



**GOLD  
DIGGER**

A NOVEL

**SANJENA  
SATHIAN**

"Dizzily original, fiercely funny, deeply wise."  
—CELESTE NG





GOLD  
DIGGERS

SANJENA SATHIAN

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*For Usha, Krish, and Tejas Sathian*

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# PROLOGUE



In the middle of Bombay there was, for many years, a certain squat building that served as a beacon for the city's ambitious. It was smog-licked and wedged between a halal butcher and a chai shop, with a sign that flickered neon blue: THE GOSWAMI CLASSES. Underneath, in faded lettering streaked with bird droppings: PHYSICS STUDIES CHEMISTRY STUDIES MATHS STUDIES | BEST CHOICE FOR SCHOLARS. A practiced eye could spot the sign from the Dadar flyover, or from the pedestrian bridge above the train station.

One evening in 1984, thirteen-year-old Anjali Joshi pressed herself against the balcony of her family's fifth-floor flat and examined the neon from her elevated angle, fiddling with her two long plaits and smoothing her plaid school uniform. Anjali hoped to glimpse her older brother Vivek exiting the school after his extracurricular tuitions, his figure knocking shoulders with the clever neighbor boy, Parag. All the strivers shaded blue.

Vivek had lately stopped paying her much mind, and the world had become suddenly lonely. Once, her brother and his friends in the housing society had played cricket with her behind the building, bowling the ball with noodly and forgiving arms. But now, Vivek's afternoons were reserved for studying, often with the wolfish, swarthy Parag, who was overgrown for his age, with a habit of grinding his teeth as he did problem sets, as though chomping hungrily on tough meat.

Anjali did not see Vivek, so she returned to her own chemistry papers—ordinary papers, unblessed by the legendary Ratan Goswami, who handpicked his students, anointing those who would matriculate at the Indian Institutes of Technology and later make their way to the highest echelons of the nation's industry—or to America. Anjali's parents had not entered her into such a pool. She was a daughter. It had never occurred to the Joshis that Anjali might want for herself what they wanted for Vivek. It had never occurred to Anjali to want very much at all.

On this particular day, she chewed on an eraser, lying on her stomach on the dusty floor and wishing for some relief from the heat. Even the drench of the monsoon would be preferable to the dryness of April in Dadar, where you could forget that Bombay bordered the sea, that a few miles away the air might salt your skin and you might see something like a beyond.

Anjali's eyes drooping, she righted herself so she could see the highest curves of the letters in the cram school sign. Inside, the bulky figure of Ratan Goswami would be rat-a-tatting his chalk on the board as he drilled students. *Young's modulus is? Atmospheric pressure is? External torque is?* At this hour, Vivek would be scribbling his last lines on graph paper before trudging home to inhale a small molehill of rice, then plunging back into his bedroom for more swotting. His body was growing slender, like a mongoose's, the longer he studied.

Anjali lifted her head at the click of a key in the lock. Her mother glanced at her daughter only briefly, then made for the kitchen. In the afternoons, while Vivek was under Ratan Goswami's supervision, Lakshmi Joshi mingled with the other ladies in the housing society, bragging about her two sons—Dhruv, who was in America, and Vivek, who would soon be abroad, too. Anjali heard her mother coming and going, the boys' names always on her tongue, her own name never uttered.

In the kitchen, Anjali's mother reached into her sari blouse and deposited something on the Cuddapah stone counter. As Lakshmi squatted to fidget with the rusty petroleum gas cylinder, Anjali padded closer to see the glint of the furtive object: a small, plain gold coin, the sort a family member might give a young boy for good luck.

"Ithna nigh, out of the kitchen while I'm doing this," Lakshmi snapped.

Anjali obeyed, retreating with her chemistry papers to the dining table, but stealing glances. Her mother boiled water in a saucepan, reached for the masala dabba, shook some soil-brown powders into the hot liquid, and began to sing something like a prayer, passing through each phrase as though passing the beads of a mala from finger to finger. At one point, Lakshmi left the kitchen and stepped into the alcove in the hallway, where the family kept their altar—pink and blue gods and haldi and kumkum and bells on a bronze plate. She returned to the kitchen pressing two figurines against her



breasts and set them on the shelf above the stove. The sandalwood eyes of the goddesses of prosperity and education surveyed the proceedings.

Lakshmi tilted the pot, just enough that Anjali could see the coin slip from her fingers and splash on the surface. Anjali stood on her tiptoes in time to see the liquid in the pot react—a little yellow whirlpool formed and swallowed the gold, as though the brew had been awaiting this addition.

“Aiyee,” she ventured. “What is it?”

“This has nothing to do with you,” Lakshmi said. “This is for Vivek.”

With practiced ease, her mother lifted the pot with tongs and held it high above a steel tumbler, like a street tea seller. Liquid ribboned out between the two vessels: a perplexing, deep-yellow flicker. It caught the muted evening sunlight streaming through the flat.

The door opened, and there came the sounds of scuffling in the hallway, Vivek and Parag, briefly unburdened of their studies. Anjali heard them making plans for a round of cricket, then lowering their voices before a burst of conspiratorial laughter. There would be no cricket; she knew Vivek would fall asleep over his coursework before there was time for games.

“Aiyee!” Vivek called, kicking off his street-dirt-streaked chappals. Lakshmi swiveled, hand still inches from the fire, and her flinty gaze fell on Vivek. He straightened, and Anjali swore he shuddered as he saw what swished in the tumbler. He glanced back over his shoulder, as though hoping Parag might call him away. But Parag had gone. The open door swung on its hinges. At the drift of outside air, the gas stove shuddered. Its flame hued the same witchy blue as the Goswami sign. Lakshmi switched it off.

• • •

MANY YEARS LATER, Anjali stood in her own kitchen in Hammond Creek, Georgia. Her daughter slept upstairs. Her husband was miles away. In the suburban somnolence, the only noise was of a long metal spoon clinking against a glass pitcher as she stirred. She brought just the edge of the spoon to her mouth. A small pink tongue darted out to taste the thing that still seemed forbidden. Was it tangier? Too sour? She had tried her mother’s drink only once,

briefly, surreptitiously. But she suspected her iteration was not yet right. That seemed to happen in migration. The old recipes were never quite the same on this side of the world.

PART ONE  
GOLDEN CHILDREN



May this gold which brings long life and splendor and increase of wealth, and which gets through all adversities, enter upon me for the sake of long life, of splendor, and of victory.

—FROM THE *Grihya-Sutra of Hiranyakesin*, VEDIC TEXT

As in metal, so in the body.

—*Rasarnava*, HINDU TREATISE ON ALCHEMY

# 1.

When I was younger, I consisted of little but my parents' ambitions for who I was to become. But by the end of ninth grade, all I wanted for myself was a date to the Spring Fling dance. A hot one. The dream was granted, by chance. Finding myself unaccompanied in the final days before the event, I begged my neighbor and childhood best friend, Anita Dayal, to take pity on me. Fine; I could be her "escort," she allowed, putting the word in air quotes as we readied for that rather fateful night.

Before the dance, I was set to meet Anita and our crowd at the mall. We'd take photos outside the TCBY, all trussed up in our Macy's finery. My mother deposited me on a median in the middle of the parking lot, early, then sped off to my older sister's picture party. Prachi had been nominated for Spring Fling court and was living a more documentable high school life. Prachi, the Narayan child who managed to be attractive *and* intelligent *and* deferential to our cultural traditions to boot, was headed to Duke, we were all sure. Earlier that day, cheeks blooming with pride, my mother had fastened a favorite, slim gold chain of her own, gifted by our ajji, around Prachi's neck. My sister kissed my mother's cheek like an old, elegant woman and thanked her, while I waited to be dropped into my own small life, in an ill-fitting suit.

I waited on the median, growing anxious. There was no sign of Anita. I paced and fidgeted, watching the others pin corsages and boutonnieres, and readied myself, after fifteen minutes, then twenty, to give up and trek down one of those horrible sidewalk-less stretches of great Georgia boulevard back home to Hammond Creek. I was already turning away from the fuss, attempting to loosen my father's congealed-blood-colored tie, when Anita and her mother screeched up in their little brown Toyota. I knocked my knee against the concrete dolphin-adorned fountain and shouted, "Shit!"

A wall of mostly Indian and Asian parents regarded me with a collective glare. Yes, I consisted largely of my parents' ambitions, but some part of me was also made of the ogling, boggling eyeballs of the rest of our community.

And another part—a significant part—was Anita, who was now stepping out of the double-parked car, smiling blithely. Anita had bright eyes: muddy brown, lively, roving, liable to flick over you quickly, as though there was something else more interesting or urgent in your vicinity. It made you want to stand squarely in her line of vision to ask for her full attention; when you got it, it felt like the warming of the late-morning summer sun.

“Neil, I *told* her we were late, but stubborn girl wouldn't listen!” Anita's mother, Anjali Auntie, said. She was dressed like she planned to attend the dance herself, in a bright green sheath framing her breasts, a dress that reminded me she was unlike other mothers.

“I got invited to Melanie's picture party first,” Anita said. “I IM'd you!”

A betrayal: cherry-cheeked and universally admired Melanie Cho had laughed off my invitation to the dance weeks before, leaving me itchy with self-loathing. Anita's grin—the grin of the newly anointed popular—matched the crystal studding along her bright blue bodice.

Anjali Auntie positioned us shoulder-to-shoulder. Anita linked her arm through mine so the insides of our elbows kissed. This was how we'd been posed in Diwali photos as kids, when our families got together and Prachi dressed Anita up as Sita and assembled a paper crown for me, her spouse, Lord Rama. The posture suddenly seemed foreign.

There was no time to be angry. I smiled. In the photos, I am washed out. She, in electric blue and crystal, beams, her eyes settled somewhere just above the camera lens.

The dance: People were learning to inch closer to each other, and some girls didn't mind the short guys' heads bobbing below theirs, and some guys didn't mind the girls with braces. The teachers on chaperone duty patrolled the bathrooms, where kids who were not my crowd might engage in “nonsense,” as my mother put it, *nonsense* that was inaccessible to me at the time.

As with any other event at Okefenokee High School, the room was semi-segregated. A handful of white kids mosh-pitted in the middle of the party; others made their way to those nonsense-filled



bathrooms or the parking lot. The good-looking Indian and Asian girls hung by the long banquet table. The debate, math Olympiad, robotics, etc., Indians and Asians were the likeliest ones to be bopping around, because though none of us could really move, the dancing offered a prescribed activity for the evening, a script. I depended on scripts in those days, before anyone asked me to invent my own life.

I followed Anita onto the floor, expecting to join the circle dancing around Hari Chopra, who was attempting to prove his B-boy abilities to the Kanye song that was ubiquitous that year, flicking a finger across an imaginary flat-brimmed hat in the warm-up. But Anita veered toward a cluster of girls that included my sister and Melanie. I stopped at the edge of the squeaky gym floor in my dress shoes, which were vast, boatlike, slippery, and made me sweat.

“Anita,” I whispered frantically, but she mouthed, *Just a second*, and darted into the girl cluster—as though she was crossing the finish line in a race I hadn’t known she was running. She’d grown spritely and uncatchable lately, always squinting at a secretly looming horizon line.

I didn’t see my date again until the end of the evening, let alone dance with her. The ghost of her touch on me—the inside of her elbow against the inside of mine—lingered on my skin. I felt insubstantial.

I spent the party with Kartik Jain and Manu Padmanaban and Aleem Khan and Jack Kim and Abel Mengesha (who was Ethiopian but clocked most of his time with the Asians), avoiding Shruti Patel, with whom Manu had agreed to come, and whose electrified bristly hair and eager gopher teeth discomfited us. Jack was counting the girls he’d made out with at computer camp the year before, in an effort to overcome the fact that he was here tonight alone. I had been at that camp and knew the single kiss he’d received was dumb luck, the result of a double dog dare.

I was supposed to return home with Anita and her mother at ten—their house sat catty-corner from ours in the Hammond Creek cul-de-sac. Ten; I only had to last till ten. I watched the egg-shaped clock on the wall above the banquet table tick. I drank the sugary punch; it stained my tongue Coke-can red.

Just before nine thirty, people began to gather for the announcement of Spring Fling royalty. At the swell of a tantalizingly

sex-infused slow song—*Crash into me, and I come into you*—I went looking for Anita. I wound through the gym, all elbows and too-long hair that curtained the top of my vision. No Anita. No Prachi. I sidestepped out of the gym and down the hallway carpeted in green and gray—the swampy colors of Okefenokee High School. It occurred to me that I might find the girls in the parking lot. The parking lot, full of *nonsense*.

I pushed open the first door I encountered, missing, in my annoyance, the sign that read EMERGENCY EXIT. The alarm wailed. People's hands flew to their ears, and heads turned toward me. A white guy gripped a handle of some clear verboten substance. Someone cursed. Someone shrieked. Someone laughed. I stood mute as they scattered. When Coach Jameson came striding outside to bust up the party, he noted my presence, held up a large, meaty finger, and said, "Wait there." I froze, darkened by the shadows behind the gym.

Girls were crying. Not Anita, I don't think. It took a lot to make her cry. From somewhere came my sister's voice, in the buttery lilt that never failed her: "Coach, I just came out here to find my necklace, it fell off, it's my grandmother's, you know I don't drink—"

"I'll ask, missy," he said. "What were you doing to cause you to, ahem, lose a necklace?"

I shuddered and didn't catch Prachi's reply because Anita stood behind me, propping open the door whose alarm had at last been killed.

"Neil, get inside, you'll get in trouble," she whispered. Her glossed lips quivered and for a moment I was suffused with a premonition that something phantom wished to be spoken aloud but that no one—not me, not the people around me—could find the language. Anita clamped her mouth shut and blinked very fast, as though beating back that ghost, and there we remained, still rooted to our finite asphalt selves.

I said Prachi was out there and it didn't sound good. "The coach already saw me," I added. "I'm not supposed to move."

"Are you *kidding me*, Neil?" Anita was framed in the doorway as the hallway light streamed out around her. "My mom's waiting, like, right now."

"I wasn't drinking."

“I *know* you weren’t drinking,” she said. No, more like—“I know *you* weren’t drinking.” I wondered how she had come by all her new wisdom, how she had grown so fast, so far ahead of me. “Did *you* set off the alarm?”

I nodded miserably.

“Dude,” Anita said. “People go out the food delivery door.” She pointed. She spoke rapidly, percussively, with a bravado that might have masked her nerves at being so near *trouble*.

“C’mon, kid.” Coach Jameson led his small troupe of prisoners inside, beckoning me with that meaty finger, holding the alcohol pinched in his other hand like a used rag. The captured students followed, heads bowed—two white guys I didn’t know, Katie Zhang, Mark Ha, Prachi. My sister mouthed, *What?* at me while Coach Jameson looked Anita up and down and added, “And you, rubbernecker.”

“I just got here, Coach,” Anita said. Her voice caught in her throat before she switched to a clipped tone like the sort my mother used on work calls. I could feel her straining to be someone with whom she had not yet become fully acquainted. “Actually, we were trying to leave. My mom’s outside, you can ask her—”

“Y’all well know not to be in the parking lot.”

“I just got worried, see,” she tried again, in a slightly sharper pitch. “Because—”

“What’s your name?”

“Anita Dayal.”

“And yours?”

“Neil Narayan.”

He repeated. “Anita Dial. Neil Nay-rannan. Y’all’re freshmen?”

“Yes, sir,” Anita said.

“Stay away from this crowd,” Coach Jameson said grandly. “Getterselves home.”

He escorted his captured cool kids past us. The scent of our innocence—or mine, anyway—was strong enough to overpower everything else.

Some kids my age drank alcohol, but I was afraid to, not because of the things the health class teacher cautioned would happen to your body and brain but because of my mother’s warnings that engaging in *nonsense* could abort all you were supposed to become, could in fact abort the very American dream we were duty-bound to live out.

Take the case of Ravi Reddy, whose parents had shipped him to Hyderabad to finish high school upon smelling beer on his breath. No one had heard from Ravi since, but my mother had hinted that she and my father were not above taking a leaf out of the Reddys' book.

I would not have wished such a fate on anyone, let alone my sister, so I said to Anita, "Can you get your mom to wait two minutes? My sister lost our grandmother's gold necklace, and she'll be even more screwed."

Anita bit her lip. Something shifted in her posture, brought her into a new alertness, like when she was asked a question to which she knew the answer in algebra.

"Oh." She retrieved her pink flip phone from her fake-pearl-encrusted purse. "Mama. Coming. But Prachi lost this gold necklace, and Neil—" A pause. She hung up. "My mom says be quick."

"My sister doesn't drink." I held up a flashlight that connected to my Swiss Army knife and house keys. Nothing showed itself on the asphalt, just the black Georgia ground beneath the black Georgia sky. Puddles of yellow lamppost light revealed the riddled texture of the parking lot. There were no secrets here; in this stupid place, what you saw was what you got.

"All of them drink," Anita said, peeling away. "You can't run in that crowd and not drink." Did *Anita* drink? A pang in my chest—for wasn't she now in *that crowd*? "She ditched with Hudson Long because she knew she was going to lose Spring Fling Princess."

"She lost?" I sighed. Even if Prachi escaped Coach Jameson, she'd be smarting from defeat. I didn't fancy enduring one of her performances of grief, wherein she refused to make eye contact with us for days, or ensured I overheard her vomiting in the bathroom. "See anything?"

"Nah," Anita called, a little nasally.

I cast my light beneath the dumpster, knelt and got a smashing stench of cafeteria chili and old bananas and a number of other smells both animal and human. I covered my nose, stood, ran the beam in a long line like a searchlight hunting a fugitive in desolate farmland, sweep, one, sweep, two, but nothing on the asphalt glinted like gold. "Nothing?" I called.

"Nothing." Anita was kneeling by the wretched emergency exit door and reaching for something on the ground.

“Is that it?” I half jogged over.

“Nope,” she said. “It’s not here.”

I was right next to her now. “You didn’t find it?”

“I just said I didn’t. My mom’s gonna be mad; we have to go.”

“Your mom’s never mad.” I waved my hand dismissively. Anjali Auntie was *different*—a given—and Anita could not believably invoke her as a threat. “What’s in your hand, Anita?”

For her fist was clenched, her knuckles bloodless. She looked ready to slug me.

Her jaw tightened. Then she growled through her teeth, as though she’d been trying to tell me something and I’d been too dense to hear it. “Neil, you are such a *freak*! Prachi lost her necklace because she’s *drunk* and making out with Hudson Long, and I’ve got enough to worry about without helping you fix *her* shit.”

She opened the door and stomped over the green-and-gray carpeting. I followed. I couldn’t do anything but slide into the back of the Toyota. Anita and her mother sat in wooden silence up front. Anjali Auntie’s eyes landed searchingly on mine in the rearview mirror a few times before settling sidelong on her daughter’s taut expression. Her own face remained impassive; I could not tell if she was surprised at the coldness between Anita and me.

Back home, in my room, I wrenched myself free from my father’s tie and tried to fall asleep as the landline rang and heels sounded below me—Prachi coming home, Prachi in trouble, my parents’ voices rising. (“Who were you with?” “Open your mouth, show your breath!” “Where’s Ajji’s—?” “Ayyayyo!” “You’ll jolly well tell us—!”) Prachi, the golden child, fallen from grace, some essential blessing lifted from her.

I dreamt in shards, and I encountered Anita in my sleep—an Anita who had Melanie Cho’s red lips and was wearing a bright green dress like her mother’s, an Anita who removed said dress to display the body of one of the porn stars I had become familiar with, which meant a white body, ivory skin, and dime-sized, pert nipples. I woke up and found that my boxers were wet. In the bathroom, I tried to scrub away all that had happened that night.