



There were seven of us on the floor, all women – me, Ramona, Shirley, Bitti, Priya, Naina and Rukhsar. There was someone in the corner room but she kept changing, so I won't count her.

But that was later. First, in the monsoon of 1992, there is only me, the two girls in the corner flat, who are never home because of bosses or boyfriends or something, and the family across from me—Shivaleela and her many children. I never quite figure out how many children. They seem interchangeable to me, all their heads shaped like grapes, or perhaps there are twins who create this optical illusion. Despite their

## NO MAN'S LAND

Paromita Vohra



small heads, they cry ferociously. Each Sunday morning, I wake groaning to the sounds of their favourite TV show, the Hindi version of The Jungle Book whose theme song is lustily belted out by a child: "Jungle jungle baat chali hai, pata chala hai/ chaddi pahan ke phool khila hai, phool khila hai." ("there's a rumble in the jungle, a new flower is born and it's wearing undies!"). I hear the kids voices echo the last phrase in delight – "chaddi pahan ke phool khila hai, phool khila hai!" Undies are something of a theme with Shivaleela's family. Her husband, for instance, wears brown VIP Y-fronts. I know this because he displays them of his own accord, on his own self every evening when I come home from work. Holding a steel tumbler of rum, he leans against the doorframe, regarding me with slow bewilderment and generic affection as I sidle past in the narrow corridor, and furtively opened my lock. Each night is a contest – will I get in before he gets me? Just as I think I have almost made it he catches the tail end of my quickly thrown half nod- half smile and says, just as he has the previous night – "Kya bhabhi, aaj bahut dinon baad?" (So sister, long time no see?).

### Leave and License

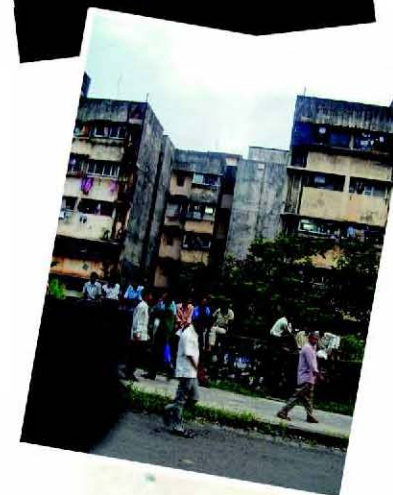
Living On My Own is not turning out to be what I had imagined. My fantasies of myself as a single woman in

a Bombay flat perhaps had a greater resemblance to life in Manhattan, but then, I hadn't really seen any women living alone except in American movies, had I? Bombay had been a sort of home, where I came to my grandmother's every school vacation. My grandmother lived in Bandra and for me, the city began at Carter Road with the sea, the sunset and bhelpuriwala and ended at Linking Road where I accompanied my mother as she bought slippers, bits of fabric and sunglasses – and if I didn't harass her too much, green coloured kulfi in a cone from the stall near Lucky's.

Afternoons in Bandra were sleepy in the shade of (check name) trees, spent playing with my miniature tea sets or drawing with my pink and white Flora pencil in the garage connected to the house or reading Richie Rich comics in the cool, dark cocoon of the old Cadillac parked in the back compound. Sometimes, when an uncle visited from abroad and stayed at the Taj Mahal hotel downtown, there would be the long drive from home to there, carried forward in the city's glamorous dark, with lights that whizzed and buildings and billboards which loomed, and exciting traffic. When you saw the red and white striped concrete awnings you knew it was almost Pedder Road and in a bit you would be debouched into the air-conditioned smell of a five-star hotel. And while grown ups drank and talked in a distorted buzz behind, you could sit at the window and watch the overstuffed tourist boats and the small figures of people at the Gateway of India.

My idea of living alone in Bombay was Bandra by day and Manhattan by night. I could picture myself at the large window of my flat, in loungy pyjamas, a glass of wine in my hand, looking out at the twinkling lights of the city. But soon enough, like in the movies, fantasy collides with reality to the screeching sound of tyres.

Reality is a special Bombay thing called Leave and License. This is not a term that celebrates the liberated life. It is, cruelly, the very opposite. It is a living arrangement under which you are not a tenant with rights under the Rent Act but merely a passer through – someone who has been given leave to live (and license for nothing) in a flat for one day under 11





months. (Living in the premises 11 months would give you tenant's rights and make it very difficult for the landlord to expel you.) At the end of 11 months you could revise your agreement – and the landlord usually does, by raising the rent and refusing to fix the leaking ceilings. However nothing can stop the landlord from terminating this arrangement, with a month's notice should you show unruly habits or a little too much cheek and nowadays, perhaps the wrong politics.

### Refugees and PAPs

As a lowly assistant in documentary films at the absolute margins of Bombay's film industry, I was in fact getting to be a veteran leave and licensee. I had a brief stay in a flat on Yari Road, which did indeed face the sea. If I ignored the intense smell of drying fish from the fishing colony across, the disapproving looks of the neighbours whenever I opened the door and they saw that I owned nothing but a mattress and a cardboard box, or that I had to stand all my vegetables in a plate of water so the ants wouldn't get to them – well, it was almost there, lapping at the hem of my fantasy. Another year and I could afford the glass of wine. But then I was thrown out so I moved further out to a flat near a sort of hill, well, actually a mound, which I fancied was a view. The charms of the view were a bit obscured by the glare of the fluorescent yellow walls and the fact that the water came for only 10 minutes in the day and the rent was more than half my salary and that at the end of the month, either my electricity got cut off for non-payment or I had to figure out which friend I could discreetly hit on for dinner.

I was a refugee from Leave and License. If something did not come along, I feared that I might lose my nerve and go home. So that's how I came here to PMGP.

A friend who works for a big Bollywood director tells me film assistants (at least those in the know, unlike me) are all talking about this place called PMGP. It has one room with a little kitchennette and an attached bathroom and the rent is only 700 rupees. So we get into an auto rickshaw and

venture into the inner reaches of Andheri (East). The further we go, the more I will the rickshaw to stop at every passing block of flats we pass – let this be it, it looks nice. But it is a while before we turn into a wide but broken road lined on either side by tiny grey building with a valiant trim of red. In one step, I have gone from my fantasy to my father's worst fear – that, rejecting every decent middle class option he has struggled to provide, I will move to Bombay, join the movies and live in a chawl.

Technically PMGP is not a chawl – that Bombay landmark of one room tenements with common bathrooms and a communitarian balcony corridor. It is blocks of very low cost housing for people who had earlier lived in a slum near a factory they call Aeltee. I later realise they mean L & T (Larsen and Toubro). The slum has been uprooted by the construction of a new road and they had been relocated to this neighbourhood – a working-class enclave in the middle of an upper-middle-class area. My neighbours are people that development experts called Project Affected Persons or PAPs.

But no one actually asked the PAPs what kind of house they wanted to live in. When the Congress Party was celebrating the centenary of its founding, Rajiv Gandhi – the party's head and Prime Minister at the time – announced a billion rupee grant to Bombay for slum redevelopment, improvement and urban renewal in Bombay city. Of this bounty was our colony built and so christened PMGP or Prime Minister's Grant Project. Clearly the housing was designed more for middle class people – yes it was only one room, but it did have an attached bathroom and a marked off privacy from the neighbours and to my middle class heart this made it different from a chawl. But to working class people this was no good. They could not afford the monthly charges for water and electricity and maintenance. They didn't like living this way, all separated off and hemmed into a 10' by 12' room. If they sold coconuts or utensils, it was pretty hard to carry their stuff up and down the stairs. Besides, it

wasn't close to where they worked. So it was that they found another slum or chawl on the other side of Aeltee, rented out their rooms and in a strange twist of development, became the more powerful party of a Leave and Licence Agreement, while middle-class folks like me, supplicant and resentful, moved our mattresses and cardboard boxes in, all the better to live the Bohemian Life.

### Off, Off Mahakali Caves Road

To find a place in PMGP was not difficult, but you had to go there first. The road did not quite have a name. You had to turn off Mahakali Caves Road and then turn into a road off that and then you asked someone on the street for a Mr. Kante. Mr. Kante was a short man with his hair combed back and a perpetual look of childish distaste. Cheating you did not upset Mr. Kante. He did it with a sense of duty, with a mournful look. It was he who had brought the Leave and License to PMGP. He once worked as a mechanic but was quick to pick up on the possibilities of the situation and, like a good Bombayite, turn it into commerce and become a property broker – unregistered of course. Word travels quickly in urban villages, so he was doing pretty well on word of mouth. If he got you a place and it needed some fixing up – an extra plug point, a little whitewash – he would have it done. Broker, contractor, what's the difference?

The colony has one wide central road with a slope towards the end. Each building has two wings, five floors. Each floor has 7 flats, (with red doors and windows, a sort of cuteness for the masses).



That makes 70 families per building. No lift, of course. As I walk up, I can look inside the houses because hardly anyone closes their doors. On the first floor, the owner has already asserted his personality and painted the red door brown and the white wall pink. He has a large framed photograph of Bal Thackeray right in front of the door. In the corner room of the second floor lives the onion-seller from the corner. His walls are painted an aqueous green and they glow at the end of the dim corridor. In front of the door is an iron bed, on which he sometimes sleeps if it is his



wife's turn to mind the shop; under the bed, high piles of deep pink onions. On the third floor there is a Keralite family with two kids, their noses round and eyes densely black and I have to step over their toys to get to the next flight of stairs. The mother, slim, long-haired and very pregnant, cooks some fragrant coconutty thing over a kerosene stove and glances at me with her long shy eyes.

Finally, I come to my floor, the top floor, where I sidle past Shivaleela's husband and let myself into the room with the uneven floors, which I am trying to make home.

### My Maternal Uncles

The day I move in, I deposit several cardboard cartons and my two cane racks in the house and stand looking out at what really is a view. Small green hillocks that house the Mahakali Caves for which our road is named. There is a mist of monsoon drizzle and standing in the balcony, I



think, well, everyone has to start somewhere. I will start next week. So I go off to stay at a friend's for a few days.

When I return I see the cardboard cartons still tied and taped but torn off at the top. Someone has gouged out a hole in each of them. I stand there in shock, my heart trembling. How had they got in? The door was locked. Could it have been the windows? What could they possibly want from my modest possessions? When I open the cartons I see that a hole has been tunnelled into the boxes from top to bottom, as if an electric saw has gone



through it, cutting up everything in its way – clothes, books, candles, plastic mugs. Why has this happened? Is it just anger against a middle-class person moving here, or malicious harassment of a woman alone? My mind searches wildly for an explanation and I sit down and weep.

A few days later, coming home late with my friend I stop to fix my shoe and she calls out – “Look out!” I see a dog running full speed at me and can't move past in time. It hits my leg with all its weight and as its long tail slithers over my foot I realise the dog is actually a rat. A big, bad Bombay bandicoot. And this it was that has tunneled through my boxes.

In Bombay people do not say the word Rat. They say Maama (maternal uncle). “Don't leave the

door open, Maama will get in.” They fear invoking the name will cause it to materialise. I wish I had learnt this earlier because I say Rat all the time and obligingly, they infest my house. I keep a broom by the side of the door. I unlock the door, enter, lift the broom, and as two or three rats scramble on hearing me enter, I desperately chase them out. But they are bold and resourceful. They make homes inside the pile of old newspapers, behind the kitchen utensils, in the bathroom loft. They scabble and shit and make my house smell. They eat up my clothes and books routinely. They are huge beasts with the demonic ability to squeeze under doors and through cracks if you don't shut the window tight. I stuff the bottom of the balcony door with magazines to stop them coming in. But I'm a bundle of nerves, kept up all night by the sound of them gnawing to get in. In the morning, drained as a survivor from Jurassic Park, I open the door to see half the magazines eaten up, dangerously close to the door's edge. One day I pick my jeans off a hook and feel they are strangely heavy, and then a rat scurries out of the seat of the pants.

Late at night there are sounds outside my door. I ignore them but they get louder and I open the door. Six men who I've often noticed sitting in a group at the front of the building stand there. Scarred by my serial evictions, my heart sinks. They say they are the building maintenance society and they want the monthly maintenance money. All the time their eyes keep trying to look over my head into my room. Annoyed I say – “Well, this is no time to ask for it.” “What do you want us to do?” one man asks roughly. “We work all day and after that we get the time to do the building stuff.” “Well would you like it if six men came to your house at 11 when your daughter was alone?” I shoot back, pleased by my balance of aggression and appeal to their paternal instincts. “What!” shouts another man, “We are old enough to be your uncles. Are you casting aspersions on our character?” Tricky territory. We stand there staring at each other. I backtrack a little. “Anyway I don't have it now. I'll give it to you later.”

“When?” “I'm going out of town for a day or two – so after I return.” They mutter a little and leave. Before I can get back into bed, there is a knock again. A young man from the posse stands there. “Yes?” “Er...I was wondering, are you an air hostess” he asks hopefully. I stare in outrage, knowing that air hostess is boy shorthand for available and loose. “NO” I bark. He backs away from my glare, “No, its just you said you were going out of town for a day or two and....ok, goodnight, sorry.”

### Kya Cheez Hai

There are a handful of people like me here, all working in the movies, living alone, keeping odd hours, wanting to buy strange things from the grocers. I go in and ask “Cheese hai?” (Got cheese?) The shopkeeper looks perplexed – “Kaun si cheez?” (What 'thing' – cheese/cheez being the Hindustani word for thing). No working class person would blow 40 rupees on a tin of cheese. Or corn flakes. Or Maggi noodles, that staple food of those who live alone. For these luxuries we must walk down to Takshila market in front of where the white-collar folks live.

The PMGP locals regard us with a mixture of curiosity and hostility. We regard them gingerly, with a class uncertainty – not knowing how to live next door to the people whose houses we had never previously been inside. Sometimes at Andheri station I get in an auto rickshaw and the driver says, “PMGP, right? I've seen you around, I live in number 8.” My friend's household help lives on the ground floor of her building. On the surface, like a socialist ideal, we all live in the same type of house, but the interiors belie our different worlds. They have aluminium utensil racks, Godrej cupboards, laminated shelves, maybe a box bed. We have handloom cushion covers, chatais (straw mats), a van Gogh print taped to the wall or a kitsch Hindi movie poster, handmade pottery coffee cups and books and tapes. One man looks long and assessingly at my rack full of music cassettes and finally asks – Do you have a music shop?

But slowly our numbers grow. More people working in film and TV begin to move in. Some even have the money to buy, liberating themselves from the 11-month cycle of you-know-what. Renovations and improvements, each designed to build an illusion of space, become the centrepiece of conversation. “Did you hear R has broken down an entire wall and made French windows?” “I heard V has a full length mirror in his bathroom. I pretended I had to go so I could see it with my own eyes!” “You should check out H's new sliding windows – powder coated, a fabulous yellow.”

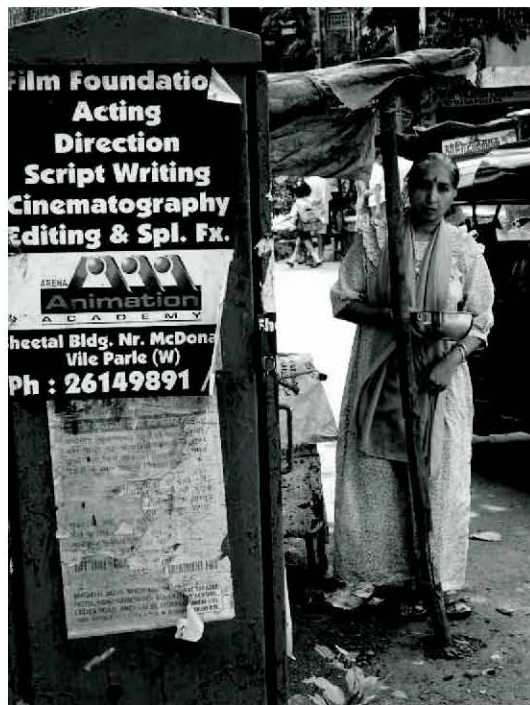
Strolling down the street I get used to someone calling out from their window – Hey, I'm making fish, want to come have dinner? Or, going out of the house to look for an electrician, being waylaid by someone who says – Coming for a movie at Pinky cinema? I begin to lose that don't-look-at-me-I'm-not really-here walk. I am no longer careful, I stand at the crossing and chat with a friend till 3 a.m. in the cold night air. This is a parallel universe, the Left Bank of Andheri (E) or some such. I live in PMGP, but in my head it's somewhere else. I still need to meet my



neighbours but they are from a distant place of maintenance money and quick staircase smiles.

Slowly PMGP is changing. More of us enter, more of the original inhabitants leave. Slowly my hostile neighbours are becoming a little, could it





quite bloom, the hard urban ground not fertile with trust. Best friends come to find the gold together, stay up long nights with tea and rum, writing the perfect script on pages of foolscap and when nothing comes through, become disenchanted with each other because one seems to have lost his purity and the other seems to be living in the reality of Allahabad or Benaras or Jhansi. They're all on their way to something better, there is a desperate optimism in the street.

Meanwhile my compendium of Facts on Rats is growing. They do not eat onions but love bread, potatoes, grain and will take a dainty bite of a carrot, maybe try out a tomato – but mostly they prefer a high-carb, high-protein diet. They love wire. I get used to coming home every night to find the cord of my table fan nipped in two. I stoically shave it with a knife and join it with scotch tape again. The Rats can scramble up five stories to attack me and if I retaliate they sprint up the edge of a thin cotton curtain and make their nimble escape with the swish of a fat pink-ridged tail. Their teeth are always growing so they have to keep filing them by gnawing at say, your new leather shoes, or your umbrella. They shit copiously. I sincerely believe that if I never make a movie, this Rat encyclopaedia that I am constantly writing in my head will be my ticket to fame.

### Nothing Happened

One January morning in 1993, I wake to the sound of thudding feet on the roof. A short while later, a banging on my door. In the building across people are standing on the roof, pointing to something in the far distance. I go up – there is a fire somewhere in Jogeshwari. It is the 6th of January and the city just calming from terrible communal riots flares up again.

There is chaos on the street, boys running past, chains in hand. A friend who sees me says, "If you have somewhere to go, just go there now and don't come back for a few days." The boys with chains have been chasing a Muslim woman across the quadrangle inside the colony and my

friend's brother runs to stop them. They hit him on the head and while he bleeds, no rickshaw stops to take him to the hospital and no one helps him. This is not the worst thing that I hear and see over the next few days as the riots eat through the city like the Rats ate through my cardboard boxes.

Two weeks later, I venture back and stop to pick up my clothes from the dhobi. "Oh, we slept in fear these last days," he says, in his UP accent. "Boys running up and down in the night. But nothing happened, they were just calling out obscenities, nothing happened."

### Message in a Dosa

All things come to she who waits. And two things come to PMGP. The first is Shetty's Dosa Cart. The second is Prakash bhai's telephone shop.

The first offers a new delicacy – spring dosas i.e. dosas stuffed with crisp slices of capsicum and tomato and crunchy onions, cut up like a Chinese spring roll. The second offers a message service. Prakash bhai has not one, but three phones. For a small fee, that phone could ring for you and Prakash bhai, chewing pan and speaking mostly in grunts, will take down a message. You may collect this message at any time but he will not come up to give it to you – unless it is a matter of death – it says so in a big notice on the wall.

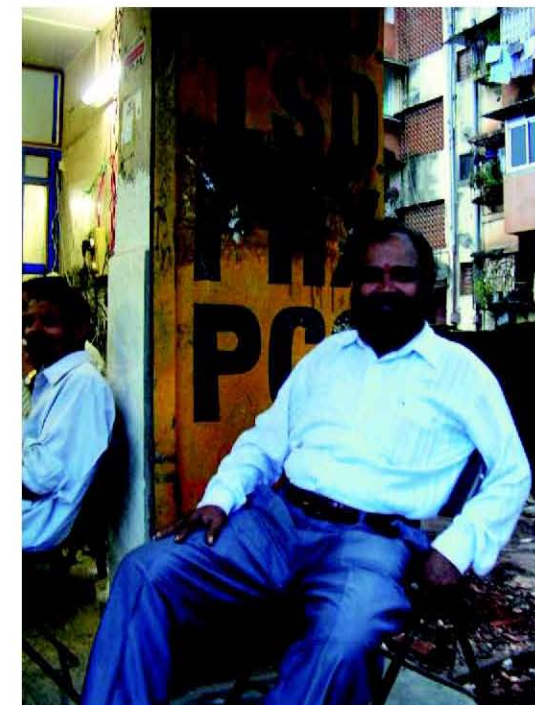
The shop is big and empty except for calendars. It is not long before the long-haired actors and the unemployed strugglers are ensconced in the steel chairs, waiting for the phone to ring. This is not something Prakash bhai has bargained for. After a few abuses and loud complaints, he puts up pieces of paper that say – 'No loitering, Sitting in the shop without work is strictly prohibited and will be presecuted.'

Prakash bhai knows exactly what's going on in our lives now. You may be discreet and studiously casual when you pass by for the eighth time asking, "Any calls for me?". He looks at you intently and says – "No, He didn't call" and you scurry off blushing. Or if you happened to be

walking past on the main road he calls out loudly – "You got a call, about a job, they want someone from tomorrow." You run anxiously to the shop and he allows you to break the line of people waiting to make STD calls – "Let her call, it's about a job."

But it's not enough for Prakash bhai to be privy to every detail of your life. He also feels he must tell others about it – "Did you hear, M was called for an audition for some role by B.R. Chopra? Arré, but his luck is bad, and actually he hasn't got that special something, you know? I have been in Bombay for many years, I can take one look and I can tell you he is not going to be a star." So of course when M does not get the role, we all look away guiltily.

Prakash bhai also offers a facility called conference call – he will connect you through his phone line to a long-distance call. But he will also put you on speaker phone so that everyone can overhear you tell your true love you've been





seeing someone else, or your mum tell you that Jatin uncle is bringing a jar of jackfruit pickle for you from Delhi, or you telling your share broker to buy 500 of Nestle and drop the 2000 of ISP.

The only person really amused by this is in fact, Prakash bhai. Everyone else is somewhat embarrassed but no one dare tell him to stop because he's dictatorial and will throw you out of the shop abusing loudly and what's more, you may never get a single message again.

I am treated fairly well, though. This is partly because my racy status as a single woman in the colony has been usurped by the ever-growing numbers of aspiring actresses, all curvaceous and enticingly dressed. Not only are they walking on the central road in shorts, they are also on TV and this somehow renders them public property. In the light of their morally ambiguous position, I become a venerable elder, a respectable prior inhabitant, with more right to deference and claim to space than the new immigrants.

The other thing is The Times of India. A journalist friend, newly returned from the USA, asks how to get in touch with me and is told of the message service. Intrigued she calls and Prakash bhai tells her all my comings and goings, including what I might have to do tomorrow because I got a call from my aunt asking me to come over for Janmashtami pooja. She is invited to come to his shop from where he will direct her to my house. She does a feature piece for The Times of India and as I am the midwife who has put Prakash bhai's shop on the map, I am forever after a valued customer for whom all rules can be broken. If I choose I may loiter in the shop without work, and without fear of presecution.

We also get a bank. It's quite plush and we are the first ones to open accounts there. My account number only has 3 digits. Almost every time I go there the bank manager is yelling at someone – "How did you sign for your father? Should I call the police? Huh? Should I? Trying to cheat us?" while the culprit, from Building no. 15 or 12

hangs his head down and mumbles, "Sorry, I didn't know, please forgive me this time."

Shetty's business is also growing. The first Shetty has given us a place to hang out but the second one has given us what all Shetty's are supposed to – dosas, idlis, vadas, uttpams, cheap and good. Sometimes he coyly slips the women a card for Saumya Beauty Parlour, which is located in the building behind where the cart stands. "My wife," he says, shyly and goes back to loudly distressing the dosa batter. The wife operates the salon with a very thin and timid helper, while her daughter, three-year-old Saumya, walks in and out with the certitude of someone who knows the place is named after her. She usually chooses to do this as you sit with your legs apart and your skirt hitched up having your legs waxed. The wife never shuts the door, so the women next door as they cut vegetables or make bidis or bindis are given one more gaping view of your foreign behaviour. Complaints bring only a shy little laugh from the proprietor. Somehow you feel this husband and wife team will go far on the strength of that laugh.

**Pyaar Hua, Ikraar Hua (Sing It! We are in Love!)**

Behind PMGP a whole new MHADA colony is coming up and the central road winds upwards between its pink and mauve buildings, as yet unoccupied. Some nights, my friend and I walk up this empty road. The neon lights shining off the perfect unused road and the full moon make us feel like we are on a film set. Any moment now the rain will come down and we will sing a song of love under a black umbrella.

I go away for six months and when I return PMGP looks different. More shops of course – a medical store, a jeweller! Old shops are getting shiny counters and gleaming jars. The sugar isn't wrapped in paper any more but poured into a plastic bag. When I argue that it's not a good thing, the owner laughs. "You're very strange madam. The others will start fighting with us if we don't give them a plastic bag. Everyone wants to go forward and you want to go backward."

The two girls who moved in at the same time as I are gone. The benches outside the chai shop are vacant. And Shetty's dosa cart is altogether missing. On the ground floor of my building is a shop with inscrutable tinted glass windows. The sign says Detective Agency.

I am mystified. I consider hiring a detective to enquire into these changes. But there are other ways...

"Where have you been?" Prakash bhai asks "There was a message from you from your friend B, he wants to borrow your still camera." The message is four months old. Prakash bhai tells me many people have moved. Suddenly there are so many new TV channels and so much work, their upward mobility has accelerated. They are all gone – the cameraman and his girlfriend who lived in the corner flat, the editor and scriptwriter who lived in no. 16, the assistant director and the actor couple from No. 13 – moved on up to Poonam Nagar or Gokuldharm and Saibaba complex in Goregaon (East). The one's who really did well have moved to Lokhandwala Complex or Yari Road in Andheri (W) where they can live next door to Amrita Singh or Akshay Kumar.

A few days later I do run into one of my older friends on the road. He's house hunting. "Moving back here?" I ask. "Oh, no. I can't do that. I mean once you've moved to the West, you can't move back to the East. People will look at your number and when they see it begins with 8 instead of 6, you could lose work."

But what about the dosa cart Shetty? "Oh, he has bought a shop in Takshila market." Indeed it's there, the first Udipi on Off Mahakali Caves Road – Shreekrishna Udipi. He smiles shyly when I enter. Nestling by the side of the Udipi restaurant is the better half of the enterprise – Saumya Beauty Parlour. As I am leaving, the door swings open and little Saumya flounces out in a pink frock, leaving the door ajar. A woman, her face covered white with bleach is revealed to the street for a few moments.

## Home Alone

Gentrification: the process by which higher-income households displace lower-income residents of a neighbourhood, changing the essential character and flavour of that neighbourhood.

Analyses of the changes in a neighbourhood like PMGP would use that word when the film assistants replace the coconut sellers. What's the word when the film assistants leave to be replaced by another category of people who come from a no-man's land of shifting class?

I am a bit adrift. My playmates are gone to their true homes – the 2 BHK (2 Bedroom Hall Kitchen).kind of homes. They are in Vijay Sales buying red refrigerators and new TVs. In pursuit of their dreams, they do not mind moving to Kandivili because Bombay for them lies where the film and TV offices and studios are and the commute takes them maybe as far as Bandra. They are at large in a different city from mine.

When I moved here, just the thought that saving so much money on the rent meant I could have a life I enjoyed and which only this city offered me – going into 'town'—downtown Bombay—sitting at Marine Drive, eating a Frankie, while I lovingly surveyed my purchases from New and Secondhand Bookstore or the scratchy 45RPM wrapped in protective plastic bought from Furtado and Sons.

Now, after 3 years, there is a big question in my mind. To commit or not to commit?

I buy the room right next to mine, because even though the neighbours are unfamiliar, the fourth floor of building 17 A seems like home. At least moving will be pretty easy.

On my floor there are two new families. On my left is Shirley, a glistening dark-skinned Catholic girl, her flamboyant sister Ramona and Ramona's daughter Bitti, an earnest and quiet eight-year-old with a katori (pudding bowl) cut. On their door

they put up a little plaque with the Infant Jesus that says Bless this House. On their walls they put up mounted photographs of Bitti standing next to Kajol inexplicably with a towel around her waist. They also have a Karaoke machine and several enthusiastic friends who come in to drink and sing loudly each night. On my right is Rukhsar, a ravishing woman with long dark hair, flawless skin, big innocent smile, languid eyes, a womanly walk and a son, Shoyu, as cute as his mother is beautiful.

The long-eyed woman on the third floor had doubled her family and the floor outside her door is lined with shoes in various miniature sizes. The onion seller still sleeps on the iron bed with the onion treasure underneath. But the fourth floor is a different matter. Women keep their doors open and there is constant traffic between houses – “Rukhsar, you have any coriander?” “Shirley, is Shoyu in your house? My god, this boy will just kill me one day, he keeps crawling off and disappearing.” If they see me at the door they hesitate, drop their voices and carry on. Sometimes Rukhsar says – “Sorry, madam.” I suppose I should be relieved she doesn’t add a ji to it.

I really feel that I am alone, at home.

I come up the stairs carrying too many things. The women are standing on the landing chattering loudly. My environmental crusade against plastic bags means that if I forget to take a bag I have to walk with several things cradled in my arms. The women watch my balancing act as I try to unlock the door with half a hand. I drop a bag of milk, which bursts in a big white bruise over the floor. Before I can control it, the word slips out – “Fuck!” The silence spreads as thickly as the milk. Then they help me mop it up. This is the first time I am actually talking to them.

A little later, Shirley comes to my house holding a cup of milk. “It’s morning, no, so I am sure you went to get it for your coffee. I thought you might be needing some.” I am nonplussed by her

kindness. I say, “Oh, no no, it’s ok, I’ll get some more later.” “Take no men,” she says. “We are all neighbours only. And you know what I say, you and me we are both the same no, single. These people here won’t understand. Us single girls must stick together.” I smile inanely. Before going she says, “I know you only drink coffee, I never see tea leaves in your garbage, no.”

Shirley and I find much to unite us after this event, other than our singleness and the fact that we both speak English. We both tend to burn the rice for instance because we start doing something else after putting it on the fire. We both like to work and to spend time alone. Both our sisters are beautiful and more sociable. In fact Ramona is not only sociable but positively bountiful. She is often to be seen surrounded by red chillies soaking in a bowl, fish or meat lying heaped on a thali and ivory slices of garlic as she scrapes coconut for its milk. Ramona loves to make cauldrons of green curry crab, red fish curry, sausage pulao and pepper chicken and to feed it to others. She looks at my pale soups and pert salads and says, “We can’t eat your food, men, what all ghash phus.” (leaves and rabbit food). In fact, she clearly thinks I shouldn’t eat my food either because each mealtime my doorbell rings and Bitti is sent with the message, “Coming for dinner?” Once in four times I agree, which makes that pretty much every other day. I take along the ghash phus anyway as my contribution because it alarms me that they never cook any vegetables ever. To these meals, Rukhsar too brings her bit – usually a chicken stew made Madhya Pradesh-style, thin, intoxicating with coriander smells and super spicy. Rukhsar understands no English, and Ramona and Shirley both frequently say things about her to me in English, while she looks on sweetly. When I suggest this may be rude, Ramona looks perplexed – “Why? What is there? We are not saying anything bad. If your heart is good who cares, men?”

Of course I am curious about these robust women. But I am too genteel to ask the questions. How can you afford this food when you don’t

seem to do any regular work? Where is Shoyu’s father and where is Bitti’s dad? I am also scared to ask questions, because despite the outward conviviality, I don’t really want to share my feelings. These I keep for my other friends, the ones who don’t live here anymore.

Eventually intimacy comes by the most trite route – alcohol.

While we eat Ramona’s food she drinks, a half bottle of whisky, and Rukhsar accompanies her. They get drunker and louder and both their stories are always about how much money they had, how they showed the people who treated them badly. “You won’t believe it you know, I was dripping in diamonds,” Ramona says. “But I was stupid, I used to give things to anyone who asked, and in my time of need, there was no one.” Rukhsar counters, “Arré, I used to wear gold bangles all the way up to my elbows. And my hair, you know now it has become half, but it was so thick the plait was as thick as my wrist. But the same—people come and ask, then how can you say no? Isn’t it madam? I would just take off a bangle and give.”

One day, a little under the influence myself I ask – “So how did you earn all that money?”

Ramona looks a little sheepish and says, “Well actually you know my mother was a smuggler.” “Right” I say politely, trying to look as if this is a regular occupation. “I used to also do, lot of back and forth, Hong Kong Bangkok Dubai. Ask them, I used to bring suitcases full of things.” “And now?” I persist. “Now why I need to work. My husband is there no.” “Oh, Bitti’s father I say.” “Arré, not him, what he will do? He used to beat me you know, every time I was landing up in hospital, sometimes hand is broken, sometimes face is broken. It took me years to walk out. Just trapped me with sweet words. You won’t believe, he used to speak such good English. Then I got divorced. Not him – my second husband.”

She is referring to a surly, burly man who comes a

couple days a week and sits in brown shorts and gold crucifix, watching TV and eating fried chicken. I say nothing about it because in my body and in Ramona’s too wide smile and that gaze that seems direct but is a little off centre, I see the truth.

Rukhsar is quiet through this because the conversation happens in English.

Shirley gets married but her husband works in the Gulf. So, though she now wears a couple gold chains more, our female conferences continue as before. She confesses – “I don’t mind we are married, but I am happy living like this only with you all.” Bitti, now a teenager, joins a hobby class in the summer holidays to learn how to do mehendi. She practices long hours on my feet, making peacocks which look like ducks. Shoyu starts to walk, his hair tied in a fan-shaped ponytail on top of his head, making him look like Little Lord Krishna.

Shirley’s husband comes home for Christmas. He gives me a box of Quality Street chocolates. Shirley gets pregnant. The detective agency board on the ground floor is replaced by a board saying Supreme Car Service, but the windows are the same forbidding tinted glass and I’m darned if I’ve ever seen a car being serviced downstairs.

We get two more neighbours – Priya and Naina. They too have one or two children but don’t seem to work.

### **The Ballad of Raj and Shoyu**

Shirley has a baby. He is called Ryan. We adore him. In retaliation, Shoyu walks into my house and pees on the floor. Then he breaks a bottle of blue nailpolish and the stain won’t come off. He is thrown out of my house crying. The stain never quite comes off even five years later. His mother comes running out saying, “Raja, why are you crying.”

It confuses me, the way she always calls him Raj or Raja. Surely one pet name per child is enough,



Shoyu being short for Shoaib. Breaking my rule of silence yet again, I ask Rukhsar – “What is his name really?” “I call him Shoyu, but his father calls him Raj.” I am mystified because I have never seen his father.

But of course I am naïve. Shoyu can after all have a father without Rukhsar having a husband. And Shoyu’s father is Hindu while Rukhsar is Muslim. How did they meet? Well, Rukhsar came from Madhya Pradesh as a young girl, very beautiful and from a poor family. She got a job as a dancer in a bar. Of course she was popular, she was graceful and heart-stoppingly beautiful, with the childlike blankness which makes it so easy to turn her into your fantasy. Raj’s father was the manager of the bar. She fell in love and he said he would take her away from it all, so he did. She got pregnant, he rented her a place in PMGP. Occasionally he visits, which is when he calls Shoyu Raj. He gives her 25,000 rupees a month she claims and why should I contradict her? Marriage? Isn’t that a bourgeois kind of question. Anyway, he’s Hindu and she’s Muslim and his mother is a heart patient and that’s entertainment.

### So, More Lonely Nights

Everyone is gathered on the landing and they are giggling. I open the door to check out the scene and see Shoyu, walking in a zig zag line. He looks at me with unhinged eyes, smiles a woozy smile and sits down with a hiccup. If he weren’t two and a half years old, I’d say he was drunker than a drunk in a movie. The women all laugh.

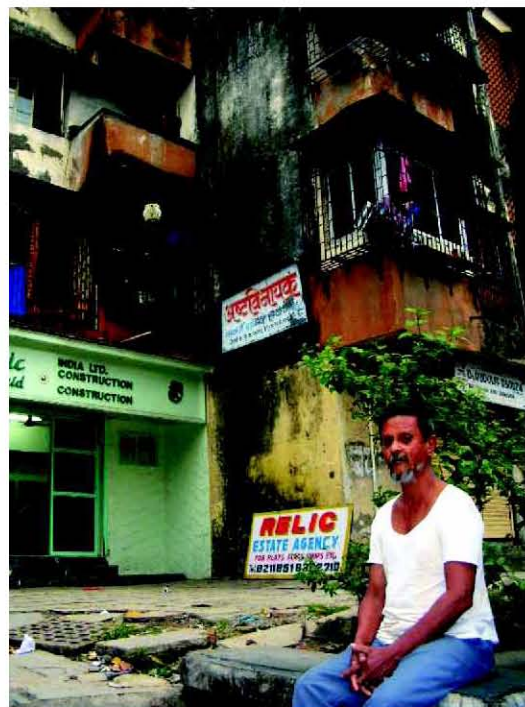
Actually he is drunk. “What to do madam, he fights with me. He doesn’t keep quiet if I don’t give him a little.”

The nights are painful. Rukhsar cries with love and desperation. Sometimes she befriends an autorickshaw driver and asks him up. Some nights she drinks with the other neighbours. Some nights she drinks alone and who wants to do that, so she shares a drink with her one and only son. Everyone thinks it’s cute, how a little kid acts like a grown up. “Do you know madam, yesterday, I

was cursing his father, and holding my head and he came up to me with the bottle of RC and plonked it in front of me and said, “Tension mat le. Le, drink le.” (Stop stressing out, here, have a drink).

It’s not long before we have to take him to the doctor who shakes his head and says there’s something up with the liver. Shoyu squirms and calls the doctor behenchuth (sisterfucker) in his baby accent. The doctor asks, “What did he say?” “Oh, nothing,” Rukhsar hastily says. “He asked for his father.” In spite of everything, we have to giggle.

Some nights are more painful than others. Some nights it is Ramona who cries, because her husband is not her husband and actually someone else’s. Because he brings her money from his illegal construction business but actually he borrowed all her money some years earlier to start this business and that’s why she sold her legally constructed house and so he’s got her hasn’t he,



with love and money? And Shirley, not prone to sentiment, gets a hard anger in her eyes and say, “Curse our mother you know, she threw us out because our stepfather didn’t want us. You know we had to stay in an orphanage and the nuns gave us one pao and some curry water – that’s all, to eat in the day. That’s why I say, never say no to anyone for food. And I won’t cry when my mother dies, it won’t be a day too soon.”

By morning, everyone appears spent and calmed from their nights of release and cleaning, cooking go on as before.

For reasons of ignorance or obtuseness, I am often oblivious to the meaning of people’s days. For instance Priya and Naina, in the room across wake late, and spend each day scurrying after their babies or standing and gossiping in nighties and petticoats. They seem like quiet, North Indian girls who watch Kkusum and wear mangalsutras. In the evenings they bathe, and I hear the tinkling of pooja bells. Later I see them go off, dressed in salwar kameezes with little knapsacks on their backs. They kept to themselves and I never really wondered about when they came back home and where their husbands are.

A family with seven children of all ages move into the room next door. Their mother, whom everyone calls Bhaiyin, is a gigantic woman with a sweet face. A Bhaiyin with 7 children, what’s so fearsome about that? Well, if they don’t live in the von Trapp mansion then it means their one room is lined wall to wall with mattresses, their balcony stacked with utensils and clothes and about 13 pairs of shoes straggle down the corridor up to my door. Her two older daughters follow the same routine as Priya and Naina. The evenings become a religious contest. Bhaiyin’s daughters believe in electronic prayer and play bhajans on their stereo at evening prayers. Priya begins to do the same. The volume of each stereo ratchets up each day as they compete for piety. Then they all come out in their salwar kameez and knapsack and go off to work chatting down the stairs.

All the girls work in bars in and around Andheri, as dancers. If you are that young and pretty you get to be a dancer, when you get older you would have to be a waitress. Rukhsar is relieved she no longer has to do it. So what if she’s had to have five abortions. She is happy to have folks like her to hang out with, unlike those who help her in many ways, but will persist in speaking English over her head and try to make her send Shoyu to school.

Bhaiyin has two more daughters, aged six and eight. Radhika and Anmol wear little velveteen and chiffon ensembles studded with crystals. They dance in the corridor singing Bhumro, Bhumro, Shyam rang bhumro, (hey bumble bee, dark skinned bumble bee, who comes to suck on flowers), their eyes darting from one side to the other archly. They drive Ryan, now nearly three, wild with excitement. He is constantly running after them, calling their names until they satisfy him by dancing for him yet again.

Ramona says, “Yeah, these people start early. After all it’s in their family line.” Apparently the two families belong to a caste of performers who have come to this city to work in its beer bars.

Feeling bolder for having community around, Priya and Naina have been transformed. They now keep their door open, the radio running loudly. They send their babies to play loudly in the corridor and if I complain they take them in for a minute and let them out as soon as my door is closed. They throw old chapatis outside their doors, so the rat population once again begins to climb. Bhaiyin sweeps outside her door every day and neatly deposits the dirt outside my door. When I ask who has done it she looks so innocent you could cry. When I catch her at it, she looks even more innocent and says, “Oh it isn’t me, it’s just this once.”

Ramona doesn’t like this takeover of the floor or losing the supremacy she has so far enjoyed. I want to keep out of it. But she won’t let me and her daily tirades get stronger. “Really these



building people, they don't think who they rent to, they take anybody. Must our children play with these sorts of people now." I try to ask, "Come on, what do you mean 'these sorts of people'. You were friendly with them too earlier." "Not me!" she says vehemently. As I gape at her rather convenient memory she says, "Never, you can ask anyone, I only keep respectable friends. Really something should be done."

### Doorbells

Winter mornings in my room are my favourite time. The doorbell rings, it's just dawn and it's the paper and the paovaala. The sun comes up slowly, and the entire room is aglow in long slants of deep red. Sitting on my table, watching the glass bottles on my window sill glow like jewels in the red-gold light, I drink a cup of coffee, listen to the sound of my modem connecting to the Internet, smell the parathas the third-floor lady makes for the kids' tiffin and watch the butter melt on a fresh brun pao.

At 3 p.m. the doorbell rings. Two men outside – one in a garland, the other without one. The one with the garland stands smiling hands folded, and looking strangely familiar. The one without tells me, "This is our esteemed local Samajvadi Party candidate. Please vote for him." I listen in a resigned fashion to his many good qualities and plans for the neighbourhood. He smiles a little more and says, "Recognise, no?" Recognise yes! It's the dosa cart Shetty. After serving us idlis for eight years he wishes to serve us in other ways. He loses, but that's only if you're being literal.

H, who moved out of PMGP and moved back again, reports excitedly that she saw Sunil Dutt outside the ration shop giving a speech. "But there were only a few people around him. And anyway he was talking complete rubbish." Better to take Shetty's route and remain silent while someone else does the talking. That way he can't be blamed for losing at least.

Another day, another doorbell. It's 8 pm. Two ladies who look like the Chemistry and Sanskrit

teachers from my school stand there. Turns out they are teachers by day and census takers by evening. They spread out the fascinating sheets, long and lined. They think I am being a smart ass when I say I don't know my caste. They give me that look that says: straighten out or it's 100 lines of imposition for you. I would wither if I was being a smart ass but I really don't know my caste so I withstand the gaze bravely. "Mother tongue?" they ask.

"Well, don't know – I guess Punjabi or Bengali – or English I guess. Can I have two mother tongues?"

"Madam, you can only have one mother tongue." They don't seem to like the fact that I was born in Pune, that I came to Bombay from Delhi and there much discussion about what to put in the columns. Exasperated, they ask, "How many people living in the house?"

"One."

"One?"

"One."

"Marital status?"

"Single."

"Age is 32 no? Single?"

"Yes."

"Hmm."

They shuffle off next door. Hah, wonder how they will fare at Bhaiyins and Rukhsar's and at Ramona and Shirley where the three people in the house have three different surnames.

### Sunday Curry

It's Sunday around noon and everyone in the building is preparing for Sunday lunch. People have oil in their hair, chicken is being cleaned, I can smell fish frying.

I turn on the tap and nothing. Not a drop of water. I wait to hear the sound of the pump come one. But there is only silence. Then Greta from downstairs comes up and says, "Come on downstairs, there is a meeting."

I make my way to the front of our building, which has recently decided to call itself Ekta and pretend it is a co-operative housing society. A big shouting match is in progress. At the centre of it

are the four or five men who are in charge of the building affairs, having replaced the earlier maintenance collectors. It turns out that the building water bill has not been paid. Actually it has not been paid for a pretty long time and we owe the municipality two lakh rupees so the water has been cut off.

Several rooms are in default. Some people have not paid the modest outgoings for two years. Some people owe Rs 3,000, some 5,000. I have been conducting a private protest because I am convinced the funds are being misused. I owe Rs. 4,500. The shop with the tinted windows owes Rs. 15,000. The society "officials" go to the shop owner and he yells at them: "You people, you can't even talk English and you dare to ask me for money!"

Confronted with the possibility of no water, I hastily abandon my protest and get ready to get my chequebook. Some people refuse to pay saying that they are tenants, not owners. Ramona mutters, "See, these sort of people should not be allowed." I am torn between agreeing and saying, "Come on now, don't say 'these sort of people' ", so I just look away. Others can't afford to pay: the onion seller, the domestic worker, the tailor. They just shrug their shoulders. The woman from the next wing, 17-B is yelling unbroken through all this and I strain to understand her problem. She says the keys to the pump house were kept with her and she was really good about running the water on time. "Why did you take them away? Huh? What had we done that you took them away and gave them to those fucking people? You wanted to insult us, yes? You wanted to say we are not fit to run the pump? Now see, now see what's happened!?"

Others in the crowd are shouting over her: "Get everyone to pay, where is so and so, call the people from room number 19." Finally the secretary puts it before us. "Fine, you all don't want to pay, don't. We can't keep chasing you. You can just go down and get the water yourselves." "

That's fine," says a man, obviously working class. "We are not scared of hard work, we will go down and get it ourselves."

My jaw drops. I am alarmed at the idea of hard work.

Finally we are all made to sign a paper saying that we will pay and if we don't the society will hire a lawyer to prosecute us. I don't even ask who will pay the lawyer. I just sign. A deal is struck with the water board allowing us to pay in instalments.

The society board starts the pump. The connection hadn't really been cut off, it was just to frighten us into paying. No one has thought to wonder how come the water board came here on a Sunday. We return to our weekend chicken curries and hair-oiling.

The whole action-packed, emotionally charged scene is repeated for two more Sundays (always Sunday) until the bill is fully paid up.

Rukhsar's crying. Shoyu's father is getting married. He's told Rukhsar: "This is it, no more money for you." She asks him how she is going to manage with Shoyu and he says: "You can work, can't you?" So she has to go back to work in the bar but now she's been downgraded to waitress. She is always tired and rarely smiles. No one wants to look after Shoyu because he is naughty and abuses and looks at people in a mean way.

The corner room has a high turnover of tenants who seem to operate on a leave and licenses of about two months. A family with two grown sons who don't seem to work or study, and one Pomeranian that always lies with its head disconsolate across the threshold move in there. It's not long before Rukhsar is smiling at the younger son as he walks around bare chested, and plays with Shoyu. "My god," Ramona says. "She has no shame, she won't even leave that young boy."





When they leave, they are replaced by a Bengali woman who someone insists is a prostitute. “Er, you aren’t supposed to say that, you should say sex-worker,” I demur. Everyone laughs. “Yeah, yeah,” they say, “This is just like when something happens you say we should call the police and turn to the law instead of giving that person one tight. What world are you living in Paro?”

I am shooting a workers’ protest in Matulya mills in Parel. There is an impasse between workers and management and I sit outside the whole day, waiting to shoot whatever happens. Me and the policemen. The cops are concerned that I won’t go eat anything in case I miss the action, so they send for some vada pao for me. As it gets later they are worried about how I will go home.

“Where do you live?” one cop asks.

“Andheri (E).”

“Oh, that’s far,” someone says.

“Not really,” he counters, “I live there too.”

“Where,” I ask?

“PMGP.”

“Really! So do I.”

He looks at me suspiciously. But then I ask, “Is your building having a water problem because of that new pipe which the health club is making” and he relaxes. I feel as if I have met someone from the home country.

The MHADA colony behind PMGP is also fully occupied now. A music studio opens on the ground floor of my building. Although there are a

couple newer shiny shops, there are also many more vendors on the street than before, selling plastic flowers, lurid calendars, hair baubles for five rupees, cheap steel vessels. A clearing has been made in one of the quadrangles for cricket so kids don’t play in the central street as much. There are cars outside all the buildings. Prakash bhai is thinking of shutting shop because everyone has phones and also STD rates are going down. “What about a cybercafe?” I suggest. I don’t really want him to move since he is one of few remaining people from the old days. “Oh cybercafe is a bad idea. Everyone is making a loss” He nods towards the colony’s cybercafes, which sit side by side. One charges 20 rupees, the other 19 an hour. “Let me see for a bit and then decide” he says.

Shetty’s chai shop has shut and been turned into a driving school. Greta from downstairs who makes dabbas and delivers them on her two-wheeler also passes my friend a card which says Driving Lessons for Ladies only. Times aren’t what they used to be, Prakash bhai says.

A crazy man lives on the ground floor. His eyes are crossed and angry. He abuses anyone who walks past and the children either make fun of him or are scared of him. I’m a little nervous myself. I wonder how he is always so neatly dressed though, how he lives. One day I come down the stairs and see he has a roommate, a man who is tenderly combing his hair. As I turn the corner he gently touches his friend’s cheek.

Another day I go down and see the door of the house has been pulled out. The door lies diagonally across the doorway, the edges jagged as if it had been torn out. The crazy man sits on his bed glowering and muttering. Greta tells me he tore it out himself the previous night in a fit of rage. Why is this man so angry?

**We May be Poor, But We Have Our Respect**  
Our building still hasn’t registered itself as a co-operative. But it doesn’t mean we can’t act like one. A big board downstairs lists some rules.

“Resell or matters relating to renovations without prior permission is strictly prohibited.” Eventually the landlords are given a talking to. Bhaiyin’s family have bought a place in Number 16 but are not being allowed to shift into it because the building people don’t want dirty families with dubious professions. Why must our building not have high moral standards? We may be poor, but we have our respect.

Rukhsar has found herself a new lover who she says is her brother. Around the time her landlord tell her he won’t renew her lease she marries him and moves to Vashi in New Bombay. She forgets to take her two katoris in which she’d given me that super spicy stew. Priya and Naina are also asked to leave. When I suggest to Ramona that this isn’t fair, what if people ask us to leave because we are single? She says, “Don’t be silly, we are respectable and educated. And those people used to make such a mess and a nuisance no? Always making a noise and creating garbage?” I am forced to agree. “Well, that’s why their lease was not renewed, not for any reason. After all this is a building not a slum, no.”

Over the years I too have lost my middle-class ways. Sometimes, when it gets stiflingly hot in the summer, Bombay’s intense humidity mix with my genteel self-imposed poverty to stir up a big sweat and I have to open the door. I’ve even lost my middle-class decencies and sit in a tank top and shorts, revealing my shoulders for the world to see as I work at my computer. My friends are uncomfortable and always shut the door when they come in.

The building has its own soundtrack – the theme tune of Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu thi, the pressure cookers, the clanging vessels, the kids crying, the unemployed grown ups yelling at them. After a while it all gets too much for me and I shut the door and turn up my jazz CD. Somewhere in a corner of my progressive heart, there is perhaps, a place that is forever 2BHK. I am uncomfortable that I do this. I shut the door on that as well.

