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The Dogs of Carova

By Doug Lawson

After Alec was buried, the issue of the beach house remained. A long, squat box of painted cinderblock with a low, flat roof, it had been purchased by Alec's father in 1949 for a hundred dollars. Built by an admirer of a man named Frank Stick, who'd started his own development to the south in a place he named Southern Shores, the 'flat top' house stood alone then in the middle of an ocean-side wilderness, reached only by a long drive across the sand. Dunes folded up from the long stretch of beaches and crested at the front door. Wild horses roamed through the backyard. Alec and his brother Bill caught fish and crabs, lost themselves in labyrinths filled with stunted, twisted trees and in the moss-covered swamp where the marsh grass towered over their two blonde heads. They chased each other across the stumps left from a submerged forest. They tried to rope ponies with old pieces of twine.

True, the house had *technically* gone to Alec, who was the oldest and who had the most artistic nature. But Bill and his wife Mrs. Bill had actually used it more frequently, at least according to Mrs. Bill. Granted, it was a bit damp from the leaks in the roofline for Bill's fragile lungs, and the décor wasn't what Mrs. Bill would have selected if she'd been given a chance to give it her own special touch—the *carpeting* in particular unsettled her stomach! And who would have *dreamed* of those lamps being anywhere

outside of a thrift store? But there they were, weekend after weekend, working to keep the old place in shape. It was all terribly out of date, and yet it was so *romantic*. And such a piece of the family that the mere fact Alec hadn't left a will (and who really was surprised, Alec being the *free spirit*?) shouldn't allow the fate of such a key piece of history to be determined by some impersonal piece of outdated inheritance law. Why, Alec had hardly been married to that... well, to that *girl* for very long before he'd gone overseas. He'd certainly have wanted it to remain in the family.

And *besides*, Mrs. Bill whispered confidentially to her friends over lunch, after tennis. While of course she didn't want to speak poorly of the girl after all she'd been through—and it was terrible and shouldn't happen to anyone, should it? And she *was* a pretty little thing, wasn't she? Hardly even showed when she was carrying. But really, just how much of a wife could she have been for Alec, if Alec had decided to pick up and go thousands of miles away? Right into a war zone? Alone? And it certainly wasn't the first time he'd done something like that. Her Bill would never have had a reason to do anything of the kind.

Mrs. Bill modestly smoothed down the front of her printed silk blouse.

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But despite her lack of real interest—it was the last thing she wanted to think about on a long list of items that were more worthy of avoiding, the house did belong to April, as April's lawyer confirmed. Cut and dried, no questions about it, really no room

for casual debate much less argument. If she didn't want to use it, he said, it could be managed and held in trust for Claire.

April ran her fingers through her short, tight curls and sighed. The Starbucks was busy, the espresso machine droned and coughed somewhere behind her and the air filled with the smell of energetic desperation. Claire slept on in the umbrella stroller, her small right hand holding her earlobe, her left arm tucked around her blue stuffed dog.

April's lawyer was short and eager, a few years younger and his bright red hair and pale, freckled intensity left after-images on the inside of her eyelids. He affected a southern accent, but the speed of his words and the redness in his face betrayed him. He spun and vibrated there on the tall stool, a tenuous tower of thin child's blocks stacked too high and topped precariously with the round, glowing ball of him. She actually worried it might collapse, spilling him out across the terracotta tile floor like so much warm milk-foam.

April hadn't seen the house, but she'd heard descriptions. It sounded awful to her—what would Claire want with a crumbly, damp, moldy place, even if it was next to the ocean? Even if it had been her father's? Carova: a place between places, the name itself made from parts of Carolina and Virginia. A tiny house all by itself, situated that close to where all of the land ended, and right in the spot where all of those hurricanes landed year after year, made her entirely suspicious. She was nervous even here in Richmond. The few stretches of offices downtown felt like a façade over the countryside so full with a particularly confederate history, a professional screen built over a town filled with disturbed and self-justifying ghosts. As a child April had been surrounded by the tallness of a Manhattan apartment complex, one of a collection of hard, solid edifices

bending low over her, blocking out the terrible sky, nestling close like a pack of absent, giant animals intent on their own serious, animal business but nonetheless herded by a series of tall, majestic doorman, intent on keeping her protected.

“Don’t think of it that way,” the short lawyer told her. His hands left traces in the air like a pair of sparklers, and behind his excitement she realized he was thinking of how he might hit on her. “The Outer Banks has seen a huge amount of development in the past twenty years! There are roads now, April. Long lines of terrific mansions that rent for thousands a week will escort you on your way up coast.”

He sat back in his chair and spread his warm hands wide. Electricity jumped between his fingers. The structure itself was irrelevant, he said. A tear-down. The land alone was worth upwards of three-quarters of a million today; developed it would be much, much more. It was a regular source of income. A college education. A retirement plan. It was, he said quite simply, a unique opportunity, and he was pleased to be representing her. Completely confident of the outcome.

He offered her one fiery palm. It hung there in the air over the small round table between them like a neon sign, his five fingers pointed in five different directions, and April looked at it, thinking that none of them were in the direction of her heart.

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She didn’t want to go. She didn’t want to drive Alec’s car. She didn’t even like to drive, really—why didn’t people leave that sort of thing to the professionals? But her own car was intransigent and stubborn, large and boxy and slow like an old dog that just

wanted some sleep. And despite the lawyer's assurances, she gathered from the real estate people that she would actually need to drive on the *beach itself* to get up to the house. It would balk. It would sink like an anchor.

But Alec's old Subaru was too much like Alec. Rough and eager, maybe a little too energetic. Not entirely clean, yet with a sort of practical (if disheveled) dignity underneath the cracked mud flaps and the dented front bumper. The interior was a journalist's chaos of scribbled notes on colored post-its stuck to the dash and the visors, folded into cup holders and the place that had held his sunglasses. The storage area in back had a tent and a sleeping bag that still smelled like him rolled up there, along with packages of ramen noodles, empty boxes of film, and a package of small, unopened Moleskine notebooks.

She cleaned it out and left his things in boxes the dining room, which he'd used as his study. She felt again like he might be back for them. There was his guitar, his squat wooden statue of a Thai dragon, his work boots from LL Bean, and the unopened packages of belongings the military had sent back to them, without a note. She sat down in the middle of it all and sighed. The music on NPR paused, and outside on the street there was the sound of a car horn. Indistinct voices of a few passing VCU students in conversation ebbed. A cloud moved from in front of the sun and light came in through the old, tall front windows and lit up the front room. It *was* time to get out, to go somewhere else for awhile.

"We're going to the beach," April told Claire. Claire fed herself Cheerios and played silently on the couch with her blue dog. She looked up from underneath a wild

cascade of light brown curls. “We’re going to see the ocean. The ocean’s like the lake at Maymont, only much, much bigger.”

Claire regarded her with speculation, and held up her two hands about a foot apart.

“Bigger, sweetie.” Claire held her arms out as far as she could reach, and looked at her. “Even bigger than that,” April said. She got up onto the couch, and drew Claire into her lap. “It’s so big, you can’t even see to the other side of it.” Though Alec had, she thought. He’d made a life of it.

She brushed the hair back from the stuffed dog’s face. It was a colorful thing with a long nose and clumsy feet, decorated in an oriental style with a diamond pattern down the back and legs and small flecks of color that looked like gemstones. It had blue fluffy hair around the head like a mane. Alec had brought it back for Claire on his very last visit with them, his last stop on the way to the desert that would claim him.

Claire tapped on the dog’s head, and looked expectantly up at April. “Oh, Claire,” April sighed. “Again?” Claire nodded and tapped on the dog.

And so April told her the story Alec had when he gave her the dog—it was a story about a whole dog family, with a mama dog and a papa dog and a little girl dog. All the dogs lived in a far away place where they had a big dog house in the forest. Every day the papa dog would try to teach the little girl dog to bark. They’d bark at the bears, at the squirrels, and at the tiny little deer that lived in the forest. And then when they were done barking, they sat down at their dog table and had grilled cheese and tomato soup for lunch.

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If Claire's toys were all in place, if she had a bag of something to feed herself and enough leg room and if the straps of the car seat were not too tight or too loose and if the *Little Mermaid* music wasn't too loud or too quiet and was started precisely when the car initially set into motion (not too soon and not too late) then April might get her to sleep on a drive.

Successful for once, April let her thoughts drift with her down the interstate, thinking about an addition to next year's Design II syllabus, a new textbook home on the dining room table waiting to be evaluated. She tried not to think of the last few months, the endless video echoes of Alec's last, terrible moments posted on that website and echoed across television screens around the world. It was something impossible to think about, and it was equally impossible to think how they would ever get past that legacy. How could she? How could Claire?

She'd had the phone turned off, the cable disconnected, and she'd unplugged the computer. She'd done the necessary amount of interviews and was careful to be contrite and soft spoken and uncontroversial enough to let it all pass over her. She was waiting for that grace and a gentleness she'd heard memory could have, to cover things over and even wrap Alec himself up in a flag of goodness, to take at face value everything good that was said about him in the media after his awful, senseless death when in reality Alec was just as flawed as any of the rest of them. Yes, he'd been a tremendous father, a

concerned, influential writer, a generous and charismatic person. Yes, he'd made it his life's work drawing the world's attention to places it did not want to go. At home, April had envied the simple, easy way he and Claire related, and the sheer devotion she saw bloom in their daughter made her both happy and envious. Despite his distance from her, Alec was a good parent, with an immediate grasp of everything about his little girl, that somehow, like magic, there had been an instant bond, a secret language between the two of them that now was lost.

And still, Alec had also been a distant, absent lover and husband, a chauvinist by inclination, at times was as dismissive of her as he was of foreign bureaucrats who'd stood between him and a story. He'd had a fierce arrogance, a boiling temper just under the surface, a dilettante's distractibility. And yet, the shape of their frustrated, misshapen love had been love nonetheless, a lumpy and misshapen balloon that rose high up into the air and had put all of the world seemingly at their feet.

The car crossed over a long bridge across a wind-capped stretch of water, and then, reassuringly, is back onto land again. Claire began to stir and fuss, tossed her sippy cup onto the floor and then whined for it sleepily.

April reached down to get it, and when she looked up again she realized she was about to hit a brown SUV stopped in front of her for a traffic light.

She stepped on the Subaru's brakes but it was too late. There was a crunch of metal, the cars lurched, the SUV's brake lights flickered on and off, on and off and its back window flipped open.

April raised her face from her hands and looked into the back. Claire looked back at her from the car seat. Her blue eyes—Alec's blue eyes—were big and round, faintly

accusatory. Her car toys were scattered over the floor, and somehow she was missing a shoe, but the purple blueberry smear across her face is from nothing worse than a cereal bar.

Up front, something was hissing a fine curtain of mist up from the engine and, as April watched, a dog poked a long, brindled nose carefully out though the fog to look around. One nose was followed by another as the car runs out of steam, until four long snouts were pushing and shoving for space and testing the salty air.

Nothing smelled like it was burning. She turned the music off and sat with her hands in her lap. A older man with a turban on his head, slightly askew, climbed out of the driver's side of the SUV and came around to the back. He reached over and put his hands on the dogs heads, under their chins, and inspected the interior and back end of the truck, the front of the Subaru. Then he came around to her window. She rolled it down.

"I'm sorry," April said. "I was trying to hand my daughter her sippy."

"Are you all right?" He looked back at Claire. His accent was British. "Your child, your child isn't hurt?"

"No, we're fine, I think. I'm sorry I hit you."

"I don't believe you're to say it was your fault," he said. "Insurance?" He straightened his turban with one hand, and rested the hand on the back of his neck. "I'm not injured. Are you sure you are all right?"

"We're fine," April says. "I'm sure we're fine. I'm sorry. I'm very sorry"

From the back seat, Claire said, in a small voice that was quite distinct, "Doggies!" April, startled, looked back at her daughter, who kicked her feet excitedly in the air and pointed. "Doggies!" she said again.

It's her very first word spoken since Alec left, exactly her fifth word in her two and a half years of life, and it's more than April can bear. She puts her head back down in her hands and bursts into tears.

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"I don't know why I'm telling you all of this," April said. She's talking to Aravind over tea. Surprisingly, Alec's car was fine—some cosmetic dents to add to the car's collection, a loose hose the officer reached in and reconnected (though he said he wasn't supposed to do that sort of thing). The SUV suffered a dented bumper, a broken window latch.

The four tall, lean dogs were tied up on long leashes to a railing in front of the restaurant, which was right across the street from the ocean. "We had tests, doctors," she says. "They never found anything wrong," though she still doesn't know why she was burdening this poor man. He was her father's age, and her father was someone April had been used to talking to. His eyes were large and brown and he had an amused yet proper demeanor, also like her father. It was that the tea was too hot to drink, or that the accident had just unhinged the day and everything was suddenly new and uncharted, and the fact that she'd probably never see this man again set the words free.

Claire was in a restaurant high chair that was too small for her, but that had a buckle on it to keep her in it. Her stuffed dog was tucked in beside her, and she alternated drinking from her sippy and eating salt off the table with her fingers.

“Why don’t you speak, little one?” Aravind held his own finger out to Claire, who extended one of her own and touched the end of it.

“Alec was working closely with her. But then...” It hung in the air, and April left it there, unwilling to go on, not wanting to care whether Aravind understood all of the details behind the words or not.

Aravind was quiet for a minute. “The dogs,” he said to Claire. “You like the dogs?”

Claire looked at him, nodded and grasped his extended finger.

“Then you must come to visit them,” he said.

Claire looked at April. “We couldn’t,” April said, quickly.

“Posh,” says Aravind. April realized she found the accent charming. “I care for four. It wouldn’t be an imposition. The house is quite large—it was for the family, and the dogs and I rattle about in it like old dried seeds in a pod.”

“Your family?”

“My wife, she has passed on. Our children are grown. Miss...”

“Please call me April.”

“April. I don’t mean to be forward, or inappropriate. I have seen you on the television. I saw...” He looked at Claire. “Well. If I can provide even a small favor to the child...”

Claire was apparently concentrating again on the loose grains of salt scattered on the table.

“You want to see the doggies, don’t you,” April says. Claire nods, but without taking her gaze off the table. She pressed her thumb down mechanically on one grain of

salt after another, and when the pad of her index finger was coated she placed it in her mouth.

“Come with me,” Aravind said. He led them outside to the dogs, who pulled at their leashes and swung their long tails back and forth. “Watch,” he said. Aravind raised a hand to shoulder height, palm open, and the dogs all sat on cue. He lowered the hand to waist level, hand still extended, palm parallel with the ground. The dogs stretched out their front legs and extended their long bodies out on the ground, carefully poised.

“Doggies,” sighed Claire. Aravind tossed each of the dogs a biscuit from his jacket pocket.

“Doggies,” April agreed, reluctantly.

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April had never gotten along well with Mrs. Bill. Mrs. Bill was disturbingly cheerful, verbally upbeat and painfully superficial. She was polished and well made-up and she had an elegant house on Monument avenue that had elegant furniture and she drove a nice car, a shiny Lexus SUV. She was well connected with corporate wives in the clouded fishbowl that was old Richmond’s social network, and though she was only a few years older than April, she carried a stepmotherly-air of amused condescension around April’s artwork, her casual appearance, her lack of social desires, her inwardly focused quietness.

Initially, April had tried to look at her as a cultural opportunity; how else would a southern woman appear to someone from Manhattan? How could either one of them

seem anything but stereotypes to the other early on? April gave her the benefit of the doubt, worked to get beyond the superficial, and Mrs. Bill had simply used her as a doormat.

So as she pulled up to the low, squat house (after the terrifying drive across the open sand beach, the waves almost lapping at the car), she shouldn't really have been surprised by the bulldozer parked out front, the surveyor's flags marking the property line. And yet she was. She sat looking at them for a long minute, until Claire began kicking the back of the seat.

She got Claire out, unlocked the house, opened some windows to air it out. Most of it wasn't as bad as she expected. The bathroom was clean, the bedrooms were tidy if a bit tattered, and the kitchen would probably have been disappointing for someone who cooked frequently though it seemed perfectly adequate for her limited abilities. Most the furnishings showed clear evidence of Mrs. Bill's attempts at upscaling, but there was something about the dated fake-wood paneling and the low ceilings that lent a warm nest-like feel to the whole place. The house had stood up for itself. It would do.

Outside again, she made a game of chasing Claire to each of Mrs. Bill's surveyor's flags, which she pulled out of the ground and stacked near the front door. She fed Claire some mac & cheese from a box, and helped her fashion a leash for her blue dog from a piece of sea grass. Claire dragged the dog across the sand as they walked out to the beach and down to the waterline. There were few other people on the beach. The sun was setting behind them. The water was relatively calm. Out past where the waves broke, they saw the bobbing heads of dolphins working their way up the shoreline.

As night came on, April tucked Claire into one of the small beds in the second bedroom with the fold-out railing she'd bought to keep Claire from rolling onto the floor. She told her the story about the barking dogs, and after she was sure Claire was asleep she took a bottle of beer out onto the old, worn deck that was built right onto the top of the house.

The moon nudged itself up and out of the dark water and illuminated a path across the waves to the shore. She wanted to think more about Alec here, to sort out her head where it was quiet, where there was nothing else and no one else to intrude on her thoughts and she found herself strangely unable to. She got mired in broad generalities and frustrated herself. She wasn't political and didn't want to be. War was a bad thing—what did that mean? And, so what? What did that have to do with Alec, the person? The world was full of bad things done for good reasons and sometimes good things came of them and sometimes they didn't. Her own country had invaded another country for what had seemed like good reasons at the time and people had died. Alec had died trying to chronicle it, to bring some clarity to the reality of what war really meant and to stand up for the men and women who were giving up their lives both willingly and unwillingly for the sake of an ideal. And maybe something good would come his work and maybe it wouldn't. She couldn't tell. She wondered how she'd ever explain those complexities to Claire. She wondered how she'd find a way to convey that Alec had died for something of value, when she didn't even know what that value was now herself.

The dogs were simply beautiful. Two of them dramatic brindles, one a deep elegant gray, one pure white. All of them greyhounds, former racers with the long, elegant snouts, the tattoos up inside of their ears, the tremendous rib cages and tiny waists and floppy ears that gave them a friendly, comical air. They surrounded April and Claire when Aravind let them in the door—a big moving cloud of waving tails, lapping tongues and the clatter of toenails across the elegant wood floors of the huge house. “They’re all friendly,” he said. “No worries.” Claire hung back at first, but as she stepped across the threshold the cloud of them surrounded her. As April watched, Claire tossed back her tangled curls, closed her eyes and held up her arms above her head. As the dogs pressed in from all sides a brilliant smile spread across her face.

After an initial flurry of interest, the dogs trotted back to the large living room, sprawling long-limbed across cushions and couches, climbing into chairs. “They shouldn’t be on the furniture,” Aravind said. “But...” He held up his hands in the same gesture of amused hopelessness her father had used. “They lived in cages their whole lives! Imagine. I thought they’d enjoy the space, and yet here they are. All in the same room. All on top of each other.” He laughed. “It’s all very American of me, I know. My wife would say I’ve lived here too long. She’d be right.”

He showed them briefly around the house; a humongous mansion, easily seven times the size of her small place. “We built it as an investment, of course. But also as a place for the girls to come. You see?” He pulled open a closet door, filled with woman’s clothing. “They come on holidays to humor me, but it is silly to hold a house such as this to use a week or two every year.” His voice echoed back from the high, empty ceilings. “My wife and I were fortunate in some ways,” he said, simply. “In others...” He started

to say something, and then stopped. “Well, enough of that. I’ll be placing it for sale shortly. It will belong to someone else, and we will go back to Atlanta and enjoy our mutual retirement.”

Alec would have thought it was all too much—the large empty rooms with elegant furniture, the expensive tile in the bathrooms, the multiple outdoor hot tubs (one for each of the three floors), the endless expanse of decking overlooking the ocean. Next door, to either side, was another mansion just the same as this one, and the row of them lined the beach out half a mile in either direction.

But she enjoyed the visit, the company. Aravind served her a spicy iced tea in a tall glass and had mango juice and tiny Indian crackers for Claire. Claire surprised April by actually eating them, one after another, straight through until they were gone. He told them about each of the dogs, their name, their temperaments, their habits. The white one hoarded things, small pillows, the other’s toys, Aravind’s own slippers. Two of them ate nothing but meat, and though he was a vegetarian he cooked beef liver for them nightly. When they were walked, they could never be let off the leash—they ran as fast as a small car and had no wariness of traffic. One of the brindles slept upside-down, legs in the air, her tongue lollygagging out of her open mouth. He hadn’t spent enough time with his own girls when they were young, Aravind said. They were his children now.

They leashed the dogs and walked them along the beach, looking at the long row of mostly empty mansions. And when they got back Claire lay down with the pack of them in front of the television. She fell asleep sprawled across the quiet white dog.

On the couch, with the end of a Disney cartoon on the screen, April felt the enormous weight of Alec’s death descend on her all at once, as if in the few hours of

distraction with Aravind it had been waiting for her, gathering strength. Her chest grew tight. She felt winded, as if she'd been running for miles. She thought she might be able to sleep for weeks on end.

She studied Aravind's face as he watched the cartoon. His beard was thick and soft and dark grey, like her father's had been. If he had been her father, there was so much she would have said to him. She would talk about how she missed Alec and how sometimes she didn't, and how badly that made her feel, and about how awful his death was and how she would never be able to bear the thought of it. She would talk about how raising a girl by herself was the most frustrating, most difficult thing she had ever done and yet how there were times that it seemed her whole life would have been wasted and without beauty if Claire had not become part of it. She would ask him what she wanted her to do now that everything had changed, and maybe he would tell her.

Hesitantly, knowing she was breaking all rules of decorum, she leaned over and rested her head on Aravind's shoulder. For a long minute he didn't react, didn't acknowledge her. But then he reached out, took one of her hands in his and held it.

Neither of them said anything. April felt her chest relax, her breathing deepen. On the floor, one of the dogs was running free in a dream.

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At home that evening, Claire ran about the small place with her blue dog in tow, admonishing it with a pointed finger, tossing it up in the air, holding it in her arms like a child and singing to it in her own way, silently, wordlessly. That night, April told her the

dog story, with a bit of her own extra ending. After all of the dogs went to sleep in the big dog house in the forest, the girl dog heard a noise. What could it be? She opened the door and went out onto the dog porch and there was a bear! It wanted to get into the house and eat all of the grilled cheese sandwiches!

“What did that girl dog do?” April asked. Claire watched her, wide-eyed, and shook her head. “That girl dog barked! She barked as loud and long as she could. And then the mama dog and the papa dog came out and they all barked together. And they scared that bear away. That little girl dog saved all of the grilled cheese! What a great job.”

“Mama,” said Claire.

April’s heart leaped into her throat, and she did her best not to show it. “Yes, Claire?”

“The papa dog didn’t bark. He just stayed dead.”

April bent her face down next to Claire’s and kissed the girl’s forehead. “But the mama dog and the girl dog scared that bear away all by themselves, didn’t they,”

“Yes,” Claire said. She leaned back and put her head on the pillow. “They were good barkers.”

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They saw Aravind and the dogs two more times before he left for Atlanta. The first was at a small independent bookstore off of the main road just north of Corolla. April and Claire pulled in and the dogs were tied up on the small porch out front.

Aravind came out with a book of old wooden boats under his arm. He saw them, stopped, and hesitantly met April's eyes. When she smiled, he matched it with a wide white grin and together with Claire they walked the greys up and down the dirt street, while Claire held the leash of one dog after another.

The last time was at the beach house. April and Claire were planting flowers to resurrect some old dirt beds along the front of the house, when Aravind's SUV pulled down the dirt lane. "Doggies!" Claire cried, pointing. She grabbed April's hand and pulled her out to the road.

"I am leaving today," Aravind said, climbing down out of the truck. He let the dogs out on their leashes. "I will not see you again for some time, I expect. So I have brought gifts!"

He handed them each a beautifully wrapped package despite April's protests. She took off her gardening gloves, had Claire put down her small, plastic shovel and brushed the dirt off of her small hands.

Claire insisted on opening both boxes, which held intricate, beautiful saris. The one for Claire was a beautiful bright red pattern across a white background, trimmed with a wide golden edge. April's was a bright red with a blue and silver border that caught the light and scattered it across the sandy yard. They were wonderfully intricate and light; April had never seen such rich, gossamer silk.

"They belonged to my daughters—I do hope you enjoy them. Though I'm afraid you'll need to learn the art of wearing them from someone who has had more experience than I."

"They're lovely," April said. "You really shouldn't have done this."

Aravind raised his hands in the air. “My daughters are modern women. What do they need these for?”

Claire was fascinated with hers, turning the shimmering cloth over and over in her hands. She held it up to April, an inquiring look on her face. “You can try it on later,” April said. But Claire shook her head, tap-danced her feet.

“I do not mind waiting,” Aravind said.

So April took Claire into the house. She brushed her unruly hair back into pigtailed and helped her out of the shorts and tank top and wrapped the long sari around her waist, over her shoulders. It was much too large for her, and it went around and around her slight frame, but when she was done Claire went and stood in front of the long mirror in the main bedroom, smoothing her hands up and down the shimmering folds of fabric.

“You too, Mama,” Claire said quietly, almost a whisper.

So April complied, quickly working the sheer material around herself. Outside it seemed noisier than she’d heard it before, the unfamiliar rumble of traffic on the dirt road, and she was conscious of Aravind outside, waiting for them. She tucked the ends of the sari in where they seemed to fit.

She stood side by side with Claire at the mirror, and there they were. She saw them through Claire’s eyes—the two of them transformed from the mundane into elegant, beautiful creatures of mystery.

The traffic came by again outside, old brakes squeaking to a stop, and as she was walking to the door she heard the yelp of a dog, a shout from Aravind. She rushed outside as other voices joined his, trying not to stumble over the sari, and as she pushed

opened the door she saw them all in tableau, as if they were all a painting; a mix of shades and vivid hues in the sun slanting in from over the water.

A small dump truck and a pickup with a confederate sticker on the back window had pulled up and parked behind Aravind's SUV. There were men inside, two of them with bright yellow hats, and one of the drivers had gotten out with an anxious look on his reddening face. Behind the trucks, Mrs. Bill's Lexus SUV pulled in, sunlight glancing blindingly off the windshield like the long, low carapace of a beetle. Aravind was in the yard near to the dump truck, bent down over something vivid and white moving on the ground, while at the same time trying to manage the leashes of the all the dogs who anxiously wrapped and rewrapped themselves around him. The white thing on the ground yelped again, and April realized it was one of the dogs.

She ran over to Aravind. Mrs. Bill shut the door of the Lexus and stood, surveying the scene with an imperious air, taking in Aravind, the dogs, at the two of them who she clearly didn't recognize behind the saris. "What's going on here? What's all this?" she said. "You people will need to leave my house this instant!"

"It's not yours," April said, bending down over the white dog, next to the fat, soft tires of the dump truck. The dog climbed to its feet awkwardly, like a new colt, holding a back leg up off the ground. She looked up at Mrs. Bill. "You can't just take what you want, don't you realize that?"

Mrs. Bill squinted in April's direction. "April? Is that you!" She came up and took April's arm and lifted her up onto her feet. "Honey, just what's going on here? Who's that... that man?"

“A friend of ours. Look...” But Mrs. Bill was still caught up in her own talking, waving her hands in the air. “But April, really. This is more than a little inappropriate, isn’t it? All of these animals on the property! And Alec’s hardly in his grave, and here’s this, this foreign *man*! What if the news people saw you here, dressed like this?”

April felt her face grow hot. Claire came up beside her to look at the dog, and folded herself fearfully against April’s legs watching all of them—Mrs. Bill’s sunken, intense eyes, the concern on Aravind’s face as he cradles the dog, feels down the dog’s injured leg. “We’re not at war with India, Sarah.”

Mrs. Bill turned and looked away. “Honey, it’s all the same, isn’t it? How many of our jobs do they need to take before we stand up for ourselves?”

April raised her hand, and with the weight of Claire and Aravind’s eyes and now the eyes of all the dogs in Carova on her, she turned Mrs. Bill’s stout carriage back to her and brought her open palm flat across Mrs. Bill’s carefully rouged cheek.

And later April realized that it was there, in that quick moment, that her life opened up before her like the beginning of the end to a bad dream. The lethargy and quiet indecision that stretched back to Alec’s death began there and then to flake away, and like Alec had before her she took a stand for something, someone she cared about. She stood in a place, Alec’s place that she would come to call her own, and like her daughter she began to find her voice.

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