

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

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a one-act play

by Upasna Barath

## CHARACTERS

PRIYA: South Asian/Desi descent. Eighteen years-old. She was born in the U.S., but moved to India when she was nine years old.

LAKSHMI: Forty-one years old. South Asian/Desi descent. PRIYA's mother. She immigrated to the United States from India when she was twenty years-old.

AMAMA: PRIYA's grandmother. Mid 60s. South Asian/Desi descent.

THATHA: PRIYA's grandfather. Mid 60s. South Asian/Desi descent.

NICK (LIFE INSURANCE GUY): Early twenties. Any ethnicity and race.

## SETTING

Upstate New York. 2018.

## SPECIAL SCRIPT NOTES

I envision an entire cast of people of color, although Nick's ethnicity and race is open. Everyone else has to be a person of color.

The words "amama" (am'mam'ma) and "thatha" (thāthā) mean "grandma" and "grandpa" in a South Indian language called Telegu.

While it's common for Desi parents to encourage their children to become doctors (among other career choices such as lawyers, engineers, so on) and in other cases, for grandparents to urge their grandchildren to get married – these are, after all, stereotypes, and should not be considered umbrella characteristics of all Desi folk. This specific note should be in the program as well.

In the script, a "/" indicates when one character is interrupted by another character.

## SCENE ONE

*Lights up on a living room. We see a sofa, a rug, an arm chair, and a floor lamp. There is a coffee table with books on it. There is also some sort of Hindu tchotchke on it – like an idol of Ganesha, a Hindu God. We hear the sound of a door shut and PRIYA and LAKSHMI enter the stage out of breath, pulling suitcases in.*

LAKSHMI: *(She walks in with relief in her tone. She spreads her arms as if to say “welcome”)*  
WE'RE HOME!

PRIYA: *(exhausted)* Finally.

LAKSHMI: Traffic from the airport is always that bad. Unfortunately.

PRIYA: I've literally been sitting down for over eighteen hours but...*(she collapses onto the armchair)*. Ahhhh, that's good.

LAKSHMI: *(sitting down on sofa)* Does it smell in here? *(She says this excitedly, hoping the answer is “yes.”)*

PRIYA: What?

LAKSHMI: Like Indian food!

PRIYA: *(takes a second)* No. That's a weird question.

LAKSHMI: Well, I cooked.

PRIYA: *(looking around)* I like what you've done with the place.

LAKSHMI: I watch a lot of HGTV.

PRIYA: *(playful)* Do you? Every time I come here I always feel like something changed. *(She continues to look around. This her new, permanent home.)*

LAKSHMI: Hm. *(Beat.)* Well you're not just a visitor anymore. I missed you. I'm so glad you're home with me now. *(She admires her daughter.)*

PRIYA: Yeah. At least until college.

LAKSHMI: Ugh, don't remind me. You've grown up too fast.

PRIYA: (*matter-of-fact*) It seems fast because we lived away from each other for nine years.

LAKSHMI: Are you going to hold that against me?

PRIYA: (*trying to de-escalate*) I'm not holding it against you.

LAKSHMI: Then why did you have to bring it up?

PRIYA: I didn't mean it like that/

LAKSHMI: You know that sending you to live with amama and thatha was the best thing for us.

PRIYA: Yes, I know/

LAKSHMI: (*getting flustered*) If I didn't do that, we'd probably be on the street somewhere/

PRIYA: Wow. Yes, I/

LAKSHMI: How do you think I can afford a house? Or a car? Or/

PRIYA: Alright! Alright. I know. We've talked about this before. I really don't need one of your rants right now/

LAKSHMI: It's not a rant, it's the truth.

PRIYA: Well, we don't have to worry about money anymore.

LAKSHMI: (*Beat.*) It kind of hit us all at once, didn't it?

PRIYA: What did?

LAKSHMI: You turning eighteen and finishing high school. Moving back here. Your dad/

PRIYA: Oh. Yeah.

LAKSHMI: Have you started looking at schools?

PRIYA: Not really. I'm taking a year off so I have time. All I know is I don't want to go to back to India. Especially for college.

LAKSHMI: A gap year gives you a plenty of time to find what you're looking for. You can go on tours. I mean, you have the money now.

PRIYA: I have to be smart with it. I can't be gallivanting around the states on college tours/

LAKSHMI: No one said you'd be gallivanting. But, if you narrow down your options to three schools, you can invest in a little trip to see what they're like. College is expensive. You want to make sure you make the right choice.

PRIYA: I guess you're right.

LAKSHMI: I am right.

PRIYA: I have found a really nice program.

LAKSHMI: Tell me!

PRIYA: It's in California/

LAKSHMI: Oh wow! That's far. But it's a great state.

PRIYA: And it's warm! I love the heat, you know. Um, it's a pretty renowned program – professors are great from what I saw online. *(She's talking it up. She hopes it will ease the blow.)*

LAKSHMI: Wonderful.

PRIYA: It's pretty expensive.

LAKSHMI: Well, if it's a good program like you say, then sure.

PRIYA: *(reassuring)* Yeah it's great. It's a Film Studies program.

LAKSHMI: *(noticeable shift)* Film studies?

PRIYA: Yeah!

LAKSHMI: (*stern*) Priya, there's no way you're going to go to college to spend thousands of dollars on a Film Studies major. (*She's in disbelief her daughter would even consider this.*)

PRIYA: (*confident*) I want to do it. Like I said, it's a great program at a great school and I'd have industry connections and everything/ (*She tries to be optimistic for her mother, but it doesn't work.*)

LAKSHMI: No way. No way.

PRIYA: Why?

LAKSHMI: We've talked about this. Over the years on many phone calls. Even amama and thatha are under the impression that you'll be doing pre-med.

PRIYA: They won't be too affected if I change my mind.

LAKSHMI: That's not the point.

PRIYA: The point is that dad died and left *me* money. It's my money. I can do whatever I want with it. He'd have wanted me to follow my dreams.

LAKSHMI: That's not true. Your dad wanted you to be successful. So you wouldn't end up like us. Divorced and poor. Isolated from family.

PRIYA: You chose not to move to India with me.

LAKSHMI: Your dad's issues caused him to be/very difficult to handle, and his family treated him badly because of it.

PRIYA: Seriously? Seriously. What are you even saying.

*Exasperated, PRIYA covers her face in her hands. She tries to calm herself down. Her mother won't hold off, though.*

LAKSHMI: I'm sorry, but it's the truth. And you don't want to end up like me either. /You need to make money. You need a stable career.

PRIYA: Why would you bring up dad's issues?

LAKSHMI: A Film Studies major won't get you a stable career.

PRIYA: *(Beat.)* You always do that. *(She has given up on the discussion. She's already tired of fighting about it.)*

LAKSHMI: Do what?

PRIYA: Guilt trip me. With roundabout logic.

LAKSHMI: *(soft)* I don't want you to struggle.

PRIYA: I'm not going to inherit dad's issues. The money is the only thing I'm getting from him. I get one shot at a solid education with this money.

LAKSHMI: You won't have to use it all. FAFSA, right? You're a U.S. citizen.

PRIYA: Okay, well, the money I put aside will be for other stuff. /Not for another degree in case this one doesn't work out for me.

LAKSHMI: Yes, like your wedding.

PRIYA: *(realizing what her mother said)* Even after being in the U.S. all these years, you still find a way to say backwards Indian shit like that.

LAKSHMI: *(feeling attacked)* I didn't say anything! What did I say?

PRIYA: My wedding? Really? I haven't even gotten into college yet and we're budgeting for/

LAKSHMI: *(She's had enough. She's ready to move on.)* I'm going to put the kettle on.

LAKSHMI *exits the stage.* PRIYA *gets out of the armchair and goes to her suitcase. She opens it, and begins looking through her stuff.* LAKSHMI *re-enters.*

LAKSHMI: Why don't you wait to unpack in your room?

PRIYA: I have something for you. *(She pulls out a photo album and hands it to her mother.)*

LAKSHMI: Oh. *(She sits down and begins to look through the book. PRIYA sits down next to her.)*

PRIYA: Yeah, it's like – all of our photos together. From before India. When I was a baby and stuff.

LAKSHMI: Oh, look at this photo of your father here.

PRIYA: Yeah, I love that photo.

LAKSHMI: He took better care of himself before we got divorced.

PRIYA: This one's my favorite. *(She points to a photo in the album.)*

*LAKSHMI and PRIYA look through the album for a few more seconds. LAKSHMI begins to cry. PRIYA rubs her back, and then LAKSHMI puts the book down. They hold each other for a moment.*

LAKSHMI: I'm sorry.

PRIYA: It's okay. I'm sorry.

LAKSHMI: I don't want you to go through what I went through. I want to protect you.

PRIYA: I know.

LAKSHMI: Don't make life hard for yourself. Please.

PRIYA: Mom, I got this.

LAKSHMI: I don't know if you do.



## SCENE TWO

*Lights up on a dining room. AMAMA is hand-stitching something. THATHA is reading a newspaper. PRIYA is on her laptop. LAKSHMI enters holding a tray with four glasses on it.*

LAKSHMI: Here. *(She places a glass in front of everyone, and then a glass in front of an open seat. She sits there.)*

AMAMA: Priya, I noticed that your American accent is back.

PRIYA: *(Distracted by whatever she's doing on the laptop)* Yeah amama, it never left.

AMAMA: *(trying to continue the conversation)* Five years in India, and you've slipped so easily back.

PRIYA: Yeah, it's pretty cool.

LAKSHMI: The kids used to make fun of her, remember?

AMAMA: That's not true. Priya, is that true?

PRIYA: *(Still distracted by the laptop)* Um, yeah, it is.

LAKSHMI: She used to call me crying almost every day during her first year in India.

THATHA *(looks up from his newspaper and rolls his eyes)* Don't exaggerate, Lakshmi.

PRIYA: She's not exaggerating.

AMAMA: Anyway, your accent is lovely. I'm sure the men love it.

LAKSHMI: What?

PRIYA: What?

AMAMA: The Indian men.

PRIYA: Um, the Indian men here have American accents, too.

AMAMA: No, I mean the Indian men in India.

PRIYA: I mean, I guess. It *was* mostly the girls who teased me.

LAKSHMI: (*realizing what AMAMA is doing*) Mom, what're you doing?

AMAMA: Stitching back this/

LAKSHMI: No, why're you bringing her accent up?

THATHA: (*He puts the newspaper down and clears his throat*) Lakshmi, I'll go check on the curry. (*He exits the stage.*)

AMAMA *puts down whatever she's doing and pointedly faces PRIYA, who has gone back to her laptop, completely unaware of the rising conflict.*

AMAMA: Priya, do you know what a biodata is?

PRIYA: A what?

LAKSHMI: Mom. Don't.

AMAMA: Lakshmi.

LAKSHMI: You both *just* got here, and you're already/

PRIYA: What's a biodata?

LAKSHMI *buries her face in her hands for a moment, clearly stressed out by what her mother is about to say. PRIYA'S interest is piqued and she shuts her laptop.*

AMAMA: Well, it's kind of like a CV – a resume.

PRIYA: Okay...(*she reaches for her glass of water*)

AMAMA: That people put together for/

LAKSHMI: Don't say it.

AMAMA: For courting.

PRIYA: (*swallowing her water sharply*) Courting?

AMAMA: Yes, like for marriage.

PRIYA: I know what courting is.

THATHA: *(entering the stage on PRIYA'S line)* Should I go back into the kitchen?

AMAMA: Sit down. *(THATHA resentfully sits back in his seat)*

THATHA: The curry looks great, Lakshmi. *(LAKSHMI ignores him, clearly still uncomfortable with the discussion occurring between her mother and her daughter)*

PRIYA: So, why're you bringing this up?

AMAMA: Well...*(She reaches underneath the table and pulls out a stack of folders from a bag)*  
Look through these. Tell me what you think.

*PRIYA takes the folders and begins to look through them. Everyone around her waits.*

*LAKSHMI is uneasy, AMAMA is eager, and THATHA wishes he wasn't there.*

PRIYA: Oh. These resumes are for me.

AMAMA: Yes, they/

PRIYA: *(reading aloud)* Tarun Rao. Five feet, ten inches. Career objective: to be a successful doctor one day and to be wealthy enough to take care of my family. Academic profile: Degree in Neuroscience from UCLA, a Masters in...he's twenty-five?

AMAMA: He's great!

PRIYA: *(continuing to read aloud)* Languages: Telegu, Hindi, English. Non-Vegetarian. Favorite movies, music...amama, what is this?

AMAMA: A biodata.

PRIYA: *(accusatory)* Are you trying to get me married?

LAKSHMI: *(sympathetic)* She's trying to get you married.

THATHA: I tried to stop her. I told her you aren't ready.

AMAMA: Priya, it's completely up to you. You can keep your options open – you can work, or you can go to college immediately, or you can get married and wait a few years before you go – whatever the case, it's up to you. But I want you to know what all of your options are.

PRIYA: Sure it's an option. It doesn't mean I want it.

LAKSHMI: I can't believe you. We talked about this. Priya is going to college *now*. Single. Unmarried.

PRIYA: Yes. (*She is glad that her mother is on her side.*)

LAKSHMI: And she'll do pre-med/

PRIYA: What? No. *We* talked about this, too. That's not happening because/

THATHA: Wait, you won't study medicine?

PRIYA: No, thatha. I want to study/

LAKSHMI: (*sarcastic*) You'll give him a heart attack.

AMAMA: Stop exaggerating, Lakshmi.

PRIYA: I want to study film. I want to work in the film industry one day.

THATHA: (*honestly clueless*) And do what?

PRIYA: Produce! Direct! Honestly, anything. I'm willing to work my way to the top.

THATHA: Your concentration during your last two years of high school in India was Biology. Where has this come from?

PRIYA: You know I've always been passionate about film.

AMAMA: Getting married is better than going to college to study film. In that case, you'll end up married and at home anyway! You might as well skip a few steps!

PRIYA: That's insulting.

AMAMA: I'm not trying to insult you, dear.

LAKSHMI: Mom, Priya is going to college next fall. It's decided. She'll spend this gap year volunteering, working/

PRIYA: We haven't discussed what I'll be doing during my gap year, but okay/

LAKSHMI: And then she'll study pre-med. I'm not marrying her off.

AMAMA: What if she doesn't like medicine?

PRIYA: I don't. I won't.

AMAMA: Then what?

PRIYA: *(trying to make it clear)* I'm going to study film.

THATHA: Should I check on the chicken curry again?

AMAMA: *(irritated)* There's no need!

LAKSHMI: You both just got here. Let's not get into this right now.

AMAMA: Fine.

THATHA: Thank God.

*Everyone resumes what they were doing before. AMAMA hand-stitching. THATHA reading the newspaper. PRIYA on her laptop. LAKSHMI sits idle for a moment.*

LAKSHMI: Mom, did you ever end up meeting with Aditya's family?

AMAMA: Yes. They asked about you and Priya.

PRIYA: Yeah, I haven't talked to them yet. *(Beat.)* I feel bad for not being close to them.

AMAMA: You need time to heal. Don't think about that now.

PRIYA: Did they talk about how dad died?

LAKSHMI: Priya.

PRIYA: I'm sorry, but – I didn't get many details. "He died in his sleep" isn't exactly providing me closure.

THATHA: (*Gentle*) It's only been a few months. Don't force yourself/

AMAMA: (*loud and clear*) But he did pass in his sleep. His heart stopped. He always had heart problems.

LAKSHMI: It was all the drinking and smoking.

AMAMA: And of course, the medication/

PRIYA: And the cook found him?

AMAMA: Yes. She tried waking him up. Then she realized.

PRIYA: Right.

AMAMA: Had he ever talked to you about the money before?

PRIYA: Yeah, he actually did once. He called me on the phone – maybe two years ago, when I was still in India – and he explained to me what life insurance was. He made me write down the number.

LAKSHMI: What number?

PRIYA: The amount I'd get. When he'd die.

LAKSHMI: He died so young. (*Beat*) He was always so intuitive.

PRIYA: What do you mean?

LAKSHMI: One time, I went to this Japanese restaurant with a friend. I ate jumbo shrimp. The next day at work, I was really sick – this was before I had you, Priya – I had a fever, I couldn't stop throwing up. I hid it as best as I could. I felt awful, though. And then I got a call from your father – it wasn't really normal for him to call me at work - he called me and he asked me if everything was alright. I burst into tears and told him I felt horrible. He left the office and came to get me and he took me to the doctor right away. I ended up being really sick for an entire month – I picked up a strange infection.

PRIYA: I never knew that. *(Beat.)* I feel like I only ever knew the negative stuff.

LAKSHMI: That's not true/

THATHA: Your father was a lovely person he just/

AMAMA: He had many problems.

LAKSHMI: He was crazy.

PRIYA: Yeah. Like, mom – you told me that story about the time you went out for dinner/

LAKSHMI: Don't bring that/ *(she is embarrassed)*

PRIYA: And some guy was checking you out. And dad threatened to kill him.

THATHA: Aditya was always a fighter.

PRIYA: *(continuing)* And how he'd always talk to himself.

AMAMA: I do that sometimes, too.

PRIYA: Well you're not bipolar. *(Beat.)* I knew dad from phone calls and Skype calls. Just like you, Mom. But the difference is I don't think I ever really *knew* him.

AMAMA: He was ambitious when he was younger. His parents told me.

THATHA: They immigrated to the U.S. when your father was only fifteen years old.

AMAMA: He got into trouble a lot– but he was brilliant.

LAKSHMI: He *was* brilliant.

AMAMA: He really wanted to prove himself to his family. He wanted to make sure their sacrifice was worth it. And to show that he could overcome his mental illness.

PRIYA: *(curious)* What sacrifice?

AMAMA: Getting up and leaving India. Moving to the U.S. for the hope of better opportunities. Of course, in the end, they couldn't wait to move back/

PRIYA: Dad stayed.

AMAMA: He stayed because even after he divorced your mother, he wanted to be close to you.

PRIYA: But he didn't move back to India when I did/

AMAMA: You were with us. But who'd watch out for your mother?

PRIYA: Who told you that?

LAKSHMI: Your father.

AMAMA: And his family. He told his family. About this.

PRIYA: *(confessing)* Whenever he called, I couldn't wait to get off the phone – I was always so embarrassed by him/ *(She is trying to explain herself. She feels guilty.)*

AMAMA: It's okay.

LAKSHMI: Don't beat yourself up over it.

PRIYA: I never saw or heard about the good side of him. Just the bipolar side. And this money – he left me all this money. I don't want to mess this up. *(She wants to be consoled.)*

LAKSHMI: You won't. Not if you make sure that you go to med school and you/

PRIYA: *(close to tears)* Seriously?

AMAMA: Let's not do this again.

THATHA: *(Beat)* It's about time we eat that chicken curry.



## SCENE THREE

*Lights up on an office. PRIYA is sitting on one side of the desk. The desk is neat and orderly. NICK walks in with a couple of folders.*

NICK: *(sitting down)* So, is your mother not coming?

PRIYA: I'm eighteen.

NICK: Sure, but usually/

PRIYA: *(defensive)* Aren't you a little young to be a life insurance agent or whatever?

NICK: *(he puts his hands up as if to say "alright, my mistake")* Touché. I'm twenty-seven. I just look younger.

PRIYA: *(clearly an inside joke)* Perfect marriageable age.

NICK: What?

PRIYA: Nothing, um – bad joke. Sorry. *(Beat.)* My mom works. So it's just me. Figuring this out with you.

NICK: *(He flashes her a reassuring smile. He sees something in her.)* I'll try to make it easy. *(Beat.)* I'm sorry for your loss. I see that your dad was – *(he flips through some paper)* only fifty-two years old?

PRIYA: Yep.

NICK: *(understanding)* Yeah. Yeah. I see he took out this policy seven years ago. *(Beat.)* This *will* be easy, I promise. It's just such a large amount, so there's a company policy that says we have to meet/

PRIYA: Yeah, it's fine. Don't worry. *(She wants to get this over with. She is exhausted.)*

NICK: Great! So I have his death certificate, his autopsy report, et cetera et cetera, so what I need from you is a legacy checklist. Do you have that?

PRIYA: Yeah, I do. *(She fumbles through her purse.)*

NICK: Yeah, we just need to make sure that it's specifically stated in the will that the entire amount goes to you – just cross-referencing/

PRIYA: Here.

NICK: Right. Thank you. Okay, now it's time for signatures. *(He pulls out a stack of papers.)*  
It's a lot, I know. Just sign your name wherever an X is marked.

PRIYA: Wow, um – should I have a lawyer present? *(She's joking, but there's an air of seriousness in her tone.)*

NICK: No, no this is just – basic paperwork, really um – please, take the time to read over anything/

PRIYA: Well, no one told me to do otherwise so/

NICK: Otherwise what?

PRIYA: *(confused)* Like, um, no one told me to look, scrutinize the content on this paper/

NICK: Right, right, right. Take your time, um, Priya? *(He says it like "Pry-uh.")*

PRIYA: Priya. *(She pronounces it the right way. She begins signing the papers.)*

NICK: Yeah, so – is that Indian?

PRIYA: It is.

NICK: What part of India are your parents from?

PRIYA: Chennai. *(She says it with the sort of blandness associated with the expectation that he probably doesn't know it.)*

NICK: *(recognition)* Oh! Chennai – like, like Madras?

PRIYA: *(She is surprised so she looks up from the paperwork.)* Yeah.

NICK: Yeah, I studied abroad in Pune, and so I did some traveling and – yeah, Chennai, it's great.

PRIYA: How long ago was that?

NICK: Let's see, um – my senior year of college, so – six years ago?

PRIYA: Wow. A lot has changed, you know. *(She continues the paperwork.)*

NICK: Yeah, I'm sure. It's an up-and-coming city. *(Beat.)* You know, *my* dad died when I was fourteen.

PRIYA: I'm sorry to hear that. How'd he die?

NICK: Overdose. *(Beat.)* Sorry, I know that's mundane/

PRIYA: No, it's alright. This whole thing is mundane, you know. *(Beat.)* It's actually kind of – I don't know, relieving, in a way? Like, that's one less person pitying me. You've experienced whatever I'm feeling and/

NICK: Yeah, but I – I still feel for you.

PRIYA: Yeah, that's like, inevitable/

NICK: Losing your father is hard. That's your dad, you know?

PRIYA: Yeah. I mean, we weren't like, super close or anything/

NICK: Really? Do you think that matters?

PRIYA *seems a bit taken aback. She wasn't expecting this conversation to happen.*

NICK: I'm sorry, I think I might be overstepping/

PRIYA: No, no. It's okay. I actually haven't been able to talk to anyone about how I feel.

NICK: Why not?

PRIYA: My mom, she – she wasn't on the best terms with my dad. So it kind of upsets me, the way – the way she talks about him, you know?

NICK: *(understanding)* Sure. Yeah.

PRIYA: And I just moved here from India, so/

NICK: Really? Your accent/

PRIYA: I was born here. I moved there when I was nine years old.

NICK: *(slightly confused)* I see.

PRIYA: Yeah, so – I don't really have any friends. Um, I should probably see a therapist/

NICK: I saw a therapist.

PRIYA: Yeah?

NICK: Drug addict father. I mean, talk about whatever's inevitable, you know/

PRIYA: For sure.

NICK: It's helpful. I think curing the mind has a lot to do with reflection and introspection. *(Beat. PRIYA is quiet, she returns to signing her papers.)* I'm sorry, I don't mean to/

PRIYA: Don't apologize. *(She smiles a reassuring smile.)* Honestly though, this is a lot of paperwork. Is there any way you can make copies of this when I'm done? I feel like I should show my mom.

NICK: Absolutely. Well, let's save paper – I'll scan and email them to her. It looks like you're almost done.

PRIYA: *(Something has sparked in PRIYA. She wants to let it all out.)* I sometimes get so worried that I might be bipolar. It's hereditary, you know.

NICK: I wouldn't worry about that.

PRIYA: I disagree. Not only is it hereditary, but I'm also currently experiencing a traumatic, life-altering event.

NICK: *(smiling innocently)* You seem pretty stable for someone experiencing a traumatic, life-altering event.

PRIYA: *(smiling back)* Okay, so it's hypothetical. For now.

NICK: In all honesty, I get where you're coming from. Substance abuse is strongly linked to mental illness. *(He lowers his voice)* I avoid alcohol at all costs. And drugs.

PRIYA: If it happens, it happens.

NICK: What do you mean?

PRIYA: You can't prevent fate from doing its thing. Right now, you're dead against alcohol and drugs or whatever. But what if one day fate does something to you, and you decide to take a sip of liquor. And then everything changes?

NICK: I disagree.

PRIYA: You're a life insurance agent. You deal with the doings of fate every day. *(Beat.)* I'm done, by the way.

NICK: *(He takes the papers, and he flips through them.)* You still want me to scan these?

PRIYA: Please?

NICK: Sure.

PRIYA: But before you do that – could I see that autopsy report? Out of curiosity.

NICK: Sure. I get it. *(He pulls it the paper and hands it to her after a bit of digging through the folders.)* What're you looking for?

PRIYA: Nothing. I'm just curious...*(She trails off as she begins to read closely. After a few moments - )* Oh. No.

NICK: Yes?

PRIYA: I'm sorry, I have to go. We're all done here?

NICK: The copies/

PRIYA: Don't worry about it. Just send them whenever.

NICK: Then yes, we're all done.

PRIYA *picks up her bag and exits without saying goodbye. Lights down.*

## SCENE FOUR

*Lights up on PRIYA, in her bedroom listening to music – something mellow. Her stuff is everywhere. It's been six months since the last scene. It's December. She has a small suitcase open and she's packing. She's humming and swaying to the music. She then hears LAKSHMI approaching her room, and she pushes her suitcase underneath her bed. The sheets and bed skirt keep it hidden from view.*

LAKSHMI: Hey.

PRIYA: Hi. *(by now she is on her bed, scrolling on her phone.)*

LAKSHMI: I got you something. *(She hands her a plastic Walgreens bag.)*

PRIYA: What's this?

LAKSHMI: It's for your period.

PRIYA: *(looking inside the bag – she pulls out a packet of M&Ms)* My favorite. Thank you.

LAKSHMI: There's also some tea, cookies, and iron pills/

PRIYA: Thanks. You didn't have to/

LAKSHMI: Should I put the kettle on?

PRIYA: No, no I'm good.

LAKSHMI: Alright. *(She motions to the bed as if to ask if she can sit there. PRIYA shrugs, and she sits at the edge.)* Let's talk.

PRIYA: About what.

LAKSHMI: About why you've been acting so strange. For some time now.

PRIYA: I haven't been acting strange. Sorry if it seems that way. *(Beat.)* I feel like we've had this conversation/

LAKSHMI: Well. One second it's "re-adapting." The next it's "homesickness." Now it's your period – I'm sensing a pattern. I want to let you know that you can talk to me. You *should* talk to me. Or, someone else if/

PRIYA: I'm fine.

PRIYA *pulls out two packets of M&Ms, and hands one to her mother. They eat for a moment in silence.*

LAKSHMI: How are the applications going?

PRIYA: Good. I've recycled some essays. That's been helpful.

LAKSHMI: I'm sure. *(Beat.)* How's the YouTube stuff going?

PRIYA: Great, actually. I have three-thousand-something subscribers now.

LAKSHMI: Wow.

PRIYA: Yeah. I guess it's not much but it kind of is.

LAKSHMI: I'm happy you have a hobby. It's good to keep yourself busy.

PRIYA: Yeah. I love filmmaking. People really responded to my last video.

LAKSHMI: What was that? The interviews/

PRIYA: Yeah, the interviews. With all the people from the community college I found.

LAKSHMI: What were people saying?

PRIYA: *(confidently)* Overall. That it's just great that I was showcasing the pressure people of color feel. To find the best way to get ahead in society and how that might conflict with wanting to follow their dreams. *(This next part is not so confident.)* And how they also face pressure from family and stuff like that..

LAKSHMI: *(unsure of what to say)* Yeah, I agree that's – it's important stuff. *(LAKSHMI drops an M&M. It rolls underneath the bed.)* Oh no, I/

PRIYA: *(panicking)* Don't worry about, I'll/get it

LAKSHMI: No, I've got it.

PRIYA *anticipates what is about to happen as her mother bends down to retrieve the candy.*

LAKSHMI: *(facing the suitcase underneath the bed)* What's this?

PRIYA: I just keep my suitcase underneath the bed.

LAKSHMI: Oh. Why'd you move it from the garage?

PRIYA: I just thought it would be nice to have extra storage.

LAKSHMI: *(coming up from underneath the bed)* That's not a bad idea. *(Pause as she takes a seat at the edge of the bed again.)* Priya, I have something to tell you. And I believe you have something to tell me? I was going to wait for the right time to/

PRIYA: What do you mean?

LAKSHMI: Hold on. *(LAKSHMI exits, and then re-enters the stage, holding something behind her back. It looks like a large envelope.)*

PRIYA: What?

LAKSHMI: I believe this is for you. *(She hands PRIYA the envelope.)*

PRIYA: *(She silently takes the envelope. She's slightly in shock. She stares at it, not wanting to open it in front of her mother. She doesn't want to look her mother in the eyes.)*

LAKSHMI: Open it.

PRIYA: No.

LAKSHMI: Just open it.

PRIYA: I'm not going/to

LAKSHMI: *(stern and loud)* Open it.

PRIYA: I know what it says. Okay?

LAKSHMI: *(taken aback)* How?

PRIYA: I got notified of my acceptance online. I was waiting around the last week for my welcome packet. Here it is, I guess.

LAKSHMI: Why did you apply to UCLA without letting me know?

PRIYA: Because. It's my choice.

LAKSHMI: You hate me. You want to get as far away from me as possible.



PRIYA: That's not why I applied.

LAKSHMI: Then what? Do they have a better pre-med program than the schools/

PRIYA: The film and media program.

LAKSHMI: What?

PRIYA: I applied to the film, television, and digital media program.

LAKSHMI: (*furious*) Do you have no respect for me? Or our family?

PRIYA: I don't understand what/respect has to do with my life choices.

LAKSHMI: All these months you gave me the impression you were going to study pre-med. All this time these applications you've been/

PRIYA: You CAN'T make choices for me! You don't know anything about me. Who I am. We haven't lived with each other for years. And yet you think/

LAKSHMI: You are not going to UCLA. That is final. (*Beat.*) If you aren't going to study medicine, forget college. (*Venomous*) Go get married.

PRIYA: I have to go to UCLA.

LAKSHMI: I will not allow/

PRIYA: Mom. I received an acceptance letter in *December*. I applied for Early Decision. And as long as financial aid works out – I'm bound to UCLA.

LAKSHMI: (*A pause*) You're a liar.

PRIYA: (*sudden flare-up*) YOU'RE the liar. You and amama and thatha and EVERYONE have been LYING to me about how dad died. I know how he died.

LAKSHMI: (*defensive*) Have you been going through my stuff/

PRIYA: No! When I went to the insurance guy I read the autopsy report. Dad fucking *drowned*. He *drowned*. He wasn't *supposed* to die.

LAKSHMI: You have no right to call me a liar. I'm your mother.

PRIYA: Mothers don't hide stuff like this.

LAKSHMI: I didn't want you to be upset/

PRIYA: I was already upset! And no one let me go to his funeral and now I/

LAKSHMI: He was cremated, I told you I didn't want you to see him like/

PRIYA: His body was in that lake for FIVE DAYS. FIVE DAYS/

LAKSHMI: Priya, *don't* use that tone/

PRIYA: And you all just kept it a secret.

LAKSHMI: You've changed the subject. Okay fine, I'm a liar. But UCLA. That's NOT happening. Blame me all you want. Call me names. You still disrespected me and my wishes. You had no right Priya.

PRIYA: Well.

*PRIYA gets up and pulls the suitcase from underneath her bed.*

PRIYA: The deposit has been made. The ticket's been booked. I'm going next week. For a tour. I'm going to take out a loan. And then I'm going to pay my school fees. And then I'm going to move to California for four years. I'm going to study hard. I'm going to meet important people. I'm going to work a part-time job. I'm going to intern in the summers. And then I'll graduate. And I'll stay in LA. You can't stop me.

*LAKSHMI pauses. Then she slaps PRIYA across the face. Lights fade out.*

## SCENE FIVE

*Lights up. Upstage right, PRIYA is sitting down at a gate at the airport. She's reading a book, but she's slightly unfocused. After a moment, she takes out her cell phone to make a call.*

PRIYA: *(upon hearing a voicemail greeting)* Hi. It's me. Please call me back. I'm at my gate.

PRIYA *returns to her book, looking up every now and then to people watch. Her phone starts to ring.*

PRIYA: Mom? Hi. I'm at the gate.

*Upstage left, LAKSHMI is in the kitchen, washing dishes. Her cell phone is on speaker.*

LAKSHMI: Good, good. Did check-in go okay? Your suitcase was so heavy/

PRIYA: Yeah, I was a couple pounds overweight, but I pulled the whole "I'm poor and moving into college" thing.

LAKSHMI: *(soft chuckle)* Good for you. I'm sorry I couldn't see you off.

PRIYA: No worries.

LAKSHMI: I just got home.

PRIYA: It's okay. *(Beat.)* I finally got my room assignment.

LAKSHMI: Took them long enough. What're their names?

PRIYA: Aimee. And Michelle.

LAKSHMI: White girls?

PRIYA: I found them on Facebook. One of them looks Hispanic? I think.

LAKSHMI: Okay, so someone to relate to. Sort of. Your roommates don't have to be your best friends, you know.

PRIYA: I remember.

LAKSHMI: So, you're boarding when?

PRIYA: *(looking at her watch)* Like, ten minutes? Or so.

LAKSHMI: Okay. There's time. You can relax. Read a book/

PRIYA: Yep, haha. I'm reading.

*There's tension between them, a sort of awkwardness where they both feel the need to fill in the space left by what's unsaid. Finally, LAKSHMI speaks.*

LAKSHMI: I'm sorry I couldn't take you to the airport.

PRIYA: No, it's fine, like I said/

LAKSHMI: No. It's not. You're my only daughter. And you're going to *college*/

PRIYA: Mom/

LAKSHMI: *Miles* away. Miles.

PRIYA: I'll be fine. I'll visit. You can visit.

LAKSHMI: Yes, of course. *(Beat.)* It's orientation week. Be careful, huh? There'll be parties, I'm sure.

PRIYA: Hopefully. *(Beat.)* I'm sorry.

LAKSHMI: For what?

PRIYA: For lying to you.

LAKSHMI: *(unsure of what to say, until)* I forgive you.

PRIYA: Thank you. I just thought – this is what's best for me. What will make me happy. If I work hard enough, it'll be worth it.

LAKSHMI: Hard work will get you anywhere you need to be.

PRIYA: I told myself, like, all the Indian kids are signing away their hopes and dreams to engineering, law, med school, hospitality, family businesses – that’s not what happiness is. Not for me, at least.

LAKSHMI: Hmm.

PRIYA: *(hoping to get some sort of reaction from her mother)* Like, everyone always complains “representation this, representation that” but how can we be represented in other sectors if our parents don’t let us aspire for something else? Or if we just listen to whatever society says – “thank you come again” - you know? *(She says “thank you come again” with the Fake Indian Accent that Desi people know all too well.)*

LAKSHMI: Hmm.

PRIYA: I’m sick of people asking me if I’ve seen *Slumdog Millionaire*.

LAKSHMI: You know, me too.

PRIYA: *(Beat.)* I know I’m doing the right thing.

LAKSHMI: *(sighing)* Priya. You’ve made your choice. I can’t stop you now. Just do what makes you happy.

PRIYA: I need you to be proud of me.

LAKSHMI: I know you’ll do well.

*Someone over the speaker announces that Flight 5263 to LAX will be boarding in five minutes.*

PRIYA: I’ve got to go. It’s about to get crazy.

LAKSHMI: Yeah, yeah. Go ahead. Call me when you land. I love you.

PRIYA: I love you too.

*They both hang up. LAKSHMI stops what she is doing. Lights down on LAKSHMI. PRIYA stands up, begins to gather her things – pulling out her boarding pass, putting away her cell phone. She begins to walk towards the gate to line up. She stops for a second as she’s interrupted by her own thoughts. A call over the loudspeaker again to announce that the flight is boarding. She looks up as she listens to the announcement. Lights down. END OF PLAY.*