

## **The Sisterhood of Water and Stone**

### **ONE**

Maybe it began with water and stone.

Twenty-four years ago, we lived on a rock. The Waterworks Colony in Jhansi was studded with dirty pink homes and one of them was ours. The quarter had a kitchen garden, a side garden and a main garden. My father was a Waterworks engineer with the government and we moved all over the country with his job, going from one pink or yellow colony to another, always chasing water.

Two-and-a-half-billion years ago, the earth was under siege from within. The earth fissured and spewed so much lava that the phase has a name—Archean Volcanism. Over and over this happened, making the new magma mingle with older magma on the surface. This created volcanic rocks and mountains. So one could also say that it all really began with mingled magma.

The volcanic effulgence makes one imagine the earth to be an inferno but in fact the sun was much milder those days, and the earth's temperatures remained between seventy and eighty degrees fahrenheit. The humid end of June in Jhansi was much more wretched. One year, fat jamuns fell from the tree in our garden, smooth and deep purple. My mother soaked them in salty water for an hour. Then she stripped off my three-year-old sister's clothes and handed the jamuns to her, which she ate with the pink juices running down her toddler's tummy, face puckered with delight.

No jamun trees existed during archean volcanism but there were organisms that had just started evolving to tap solar energy. Winds blew. They gnashed on the mountains and stones, carrying little parts of the earth to deposit elsewhere. In their wake, these antique winds left rocks and hills in misshapen states that—millions of years later—I would be tempted to call post-modernesque. Jhansi’s history is written in the geography of these hoodoos, mesas and buttes. Otherworldly landscapes that one day would give me earthly conundrums. But stranger things have happened.

For example, during the Neoproterozoic, an eruption near present-day Jhansi created the Bundelkhand Craton – one of the eleven cratons around the world. Roughly three-and-a-half billion years later, I would accompany out-of-town relatives on wildlife safaris to Shivpuri—an hour’s drive from Jhansi—in a white Ambassador car with blue curtains, and drive up and down the slopes of this craton, making me a part of the running history of this part of the earth. Or so I like to believe.

Two-hundred-million-years ago, the Indian subcontinent’s next-door neighbours were Antarctica, Australia and Africa. This supercontinent was called Gondwanaland, after central India’s Gonds, India’s original, ancient inhabitants. But this supercontinent started falling apart, making the Indian subcontinent float away, ever so slowly, towards the northern hemisphere. It took a hundred-and-fifty-million years for this chunk of land to collide with Asia, to buckle up from the impact and form the Himalayas, to make Jhansi the heart of India. Today Jhansi divides India into two halves. Far from the ocean, Jhansi is a dusty, a quiet town, an unlikely heart of a verdant, monsoon-rich country.

Twenty-four years ago, as if following the continental drift, we came to Jhansi on an overnight train. The Bundelkhand Express shivered while crossing a bridge. When my parents woke me up, I looked out through the iron bars of the coupé and saw a vast river of milky tea, the colour of chickoos and coconut husk. The river and we crisscrossed in our paths like compasses drawing intersecting arcs.

My sister insists that it began with that February train ride. Today the four of us are on a train to Jhansi again, trying to return.

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The train goes chook-chook-chook. It sways like a cradle, and we loll in the five am stupor. Outside, the hinterland rubs sleep from its eyes, it stirs amidst amber dust clouds and heat mirages, it bathes and brushes its teeth at public hand pumps, it holds hands and walks to school—oily-haired and navy-uniformed. Buffaloes waddle. Men squat in mango orchards. Vespas honk. The train goes chook-chook-chook. We sleep a fitful sleep.

We should know better. We should toughen up when the train glides over Chambal ravines. We should foresee when we pass Agra and don't spot the Taj Mahal floating behind factory smog. We should jerk awake when the train stops at Gwalior and the compartments fill with tea vendors' cries. But we continue to snooze.

And then the train crosses Gwalior. The train crosses Gwalior and the world turns bare. No tree, no grass, no shrub, nor bush. The sky is orange, the earth red and rough, studded with cliffs and boulders in surreal shapes that stretch to the horizon. Flat-topped mesas

and rugged ridges, mounds of rocks and pillars of stone dot the landscape in cinnamon and chestnut and salmon hues. Yellow dust eddies around this fallow land.

We lick our lips, we stare at this tableau of rock, outcrop and stony thrones. The ground is pebbly and dry—we remember it so well we can feel it under our feet. But all we can do is to look at each other, unable to say a word.

## **TWO**

I was ten when we came to Jhansi. On our first day, I wandered between the packed furniture—the TV triple-wrapped in Bombay Dyeing bedsheets, the blue fridge prostrate on the floor, my parents' entire combined life bound in packages of varying shapes. If you leaned against one, you could hear eleven years of marital transactions fidgeting inside.

The grounds of St. Francis' Convent School for girls—where my sister and I would study for the next two years—were also inlaid with blunt rocks and the kindly nuns had not thought of removing them. They made perfect seating for heady schoolgirls amidst a profusion of fuscia bougainvillea.

Our childhood was spent straddling these quartz reefs, climbing and unclimbing their slopes. This relief was created three billion years ago when a year consisted of 450 days. The creatures who lived on this land then did not breathe oxygen. Evening fell early, each day only twenty hours long. But by the time we came to occupy this part of the earth—when the lunch bell rang at one pm we spread our tiffin boxes on the mafic rocks outside the school chapel—the sun was still high in the sky, teasing out the blazing afternoon, making the silica-laden rocks twinkle.

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The train stops and starts and we lurch forward with it. The jagged crags run along with us; they outline the horizon like a lifeline ticker, tracing the canvas of a conjoined childhood.

More cliffs topped with miniscule shrines appear in the train's window.. The sky is vast, the floor of Jhansi lunar, unending—auburn and russett, a railway track here, an electricity tower there—paved with folded bedrocks that look warm, and inviting. Suddenly, the train is next to the mesas, raise your fingers and touch them. They are the colour of henna'd hands, of paan spittle, of black salt.

Today the cliffs pose as totems. These hills have shadowed our memories. Their geometry is surreal, like spelling a message in runes, an undeciphered script in quartz.

Some dreams last a lifetime, leaving you disoriented when you awaken. The train ride to Jhansi stretches like a rubberband. The train halts every two minutes and Jhansi is perpetually a station away. We wait, stalled on the edge of the city, like the moths that danced around their paraffin pyres in Jhansi's Sadar Bazaar, so close, so far. We're full of answers we cannot voice. We try to move, try to rub the cobwebs of this sleep-paralysis away, and fail.

### **THREE**

On the first Sunday of March, the Waterworks Colony's residents piled into Jeeps with canvas doors, the children sitting in the back over the spare tyres. We drove south across the Bundelkhand Tectonic Zone for a picnic by the Matatila Dam.

My mother had woken up at five am to make buckets full of fruit chaat. By the time lunch was served, the bananas had liquefied and the apples were soggy, but we ate them anyway, the rock-salt-laden fruits dissolving in our mouths.

The Matatila Dam stored Betwa River's water, which was used for irrigation and water supply in surrounding areas, but its waters had not reached Jhansi yet. Jhansi depended on the Pahuj Dam for its water supply, a tiny reservoir over the petite Pahuj River.

The year before we moved to the city, Jhansi had seen one of its worst droughts. The Pahuj Dam had dried up, bore wells had failed. There were proposals about connecting Jhansi with the Matatila Dam to ease the water shortage but nothing had materialised. My father talked to other officers and complained about this delay. Even on a March morning his temples were dripping with sweat.

Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first prime minister, had started India's modernization project in order to turn the country's face to the future. Even though in his later years Nehru changed his mind and called for smaller water projects as opposed to gigantic dams that fundamentally upset the ecological balance, at the beginning he had deemed dams the temples of modern India. My father, born in the first decade of independence, and made desperate by the conspiracy of Jhansi's earth, water, and winds, prayed at dams' altars.

A pastoral picnic on the shores of an environmental travesty seems comical now. But in those days our weekend trips—my parents called them “outings”—were to waterfalls created when a dam in danger of overflowing released water into the river and to pumping stations my father was inspecting. My sister and I have albums full of

photographs of us perched upon water tanks that held entire cities' water supply. There was nothing more consummate than the children of Waterworks engineers rolling in the soft grass by a dam, hedged in by a sapped landscape.

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The train reaches Sonagiri and we fight for the window. "Children, children," Mama says and we are ten and three once again, eyes shining, mouths ajar. The pearly Jain temples, a thousand years old, are sprinkled over the steep slopes of small hills. They look like the tiny white conches we collected from the Matatila Dam's banks. The temples appear grey through the train's grimy windows and we stare at them until they edge out of the frame. We know what's coming next.

When the Sipri Pahad comes into view, the shock of seeing something simultaneously so familiar and so forgotten is our denouement. The biggest mesa in Jhansi, it is the first marker of the city when you approach from the north. Countless childhood pilgrimages are contained in this visage of the mesa, in its flat top and rectangular shape, in its colour of a smoggy night.

These hills are a part of the Vindhya Mountain range that sprouts across India's centre like a diagonal line of acne. The laws of Manu—a breathlessly misogynist, casteist tract written almost two thousand years ago—beseached all Aryans, "the noble ones," to stay in the exalted land between the Himalayas and the Vindhyas, and deemed those who lived further south, mleccha, "barbarians."

To hell with Manu. Here we are, at the original precipice.

## FOUR

The Waterworks Colony was full of young couples with small children. There were weekly ladies' gatherings—always lunches—while the husbands were away at work and the children in school. The women played Bingo and trivia games, shared family recipes and histories. Then they served chickpeas drizzled with tamarind chutney, puff pastry stuffed with curried potatoes, pea cutlets, dumplings floating in sweet yoghurt.

On “Husbands’ Day” in April, after the children performed folk dances and the teenagers enacted a skit, the wives presented a qawwali about their engineer husbands. They crooned about the perils of burst pipelines and drying rivers and failed pumphouses. They winked at their men, arched eyebrows and shook heads while singing about nights spent alone taking care of their ill children—far from family and childhood friends—in alien towns every two years, while the spouses were away doing their jobs. There was fond laughter and loud applause.

Later, between bites of paneer kulcha, we ran amuck on the empty colony lanes, playing catch me if you can. The colony was on a hill and Jhansi’s rocks loomed around it.

This topography makes large parts of Jhansi uncultivable. The layers of rock do not allow water to percolate through, making the region prone to both droughts and floods.

In a country that has three months of monsoon, Jhansi sees rain, on average, for thirty-seven days every year. In a cycle of five years, two face drought and one is privy to excessive rain. The drought lasts three years, sometimes four. The wells dry up. The rivers are dammed. The dams run empty.



The word monsoon is derived from the Arabic “mawsim,” which simply means weather. But Jhansi, the middlemost polestar of India, is often left bereft even of these basics.

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Finally, Jhansi. Old Jhansi, new Jhansi.

The train passes over the main road. We look down at the traffic, and up at the fifteen-storey high petroleum tanks. Everything is the same, everything is completely different. Jhansi is oblivious to our presence while our hearts race.

We leave the train station and enter a taxi. The Jeep revs up. Here we go—we see Elite Cinema, where we watched our first film in a cinema hall (*Jurassic Park*). We see the police colony still full of neem trees, squat yellow apartments, and a gun shop. We drive past derelict churches with fading whitewash and overtake motorcyclists resting under date palms. We don't see the stores that rented out semi-pornographic horror films to us. We don't breathe in the goat curry smell that used to haunt the rental stores.

We turn left on Gwalior Road and come face to face with our childhood home, still painted the regulatory pink. Hackneyed questions: Was this road always so narrow? Was the parapet on which we read Enid Blytons always so low? Was the colony always so *small*?

Emaciated stray dogs slouch on the colony's slopes. The terraces of rocks we played on have been built over with garages. Trash stinks everywhere. There are piles of it, in between houses, by the main road, on the few remaining bedrocks. Only the colony's

trees are the same, the red gulmohurs, the yellow labdanum, the bitter neems, the fragrant eucalyptuses, now taller than the two-storeyed buildings.

Standing in front of a house that once used to be home, we're confused, but one thing is clear. Jhansi has moved on while we have clutched on to it, trying to hold water in a fist.

## **FIVE**

By May, Sandhya Sahu became my school-best-friend. We sat in a cavernous classroom that was once a church, rife with the smell of pencil shavings. Ceiling fans dangled above our heads like upside-down flowers. Sandhya and I told each other stories about shit, snot, and farts. We ate tart, club-shaped weeds the size of our fingernails that grew on mossy walls. After dusty squalls that turned afternoons into twilight, we caught dried pods floating in the air and peeled them to nibble on the seed inside.

In the Waterworks Colony, shrubs of wild roses fanned out like fishing nets, a tangerine tree bloomed with white flowers, and otherworldly cacti with glassy spines grew taller than my father. Croton leaves splattered with rainbow colours bloomed in terracotta pots and boxy henna hedges grew behind swings.

On Sundays our parents pulled Mouru and me out of bed and we sleepwalked to the Jhansi fort. Outside, middle-aged ladies in shiny sarees haggled with auto-rickshaw drivers. Little booklets about Rani Lakshmi Bai and junk jewellery lay spread out on the ground. Inside, the dusty ramparts were choked with weeds. They smelled of bat droppings and human shit.

During the summer break we went for computer classes to Mrs Neelu Khatri's house where we sat in a room with a small balcony, green walls, and a television with eight channels. Cycle bells and truck honks filtered in from the balcony. We wrote BASIC programmes and created Fibonacci series flowcharts and converted decimal numbers to binary while Mrs Neelu Khatri sorted her sons' laundered underwear.

We would continue to top computer exams even after leaving Jhansi. Our parents would be ecstatic, but we were glum. "Jhansi ki rani," Delhi boys would whisper to our backs and snigger. When we waxed our legs for the first time and wore the brown, pleated school skirt—oh, the excitement—Delhi boys said, "Abey, the queen of Jhansi is not hairy anymore," and we blushed and shrank, for to be called the martial queen of Jhansi was the worst label for a flat-chested teenage girl trying to be feminine, seductive, and soft. "The rani didn't care," we told each other at home. The rani rode horses and killed evil men with her sword.

Jhansi ki rani was not funny in Jhansi—she was gallant and gutsy. Wasn't it she who fought the British as they took over the Jhansi fort? Wasn't it she who jumped from the top of a six-storey turret and escaped the cruel British soldiers, her son strapped to her back? Look, the rani's temple. See, the cannon the rani used. There, there, the exercise grounds where the rani practiced fencing. A school named after the rani, a college, a swimming pool, gardens, traffic lights, all called Rani Lakshmi Bai. She was our Durga, our Diana, our Joan of Arc. Jhansi ki rani was everything, everywhere in Jhansi, seeping through our imaginations like water through sand.

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The Jhansi Fort towers over us, a castle with walls as thick as the length of an adult arm, riddled with turrets and parapets, and a martial, unbreachable facade. It levitates over the city on a hill and rises like an extension of the city's elderly mesas, its walls the colour of crocodiles that swim half an hour away in the Betwa River.

Jhansi is a deeply post-colonial city, its loyalties higgledy-piggledy in the mix of the fort, Victorian cathedrals, and Raj-era central railway relics. When the main gate of the fort—fifteen feet high—is wheeled shut, it forms the Union Jack.

The fort is synonymous with Jhansi's famous queen who is known across India for fighting the British East India Company to her death during India's first war of independence in 1857. In a war whose soldiers were all men, Rani Lakshmi Bai is exalted in Jhansi for her martial prowess, for her fatherly fighting and her motherly sacrifice.

We walk to a stone balcony in the heart of the fort and watch the city spread out beneath the battlements. The old city that once used to reside inside the fort's walls has long spilled out into a jumble of indigo-white terraces topped with black Sintex water tanks and TATA-Sky cable dishes. Our middle-aged tour guide calls Mama "Mother" and the spell is broken. We hug her and laugh. Twenty-four years ago, she was thirty-four, the same age as me today.

We reach St. Francis' Convent School at three pm, the students home, the school hushed, as if told to place a finger on its lips. We wheedle the watchman to let us in, and step under the gulmohur trees. We take selfies with the track field. We cross ourselves and proclaim, "It is an honour to work for God." We stop short at the grey-and-white

principal's office. The old red church building is gone. Its thick walls built in 1913 took up too much space, and now the new grey building has seven extra classrooms.

We crouch under the papery orange bougainvillea and remember the school's yellow colonnades. We walk out of the school into Jhansi's pediplain, this last stage in the evolution of landforms, the final result of an infinity of erosion, exposing the earth's inner layers.

Like a game of cards, Jhansi's soil is red and black. Mostly sandy loam, it barely holds water and depletes the water table. Loamy soils also erode and travel away with water when it rains. People dig deep into the earth for water, putting in illegal borewells, and in summer, the water underground dries up, and the handpumps bray yet yield nothing.

Water is nowhere to be found. Scorching westerlies blow and men tie towelettes around their ears. Wheat dies. Mustard dies. Barley, sesame and peas die.

Because of the nature of Jhansi's granite and the gneisses rocks, the dams slowly weep water into the ground as well, losing precious storage.

For all its dramatic landscape, when it comes to summer, Jhansi is a cliché. Barren soil. Absent monsoon. Cracked earth. Failed crops. In the last ten years, more than two thousand farmers have committed suicide.

## **SIX**

One evening in June, Mouru and I raced our bicycles with training wheels to intercept a mangy kitten sniffing around a broken waterpump and brought him home. We tried to feed the kitten rice pudding, but he only drank water and ran up the tangerine tree. Later

in the month the women held homemade ice cream parties to distract their families from the weather, the paucity of water, the incessant evaporation. My mother made orange ice cream. It melted in the heat, and I complained that it tasted like vomit.

There was no sign of rain. The Pahuj Dam started drying up and water supply became erratic. Jhansi's women walked into the Waterworks office with matkas on their heads. These earthen pots that they normally stored water in had run dry. To protest, the women smashed hundreds of their matkas in the office courtyard. A dirge of thirst, a lament of broken water pots.

Thirsty people started gathering at the office. A Waterworks employee was thrashed in the old city and, fearful of the public's rage, the officers stopped going to office.

My father was puzzled by the gap between supply and demand. He tied a local-style towelette on his head and walked into Jhansi's oldest, thirstiest neighbourhoods in the middle of the night.

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Now we've driven into the old city. The slim roads are full of metallic insects—motorbikes, scooters, scooties, bicycles. Men huddle and chat. The narrow gullies are flanked by whitewashed houses with wooden doors. An *Archies Gallery* that sells soft toys and *Hallmark* greeting cards has gigantic red velvet hearts hanging from the ceiling. They slowly rotate, as if in a music box.

Veins and arteries of pipelines intersect Jhansi, meeting at its heart of the Waterworks pumphouse. Being a Waterworks engineer means being intimate with the waterways and

the sewage lines of the city. Papa shows off, giving directions. He has not forgotten the gullies, the nooks, the house numbers and the open drains, some as big as small canals.

“Dekha? Yaad hai!” Papa shouts over the honking. “See? I remember!”

These streets had been quiet the night Papa waited here with eight hundred people, waiting for water at three in the morning. All of that June he came here every evening, going home only at dawn when the public had stored the water. First the residents were suspicious of him—no officer had ever done this before—but soon they were showing him illegal bore wells, leaking pipelines, valves that existed only on paper, contraband water connections, entire networks of fake water supply woven by hands thirsty for money.

## **SEVEN**

My sister loves the monsoon because she was born during a spell of rain in July. My mother baked a butterfly-shaped cake on her birthday in Jhansi. Our parties were earnest with brainteasers and quizzes, the answer sheets stained with oily fingerprints of children eating samosas. But after the cake with the pink and white icing (that my mother had spent the afternoon piping with her multi-shaped aluminum nozzles) was cut, a roar went up and the children were climbing on the sofa, dragging chairs to the walls, being lifted by grown-ups, to burst the balloons tacked on the walls. Mosquitoes buzzed at the window screens.

My father was not at the party. He was getting new hand pumps installed, having damaged pipelines repaired and the defunct ones replaced, dismantling illegal connections, ordering new electricity generators, pressing factories for unpaid water bills

and dictating letter after letter to be sent to the higher-ups in Lucknow, pleading to make long-term arrangements for water in the district. Your request is on file, they told him. As the Pahuj Dam shrank, the evaporated water left marks on the periphery.

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On the way to Sipri Pahad, we pass teenagers eating momos outside a barbershop, we drive through lanes flanked by purple and pink houses that have crept to the mesa's edge. We go up, up, up to the mesa, mysterious and grand under the setting sun, an unexplored menhir of a stony childhood. The city lies behind us, the fort is a blip in a corner. We are companions in nostalgia, in these subsets of associations. These Venn diagrams of memories hold us close.

About ten thousand years ago, many humans lived in central India's caves. Their chosen homes were away from monsoon-heavy jungles, but close to sources of water. They cared about hunting, about a goddess of fertility. They believed in life after death. Cave paintings from this era are said to be an evocation of talismans. By scratching scenes of a successful hunt on the walls of their cave-homes, our ancestors were willing them to come true. The earliest form of prayer, preserved in layers of rocks.

Did those primitive fingers touch Jhansi's stones? The Paleolithics were nomadic. Did any of them tread on Jhansi's gneiss complex rock? Did they—like our family—passing through, ever call this barren patch home?

## **EIGHT**



Lucknow was a mythical city, the Babel of the state government. Engineers were called to the city for “urgent” meetings by ministers. Government babus had incomprehensible designations: Principal Secretary, Special Secretary, Joint Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Every time Lucknow was mentioned, talk was of files going up and coming down and getting waylaid. As I grew up, I would imagine a grey tower filled with aluminum almirahs. Files levitated and fell. No one read these files. They just circulated in the belly of the tower, each file a Vladimir to some Estragon.

In August, Bundelkhand was declared drought-hit by the government. My father was frantic. He was getting the water in the city’s old wells tested. From about fifteen wells potable water could be drawn for up to two hours every day, filtered and pumped out to the public. One of these wells lay in the Jhansi fort, overrun by dried grass since 1917. Trying to make the remaining water in the dam last longer, it was decided that mohallas would get water on alternate days. Each day was a desert, no oasis in sight.

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The old Jeep gives up on the slopes, so we walk. We jump over open drains, we breathe their stink mingled with the smell of frying ginger and garlic. A dog barks and the sweet female voice sings, “Ram-Ram-Ram.”

We climb up the hill, ants on a wall, losing perspective, clambering towards the rock of our dreams. The houses are set haphazardly. We wander through the maze, the mesa overhead our guiding star.

Then the world opens up—there are stairs paved on the hill in front. We step upon empty cigarette packets and green-and-brown Kingfisher beer bottle shards. A pack of men starts following us, softly intoning obscenities, but they tire soon and fall away. The sun is setting, the evening azaan breaks out from a mosque loudspeaker. We count the steps as we go up. One, two, three, twenty-three, hundred, hundred-and-twenty, three-hundred, three-hundred-and-fifty-five, four-hundred.

Faces and creatures appear in the rock and disappear: half of an eye, a sulky mouth, birds of prey, flowers. Cicadas chirp, the sun dips and Jhansi grows behind us, stretching outwards like a roti being rolled out. The city is small, and around it, Jhansi's lonely rocks and the prehistoric landscape rest under the red darkness of late dusk. At the top we give up the count and turn around. We are alone with the rock, at last.

## **NINE**

On the fourteenth of August, Jhansi awoke to a transparent sky. My father cursed the gods, the water stealers, the climate, the monsoon winds, and the city of Lucknow in Hindi. The Pahuj Dam was dry.

My father spent the day composing a letter to the people of Jhansi. It was an openly sentimental letter, telling the residents about the drought, the drying of water sources, the irony of nature, their shared struggles. He requested the public to stay calm. People read my father's appeal in the newspaper on the morning of India's forty-second Independence Day. Hearts sank, throats parched. My father went to office for the flag ceremony and watched the flag hang limp in the still air.

At home my mother made feeble jokes about the incompetence of Indra, the god of rain. My family talked about mythological figures as if they were close relatives. Gods were lambasted with an easy familiarity during those mythic vagaries. My father went to bed feeling desperate and defeated.

Over two decades later, driving around Jhansi, I remind him about this day. He tells me that when he was a child people built pyaaos—public water houses where people could rest and have a drink of water—to earn punya, divine merit. Bringing water to thirsty beings was an act that led you to heaven.

“But we, we were charging people money for water,” he says, “and even then we failed.”

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The next afternoon, we walk to Rani Lakshmi Bai’s residence. The small, yellow mansion looks weary and old when compared to the fort.

The Jhansi fort is always milling with tourists gawking at the dungeons and gallows but the rani’s residence is empty except for the two women sitting in the central courtyard, entertaining a child with a doll, and a bored watchman. The limestone carvings on the walls have been painted over. The fountains are dry.

In deifying its queen-goddess, Jhansi has mostly forgotten about Lakshmi Bai the woman. The city only remembers her martial avatar, passing down mythical stories about her fencing prowess, her favourite gun, her lightning fast horse on which she escaped the British, making the fort focus of the city. The actual residence is mostly neglected.

Walking up the stairs, we are overlooked by the fading ceilings that were once lavishly coloured. But the queen's bedchamber is wholly crimson, painted with numerous variants of the tree of life, every inch of every wall covered with blue, yellow, green shoots and leaves and creepers undulating over the edges and around the corners. The room faces south-west and is incandescent in the late afternoon, the receding sun turning it ruddy. We feel drunk leaving the room, its claret hues burnished into our brains, and careen down the dark staircase to come face-to-face with hundreds of empty-eyed goddesses.

Stone sculptures of women stare at us from a myriad vantage points. Heavy-hipped women with lotuses in their fingers, yakshis and yoginis, mother goddesses and monstresses, dancing celestials, cloud maidens, river goddesses and man-eating rakshasis—some supine, some upright, others on their sides. Their brows are like bows, their breasts are like melons, their waists are like a swan's neck.

Carved between the ninth and twelfth centuries, these Chandela sculptures were excavated in and around Jhansi. The mansion is littered with them. There are no signs that tell you who they are or why they are here. There is no provision to protect them from rain, winds, heat, sun. The lithe tree spirits, the copulating river nymphs, the sleepy naginis are all lying manifest to the world and its elements inside this disremembered palace.

The Chandela aesthetic was all about soft curves and fluid transitions, rounded cheeks and almond eyes, graceful brows and gentle smiles. With their smooth surfaces, the sculptures sought to reflect a serenity of mind—an ideal state of being that comes from detachment.

Air, rain and Jhansi's sun pared away monoliths and gave them hypnotic contours. And now, like a microcosm, these figures—Jhansi's primordial stone pared by ancient hands—lie here awaiting another cycle of fate. It is perhaps apt that these forgotten female statues rest inside this abandoned palace. In being ignored by recorded history, by the government and by the public, they mimic the city of Jhansi, closing a melancholy loop.

## TEN

In the middle of the night, there were rumbles outside; my parents stirred in bed, dreaming of gurgling trucks that drove past Gwalior Road. A distant hiss—*sarsarsar*—could it be rain? My father opened his eyes and thought he was hallucinating. Together my parents scrambled to the veranda. Rain was pouring into the garden, ricocheting from the mud, running down the cactus trees and making the tangerine branches bobble.

It rained and rained that night, the sky tearing open, emptying nimbus clouds upon Jhansi's bungalows, churches, havelis, hovels, schools, offices, the red earth and the primeval rocks. It rained so much that by morning, the Pahuj dam was full. Monsoon had arrived.

At dawn, my father's colleagues turned up with boxes of mithai to celebrate. My mother fried pakodas and my father guffawed. Between sips of tea he kept saying, "There is water in the dam now, Meera, there is water in the dam."

Mouru and I tried to catch the warm raindrops in our mouths. We hopped around the house and stole sips from the adults' chai.

Mouru fished out her mathematics notebook and we tore out a chequered page. We folded one corner down to the bottom edge and stripped away the extra bit of paper. A square emerged. We folded down corner after corner, turning the piece of paper into smaller and smaller squares.

While my father and his team reconvened at the office to plan for the issues that accompany monsoon—sewage leaks, malarial mosquitoes, cholera outbreaks—Mouru and I pinched the two edges of the paper square and pulled it gently apart. A paper boat emerged.

We placed the boat in the rivulet that had sprung under the tangerine tree. The boat moved slowly—a splash, and it almost drowned—but then it picked up speed as Mouru and I screamed at it, running along. We giggled, woozy with delight we didn't fully understand. The boat bobbed forward in fits and starts. A fresh burst of water, a gust of wind—the boat sailed rapidly afar and disappeared around a bend.

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So many years later, my sister and I have come back to the Pahuj Dam with our parents. Jhansi gets her water from the Matatila Dam now—that pipeline finally in place—and the Pahuj pumphouse is decrepit.

The dam is really a small, bucolic lake. The trees around here are those that brave waterlessness—palms, dates, acacia babool, famine weed. Birds chirp under the sieved sunlight and in the middle stands the filtration plant, housed in low rooms painted yellow and red. We stumble upon three pump operators peeling tiny shrimp they have caught in the river, the fishy smell settling over the rapid gravity filters. They talk to us

enthusiastically but shake their heads when my father tells them his name and year of service.

By this time, my father has worked at bigger, more complicated sites, at higher posts, handling larger populations. My sister and I have moved away, gathered new ways of speaking and thinking.

My father, after working with the Waterworks for thirty-four years, will retire next month from this lifelong job that has brought him pain and punya. He is excited and nostalgic, but also a little subdued, standing at the bank of the Pahuj Dam. Without his retinue of officers, without him walking purposefully into the filtration plant to discuss the quality, quantity, logistics of water, my father seems lost, shrunken, smaller even than the small Pahuj dam, and I start questioning my desire to visit the past. Can you recreate a place that no longer exists? Can you ever go back?

My father walks to us, smiles and says, “Satisfied? Our train leaves in two hours. Let’s go home now.”

Shuffling feet on pebbles, one last look at soft water against withered rock. We hesitate; the moment feels too banal. The four of us pose in front of the dam—this edifice of water and stone—say cheese, click a picture. Just another family on a Sunday outing. Then we turn away.