree, Maya thought, and now she eats cookies shaped like Santa Claus and sings

³**blue-faced gods and goddesses:** Hindu deities such as Vishnu and Shiva are sometimes depicted with blue faces and skin.

"Away in the Manger" without hesitation. After five years, she knew the words by heart, just like everyone else at the party.

"And so," Shyamma finally said, "How are you?"

"Fine. We went fishing today."

"That's nice, bacchi."⁴ Maya listened to the pots and pan clattering in the background. She doubted her aunt had heard her. Their conversation was over.

Shyamma had raised Maya alone, after her parents were killed in a plane crash. Rather than send Maya back to live with her paternal grandparents, Shyamma insisted on keeping her in the States. She herself didn't want to go back to India and marry the demented distant cousin her father had found for her.

"Understand," Shyamma once said, "I had a fellowship, and I was finally free. And I was afraid if I sent you to your father's people, we'd never see you."

They had been lonely in Erie. They knew no other Indian families with children. Most of Shyamma's friends were single women who worked full-time. She seemed not to miss her family whom they saw on rare visits to Delhi. Now, though, her loneliness had caught up with her. Maya heard it in the phone calls, the unasked "When are you next coming up?" During those cold, dreary winters, when the wind blew hard off the lake and kept them inside, Shyamma would tell Maya what a great life they had, how easy it was to be American, how good this country had been to her. But for Maya, growing up in a strict vegetarian household in Erie during the sixties was not fun. Her aunt, Shyamma, banned Oreos because they were made with lard. At barbecues and school picnics, Maya hid her plate, heavy with potato salad, corn on the cob, coleslaw and an empty hot dog bun. Shyamma saw to it that Maya ate nutritionally sound meals, overlooking the conflict between this and Maya's sole desire: to be like everyone else and not like her aunt, who still lived in the culture she'd left over thirty years ago.

On their last trip to Erie, Maya and Evan had found Shyamma chilled and sick with the flu. She had hid it from them, she said, because she was afraid they wouldn't come up. The walk at Presque Isle, promised to Evan, was put off; it was too cold, even if they were healthy, Shyamma insisted. They spent the whole weekend indoors. Evan paced the small living room and stared out the window the way Maya used to when she was a child. Shyamma lay on the couch,

⁴bacchi: girl, daughter

reading magazines and marking all the things she would someday buy, when she had enough money. Her salary from the hospital was never quite enough; she was a woman with foreign syntax and got paid less than any man in the same position.

Such was Shyamma's freedom.

Later, in bed, Evan asked Maya again about the ski trip. His parents wanted to take them to Banff at Christmas, where a friend of theirs would let them stay for free.

"I don't think so."

Evan sat up and looked at her. Maya kept her eyes focussed on her book and remained slouched against the headboard.

"You always said you wanted—"

"I'm too old. Why don't you go without me?"

Evan ran his hand through his hair. He looked at her for a minute and then got out of bed.

"Fine. You figure out a way to tell my parents why you're not coming."

Evan, Maya had learned a long time ago, was uninterested in confrontation, in talking things through. He left the room and she heard him go into his study. He would work for the next few hours, slip into bed after she'd fallen asleep, and dream through the conflict. The next morning, he'd act as if nothing had been said, and by evening he'd be asking her the same question again. And if she did not give him the answer he wanted, the whole scene would repeat itself, day after day, until one of them—usually Maya—gave in.

She woke up early the next morning. Next to her, Evan slept soundly. Maya pushed his thin hair off his face and traced the outline of his ear, half willing him to wake up. He turned over to his other side, pulling the sheet with him. When she slid out of bed, he didn't move.

Down in the kitchen, watching the sky get lighter over the river, she smelled it, the dead fish smell. She sniffed the carton of cream, her fingers, the tail of her long braid. She opened the refrigerator, scanning the shelves for any forgotten beans, unwrapped meat or cheese. She pulled open the vegetable bin, checking for wilted broccoli, mushy tomatoes and soggy lettuce. She threw out some mouldy cottage cheese and a dried-up piece of fudge cake.

Maya's feet stuck to the kitchen floor as she scrubbed the cabinet doors.

"You are so ungrateful," Shyamma used to say, when Maya was sixteen and came home at two in the morning, smelling of alcohol and back seat sex.

Maya shrugged. It didn't matter what she did, Shyamma would be there. They were family, blood in a world of strangers. Like fish, they swam in the same school, a school of two, but a school nonetheless, dodging predators, careful of false bait.

Maya had finally bitten. Life with Evan was too tempting, an easy guarantee that she would not end up like Shyamma. But the ski trip weighed on her, pulling her in a direction she wasn't sure she wanted to go. Evan's parents had welcomed her as easily as they welcomed Shyamma; now she wished for a little resistance—a disapproving arched eyebrow or a look of confusion when they saw her living room, would have been good. Instead, Pat had smiled into the tiny mirrors, and Evi nodded as he eased himself in his old chair. She and Shyamma had done everything to make themselves acceptable, so why should the mixed decor worry the Everetts?

Maya brushed her teeth until her gums bled and the brush hurt her cheek. Once on a bus she saw a man scratching his arms with a steel pick comb, running it up and down his forearm, until the skin was raised in thin red welts and looked ready to burst.

"Heroin addict," Shyamma said, after the man stumbled off the bus.

"How do you know?"

"When they need a fix, they itch so bad, they want to jump out of their skin. That was him."

Looking at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, Maya felt the same way. She wanted to be out of this skin, out of this life and into another, one that fit her, not one that she had to fit.

That night, when Evan asked again, Maya said, "I don't want to go."

She lay in bed, flat on her back. Light from the house next door cut through the open blinds, striping the rumpled cotton sheets. She stared at the ceiling, searching for the fluorescent stars Evan had pasted on it when they first moved in.

Evan rolled over on his side, facing her. "If it's the money—"

"It's not the money."

"Then what is it?"

Maya flopped over, turning her back to him. "When I was a kid, all I ever wanted was to go on our school ski trips. Every year they had one, and all the cool people went. Those who couldn't afford it did cross-country on their own. Shyamma wouldn't even let me do that. When I said she didn't trust me to take care of myself, she said it was the cold—too cold for me. She really meant it was too cold for her."

"So here's your chance," Evan said.

"I don't care anymore. I can't do it."

"You won't even try."

She turned to face him. In the dark, she couldn't read his expression, but she resisted the urge to turn the light on.

"Why is it so important that I ski?"

Evan sighed. "You're part of the family."

"Ralph doesn't ski. He's still part of the family isn't he?" Evan's older brother-in-law refused to put on skis for political and economic reasons that the entire family teased him about.

"He's just scared."

"So? I bet Anne isn't forcing him to go to Banff."

"Jesus." Evan punched his pillow. "You're the one who wanted to go fishing, you wanted to ski, and now you're blaming me." He left the room, slamming the door behind him, and then slamming his study door as well.

Maybe she was scared. What if she couldn't really be an Everett? She was still horrified by her participation in the death of another creature. It was all very well to kill a fish on television or buy it at the store, nicely cleaned and filleted, but this—this was the beginning of a cycle she'd never be able to escape.

But what was the alternative? Maya lay on her back. On the ceiling, the stars glowed. There was the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, Orion, the archer. Evan had followed the instructions so precisely, the whole sky filled their ceiling. When she initially suggested it, she'd thought of scattering them where she pleased. While she was out one day, Evan put them up, arranging each and every one just so.

When she showed her surprise, he frowned and said, "But that's how they're supposed to be. Every star in its place."

And where was hers? She had thought with Evan she would find it. But only if she forgot where she'd been before, and now she found that forgetting incomplete.

The next morning, Maya woke up at dawn and was on the road before the sun had completely risen. She didn't want to give herself the chance to change her mind and seeing Evan would have done that. She drove north on 79, past Mars, Moon Township, and the shrine in the median at Zelenople. A marker for someone who had died on the road, the small fir tree was decorated for July 4—red, white, and blue tinsel draped over it and an American flag languidly moving in the slipstream of the big trucks that roared by. At Easter, pastel-coloured plastic eggs hung from its branches, and at Christmas someone garnished it with bright ornaments, including a gold angel for the top. She'd seen similar shrines on the Mass Pike and the New Jersey Turnpike, so unusual

they'd caught her eye.

By the time she pulled into Shyamma's neat little driveway, with the marigolds lined up on either side, it was well past eight o'clock. She knew that Shyamma would be in the kitchen. Maybe she could talk her into making some masala chai,⁵ something to wash her mouth of the terrible McDonald's coffee she'd had an hour ago.

Shyamma didn't look up from the counter where she was rolling out some dough.

"Evan called. He wants to know if you'll be home for dinner."

Her tone was accusing, on Evan's behalf.

"I left him a note."

Shyamma tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Her hair was still black and shiny, a testament to the coconut oil she used regularly and rigorous brushing. Her small brown face was slack at the jaw and under the chin, but her cheeks were high and firm, turning into small apples when she smiled. She had a sweet smile, Evan said, like Maya. But neither of them was smiling now.

"Paratha?"⁶

"Stuffed kulcha."⁷ Shyamma kept rolling the small rounds of springy dough.

"For breakfast?" Maya was used to seeing the stuffed bread on special occasions only.

"No one here to tell me I can't."

She put the water to boil, in a saucepan, Maya noticed with relief. If Shyamma was making masala chai, Maya was not in that much trouble.

"I killed a fish." The words sounded terrible out loud, damning, yet she understood in that moment why criminals often confessed. A fleeting lightness lifted in her as she waited for her aunt's absolution.

"Did you eat it?"

"No." What did her aunt think she was? "I tried to save its life."

Shyamma added two teaspoons of tea to the boiling water and some milk. She let it boil vigorously, like the chai-wallahs⁸ back home did, in huge pots on single burners.

"Sounds like a contradiction."

"It was an accident."

They ate in silence, at the same formica-topped table Shyamma had bought twenty years ago at a yard sale. The kulcha was slightly burnt, crispy at the edges and soft in the middle. Maya couldn't remember

⁵masala chai: a hot, spiced, milky tea

⁶Paratha: a flaky, fried bread, sometimes mixed or stuffed with other ingredients

⁷kulcha: a flatbread, sometimes stuffed with other ingredients

⁸chai-wallahs: roadside tea merchants

when it had tasted so good. "You don't have to come here every time you want a stuffed kulcha."

Shyamma cleared the dishes as she spoke. Maya had the impression she was going somewhere, that she didn't want her to stay.

"I know." She had the recipe, carefully pasted into a notebook with a number of other recipes Shyamma had insisted on showing her. At the time, she'd resisted; it seemed unnecessary, going back to a time when girls were prepared for marriage. Now she understood Shyamma had not been preparing her for anyone but herself.

As it turned out, Shyamma did have plans. She was going to a friend's house to discuss their Christmas vacation, a cruise somewhere warm and tropical. Maya hid her surprise; the only holidays her aunt had ever taken were their trips to India. Not wanting to even slightly dissuade her, Maya said nothing. She took the leftover kulcha and headed home, with promises to bring Evan back in a few weeks.

When she got home, Evan was out. She went straight to the bedroom and dug around for the leftover stars stashed in her bedside table. She cleared off the table and stood on it; using the wall for balance, she added her own star to the cluster directly above her side of the bed.

All these years, she thought the answer lay in teaching Shyamma to love the cold. Maybe she was wrong.

Maya sat on the porch staring across the river. The sun had nearly set and the air felt like rain, heavy and full of promise. Her skin was clammy from the heat and humidity, but it didn't bother her. It reminded her of the way she felt in the monsoon, just before the rains came, turning the streets into muddy rivers that came up to her knees.

The door opened, and she saw Evan's shadow cast down the stairs. He stood for a moment in the doorway, drinking a beer.

"Nice night," he said.

His voice was low and cautious as he sat down next to her. Maya couldn't bring herself to look at his face, that sweet combination of dimples and blue eyes that showed his confusion no matter how hard he tried to hide it. Instead, she looked at his feet, grimy from a barefoot summer, the toenails ridged and hard, dirt rimming the cuticles. Later, maybe, his nails would scratch dully against her legs, her ankles, and the tops of her feet, leaving white lines and marks across her own dry brown skin, never hard enough to draw blood, but enough to mark Evan on her.

Storytelling is the oldest form of education.

Terry Tempest Williams

"Shyamamma used to have a small shrine in the corner of our kitchen." Her voice was hoarse from thirst and silence. "Incense, flowers, an old calendar painting of Ganesh.⁹ That's all. Whenever I had friends over, I'd try to keep them from going in there."

"Why?"

"So I wouldn't have to hear them laugh and say, 'Ew, what's that?' and then explain why my aunt was worshipping a god with an elephant head."

"The god of all beginnings and the remover of obstacles." Evan sat down next to her.

"Shyamamma told you that."

"When we got married."

Maya smiled. At the time, she would have forbidden the mention of Ganesh or any other god at her wedding, yet Shyamamma had managed to find a space for him.

"I'm going to the temple when she comes."

One day, Shyamamma will be gone, she thought, and I want to be left with more than the calendar image of a pot-bellied, elephant god.

He took her hand and squeezed it. "Want me to come?" "No. But no more fishing trips, okay?"

Maya drew a sip of beer from the long-necked bottle, letting a few drops drip down her chin. She held the cool glass against her temple and watched the lights come on across the river, solitary stars dotting a dark, lonely land. Evan put his hand on the back of her neck and stroked the damp hairs hanging out of her bun. They sat for a long time in silence, listening to the cicadas buzzing in the still heat, waiting for the storm to break and the sky to clear.

⁹**Ganesh:** an elephant-headed Hindu deity, remover of obstacles

Geeta Kothari's fiction and non-fiction have appeared in several anthologies and journals, such as the *Toronto South Asian Review*, the *New England Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, and *Her Mother's Ashes*. She is the editor of the anthology *Did My Mama Like to Dance?* and *Other Stories about Mothers and Daughters*.

1. Response

- a. Explain how the first paragraph symbolically captures one of the main themes of the story. Reread the story carefully, noting other passages or references that you think might have a symbolic meaning. Be prepared to present your ideas to a group or the class.
- b. Why does Maya both envy and resent Evan?
- c. Throughout her life, Maya has relied on others to give her a sense of direction. Give some specific examples. Do you think this is still true at the end of the story? Explain.
- d. What are some of the decisions Maya has to make in this story, and what choices are available to her? Do you think she makes good or bad decisions? Why?
- e. "The Spaces Between Stars" depicts a particular situation. Do you think the story has a broader relevance? Why?
- f. Discuss whether you were able to connect with the story, and whether that, in turn, affected your enjoyment of it.

2. Literature Studies Story Endings

Some stories end with **closure**, while others are open-ended. What kind of ending does "The Spaces Between Stars" have? Give reasons for

Closure occurs when a story ends without ambiguity. The main crises and/or conflicts are neatly wrapped up and the reader has a sense that the story is truly finished. In an *open-ended story*, the reader is uncertain about what might happen next; several outcomes are possible.

your answer, including specific references from the text. Is this a question that can be answered definitively? Why or why not?

3. **Writing Letter** Adopt the persona of Maya and compose the letter she would write to Evan's parents to explain her decision not to participate in the family skiing trip in Banff. Your writing should reflect your audience and purpose.
4. **Critical Thinking** In "The Spaces Between Stars," author Geeta Kothari explores some issues related to the mingling of different cultures. In a group, identify and discuss these issues. What are the main problems and challenges in Maya and Evan's marriage, and what solutions appear at the end of the story? Summarize your conclusions for the class.