(Honorable Mention Winning Story in New York Stories Magazine Contest)

HOPE IN HIGH HEELS

By Shobhan Bantwal

Fate can be both beautiful as well as ruthless. Before reaching the age of forty-nine I have managed to observe and experience both sides. From Silicon Valley to Queens, New York—from suburban affluence to a dank, dimly-lit corner outside the men's room of a crowded urban subway station. That just about spells the direction my life has taken in the course of four short years.

In my quest for anonymity and solace for my tortured soul I have traveled across this vast country. I have found the former to some extent but the latter still eludes me. My soul still knows no peace.

"Are yuh cold, yuh crazy dog?" says a gravelly voice not too far from me.

I choose to ignore Smelly Willy's question. Willy just can't stop talking, especially when he's drunk. He's been asking me dumb questions all morning. He's a fellow huddler in this hole that some of us who belong to New York City's homeless masses call home. This is the corner in which he and I hang out almost every day. We sit cross-legged on the hard concrete floor and observe the commuters go about their daily lives. We are stationed directly opposite the turnstiles that gobble up the subway tokens. We get a good, wide view of the platform, too, so we can see the trains pulling in and out. Half the time we're snoozing, too bored to keep our eyes open and our brains alert.

I shiver beneath the moth-eaten blanket given to me by the city shelter in which I sleep on cold nights. The unseasonable late September chill feels like cool needles piercing my T-shirt clad chest,

a chest that used to be broad and muscular. Now the ribs show through the slowly disappearing chest hair.

I pull the blanket tighter around myself. Thoughts of the pale ivory electric blanket that used to keep me warm on cool nights in California flicker in my mind. Memories of hot, leaping flames in the fireplace in my white-carpeted family room, dance before my eyes.

My reverie ends with a harsh jolt when the odors come drifting out of the men's room ten feet away. Ugh! The stench of a men's room! Some guy or the other is either going in or coming out of there—a necessary trip after the cups of coffee he's had since his eyes opened this morning to another working day. I ought to know; I was in that habit myself not too long ago, drinking twenty-ounce cups of dark, rich caffeine every morning.

"I aksed you a question, dog," Willy growls, his speech slurred from a night of taking swigs from his mug.

I send him a bored look. "Yeah, I'm cold. Don't ask me again." The handle "dog" no longer offends me. I'm beyond caring. Besides, what does it matter? We're all fellow squatters. *Dog* is as good as Willy or Georgie or Mickey or Jimmy. At least to me it is.

A doctorate in computer science from Stanford doesn't mean a heck of a lot when I'm cohabiting with the likes of Willy. He grew up on the mean streets of Brooklyn and never studied beyond second grade. Willy can't even read the billboards. I can write complicated computer programs and do elaborate mathematical calculations in my brain. Willy looks at discarded magazines with nude pictures of busty females. I read trashed copies of the Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. But with our matching scruffy beards and unwashed hair hanging down our emaciated shoulders we are brothers of a sort.

A snicker erupts from Willy. "Got a tempuh, big feller? Hungry, I bet. Here, have a nip of my gin," he says, on an exaggerated note of tender concern, his New York accent even more apparent

as it slides off his gin-laden tongue. He slithers toward me on his butt and holds out his insulated plastic mug—Willy's trademark. He's positive that he's got the cops convinced that he's drinking coffee from the mug.

I reflexively slide away from him with my breath drawn in and a shake of my head. "I don't drink." Willy's gin is probably fermented sewer water.

"Too fancy for my gin?" he asks. "What did yuh used to drink, doggie? That fancy Jimmy Walker shit?"

"That's *Johnny* Walker," I reply with disdain.

"Same thing. It's still booze, ain't it?" says Willy with a snort. "So what's wrong with my gin, anyways?"

"Nothing. I don't happen to drink gin." I'm just about ready to throw up. They don't call him Smelly Willy for nothing. The odor emanating from his tattered sweatshirt and jeans is enough to make my eyes water. I often wonder if Willy soils his underwear in his sleep—if he wears any underwear at all.

I bite back a threatening wave of nausea as Willy slides away, pretending to be hurt by my indifference. I'm forced to take a breath; I can't hold it in forever. But the queasiness does have one advantage. It keeps me from thinking about how hollow my belly is. I haven't eaten in over twelve hours.

I look longingly at the bag of Dunkin Donuts in a commuter's hand. The flaming acid is churning in my stomach, making the ulcer feel like its on fire. The ulcer is a relic left over from years of hard work and stress as an executive at a 'dot.com' company first and then as an owner of a once-flourishing software business.

"You wanna keep bein' a grouch all day, go ahead. See if I give a dead rat's ass," Willy says in a voice filled with offended scorn.

Then don't give a rat's ass. I choose to look in the direction of the inbound train so I don't have to look Willy in the face. Homeless men don't make eye contact. We're all expressionless. We're ghostly shadows that flit around the bowels of the earth.

The chug-chug of the train is louder now. The suit-clad and fancy-shod men and women in their designer labels glance at their watches with a frown. The train is late by a few minutes. In their fast-paced, over-priced world every minute lost is worth a small fortune. Nonetheless, they all move forward to the edge of the platform, a look of anticipation on their faces—faces covered with myriad shades of makeup and men's colognes. I smell Aramis on a man as he approaches the turnstile. It used to be my favorite cologne.

A few seconds later the train thunders into the station, its brakes grinding like fingernails scratching a blackboard. The trains around here look quite clean, a surprise to me when I first got here. Willy told me that the previous mayor has been responsible for cleaning up the city—no more prostitutes, pimps, muggers and graffiti on trains. Three cheers for the ex-mayor! Of course, hobos like us still manage to exist despite the countless cops patrolling the streets.

The train's doors slide open with a whoosh. The Ralph Laurens and the Liz Claibournes squeeze in through the doors alongside the Wal-Marts and the Macys. Once inside they make a mad scramble to find seats. The scent of Gucci and Starbucks briefly mingles with Avon and Seven-Eleven. Patek Phillipe-clad wrists brush against Timex-clad ones. All that well-cultivated refinement is suspended in a moment of dog-eat-dog self-centeredness. The young men here do not rise and offer their seat to a lady. This is New York City—each man for himself.

Packed like pickles in a jar, they're are all heading for the hustle and bustle of Manhattan—Wall Street, Park Avenue, Times Square… They'll stride into tall, impassive towers made of steel and concrete and shiny glass that can blind a man with its glare. They'll ride in plush, burgundy-carpeted elevators manned by uniformed operators with resentful expressions.

In their respective offices the busy commuters will peel off their topcoats, offer fake, cut-and-paste smiles to their coworkers and head for the coffee machine. Coffee. Dear God! What wouldn't I do for a cup right now!

"Woweeee!" Willy exclaims with a grin that shows two missing teeth on the bottom. "Can yuh believe this, doggie?"

While I'm salivating over thoughts of coffee, some generous soul has offered Willy a brown paper bag. Ahhh…it looks plump and heavy. Food! McDonalds—the golden arches are clearly visible on the bag. I wonder if its pancakes dripping with butter and sweet syrup? Hot, dark coffee? Hash browns? Bagels with cream cheese? My body yearns for sustenance. My stomach growls, the sound loud and resonant.

Willy pulls out a breakfast sandwich wrapped in waxy paper that crackles, making my mouth water. "Hmmm…whaddo we got here? Bacon, egg and cheese. Lordy. Lordy, will yuh looka this." Willy grins and gives me what passes for a wink.

I'm a rigid vegetarian, but the aroma of bacon, egg and cheese is so enticing at the moment that it makes me want to strike Willy in the gut and grab the sandwich. But I won't. Even in this lawless jungle of vagrants there are some unwritten rules. Besides, I'm appalled at my violent thoughts. A Hindu Jain man drooling over meat and eggs! And then thinking about doing bodily harm to a fellow human being?

Biting into the sandwich noisily, Willy chows down the last morsel, rolling his eyes in ecstasy. Ummmm. Good. Real good." In a minute he pulls out a cardboard sleeve with a hash brown patty nestled in it. Then he squints at me. "Wanna eat em hash browns, or what?"

I'm tempted to say no, thanks, but *pride* is not a word that appears in a starving man's dictionary. The aroma of fried potatoes is seductive enough to bring a saint to his knees. I nod yes. "Thanks."

Willy tosses the patty at me. I deftly catch it in mid-air. In two seconds flat the potatoes are going down my throat, salty, crunchy-tender and altogether fabulous. They feel even better traveling down my food pipe. Greasy potatoes have never tasted better. "Thanks, Willy."

"Mr. Polite, aren't yuh?" mocks Willy. "What were yuh, dog? Some kinda big shot in yur last life? Like one of em monkey suits that gets on the subways?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I reply. I never want to talk about it, least of all to Willy. How could he relate to driving a BMW convertible, vacationing in Europe, and making plans to send one's only child to Harvard? It's a part of my life that I have clumsily folded up, tied in a tight knot in a piece of cloth, then locked in a steel trunk and sent to the bottom of the ocean. It's lost forever.

By now Willy is taking large gulps of tepid-looking coffee from the paper cup with the clown face on it. I don't give him a second look. I know there's not enough in the cup for the two of us. Willy is not a bad sort, actually. Most often he shares his booty with me.

He's nasty to most people, but for some inexplicable reason he's taken me under his wing. He seems to have recognized my hopeless naïveté: that I'm not used to the ways of the impoverished, the meanness of the slums and the dangers that lurk on these treacherous streets. He's taught me a lot, except how to steal—because I refuse to learn. I will not stoop to theft despite Willy's attempts to persuade me that it's not a sin when one is dying of hunger.

"Yuh one of em fancy forrun people?" Willy had asked me when he'd seen me get off the subway at this very station one evening several months ago, looking about me like a bewildered alien from a distant planet. I had probably stuck out like a sore thumb.

"Fancy foreign people?" I had asked, wondering what he meant.

"Don't try to fool me, yuh big dog. I see 'em all the time. Them Indians and Pakistanis and them Middle East people and the...yuh know…chinks. They come here and make big bucks. Yuh one of em, ain't you?"

I had turned away from his discerning, bug-eyed gaze. Yes, I used to be one of them.

"Yuh don't fool me, boy. Yuh one of em suits fallen on hard times. I can tell from the way yuh walk and talk, dog. Yuh got a bit-o-class under that ugly beard." Willy had laughed and laughed after that, going hysterical over his own remark, as if it were some big joke.

I had maintained my cool at what I'd considered insults and said nothing in my defense. But he had shared his slices of stale bread and cheese with me. Then he'd introduced me to the men's shelter and his little corner of this station. I'll never forget that.

Willy hasn't badgered me for answers after that day. We try not to pry in one another's private lives. I'm just "dog" to him and to me he's Smelly Willy—a name the guys at the shelter have bestowed upon him. I'm grateful to him for teaching me how to live on the streets without getting killed. I've even learned to carry a knife in my pocket.

The clickety-click of a woman's high heels is clearly audible a little distance from us. The footsteps come closer. Male curiosity makes me glance up when the footsteps are almost directly before me.

I freeze. Dear God! Am I hallucinating? I'm sure hunger is playing cruel tricks on my brain.

It's Hope!

But Hope is dead, my mind screams back at me. Julie and I have cremated her. It was Hope—sweet, adorable Hope that had lain in that satin-lined casket four years ago at the funeral home, looking for all the world like a china doll taking a nap, her rosy lips curved into a trace of a smile. Her mangled lower body was covered with a satin sheet. The accident had caused massive internal damage to the lower half of her body. My beautiful baby girl had bled to death.

My heart hasn't stopped bleeding since then.

It is Hope who has plagued my waking as well as sleeping moments these past few years. It is Hope's face that I continue to see in every young girl that I lay eyes on.

The young woman wearing the high-heeled sandals tilts her face to look directly at me. She looks so much like Hope. And yet, she's not quite Hope, I realize. My racing heart slows down a notch. It isn't my dead daughter's ghost, just someone who looks a lot like her. This girl has the same smooth café latté skin, the same long mahogany hair, the sharp chin and straight nose, the same feline gait. And the long, lean legs that boys at Hope's school used to drool over.

Something briefly flickers in the young woman's large eyes as they make contact with mine. Recognition? No, it can't be. I don't know this girl—never seen her before. Besides, with my disgusting hobo's countenance, how can such a classy girl know me? Has she recognized a fellow Indian in me? Most likely. My brown skin is still visible in places on my face despite the hirsute appearance. I can't get away from who I am.

She quickly turns her gaze away, but almost immediately glances over her shoulder for one hasty peek before she ambles over to the turnstile and pushes past it. I shift my eyes downward. She has caught me staring at her. She's probably mistaken my interest for something it isn't. I feel mortified.

An amused snort erupts from Willy. "Ain't she a bit young for yuh?"

"Young enough to be my daughter," I retort.

"That don't mean yuh don't wanna get in her pants, do it? Yuh been lookin' at her funny, doggie."

I give Willy a murderous look and hope it conveys the message, "Don't mess with me." But I notice Willy isn't paying attention to me. He's checking out the young woman's body as she walks away, his bulging eyes filled with lecherous speculation. "Can't say I blame yuh. She a doll baby, ain't she?"

"Shut up. Just shut up," I yell, loud enough for a few passersby to glance our way. Willy has no right to ogle at that girl's body. He's old enough to be her father, too. Besides, why is the girl

wearing a tight, black mini-skirt and shoes with six-inch high heels? Don't her parents have anything to say about their child dressed in a come-hither outfit? Good old-fashioned Indian parents don't let their grown daughters walk about dressed like little tarts.

"I'll look at anythin' I want, dog. Who're yuh to tell me to shut up, anyways?" Willy takes another swallow from the mug. "She from your country, ain't she? Is that why yuh gettin' bent outta shape?"

I refuse to dignify that with a response.

"She is, I could see that. That don't mean I can't look though. Nice ass she's got, too."

I secretly fume at his vulgarity but don't say another word. If I give in to my rage I'm afraid I'll end up in a scuffle with Willy. Willy would never understand my feelings about that girl.

That night, on our way back to the shelter, an inebriated Willy stumbles and takes a spill on the sidewalk. His head smashes against a concrete step leading to a video store and he suffers a head wound.

Willy is taken by ambulance to the hospital where the city's poor and homeless are treated. I go back to the shelter on my own, my heart feeling like a ten-pound rock. I can't sleep that night worrying over Willy. I feel alone in the large room, surrounded by dozens of other men sleeping on their bedrolls, some of them snoring loud enough to wake up the stiffs in the morgue down the street. The hospital has kept Willy overnight for observation. I've been told that he has a concussion and stitches on his head.

The next morning I find myself at the subway station. Despite his annoying ways I miss Willy dreadfully. I pray that he's all right. He's the only thing that comes close to a friend to me right now.

Miss High Heels appears again today. The shoes are different—shiny black pumps, but the heels are like stilts. Again she throws curious glances at me a few times. At one point I feel sure

that she's going to say something to me, but then she seems to change her mind and moves away. I'm both disappointed as well as relieved. What would a homeless bum say to a refined young woman like her, anyway?

For several days Miss High Heels and I continue the peek-a-boo, pause-and-glance routine. Good thing I'm alone. Willy would have teased me to death. The shelter's grapevine says the doctors suspect Willy has a massive brain tumor. I hate it that they won't let me visit him. I'm worried sick about him. I've lost everything already. I can't afford to lose Willy, too.

Today is Monday. Miss High Heels hasn't been to the station on the weekends. It's obvious that she either works or goes to school—strictly a weekdays subway rider. Here she comes at precisely ten minutes to eight. Today she's wearing a brown pantsuit. I mentally nod in paternal approval. The brown high-heeled shoes are rather nice and conservative, too.

All of a sudden the young lady stops right in front of me. "Are you Indian?" she asks.

I gasp in surprise. Her voice sounds somewhat like Hope's voice, too. I manage to nod.

"Are you Gujarati?" She's frowning at me now.

I nod once again. I'm embarrassed to admit that I'm a Gujarati Jain. What will she think? Will she wonder why an Indian man is a vagrant who stinks like I do? Why he lounges around a subway station and lives on the fringes of humanity like a mangy mutt? If she's been raised in the U.S. the poor girl has probably never seen or even heard of a homeless Indian in America. No wonder she's been looking at me strangely.

"Are you a mute?" She looks at me with pity in her dark eyes. "Is that why you can't speak?"

I recover and find my tongue at last. "I…I do speak."

"Oh, okay then." She walks away from me very slowly, as if she's trying to digest what just occurred. She looks a bit confused.

I'm trying to digest the encounter myself. She talked to me! My heart is still beating the most erratic rhythm. I go home to the shelter in a euphoric mood that night despite the niggling thoughts about Willy and his tumor.

It's Tuesday and she opens her purse and offers me a dollar. I'm ashamed of taking charity from a mere child, and yet, if I don't accept it she may feel hurt. So I take it and say, "Thank you. God bless you." That dollar and the coins from other people add up to two dollars and sixty-two cents—enough for vegetable soup, an orange, and a soda for dinner. Although food at the shelter is free I most often can't eat it. They serve chicken or hot dogs almost everyday—enough to make me gag—a man born and raised in an orthodox Hindu household in Gujarat.

For an entire week the young lady offers me a dollar each day. Then, all of a sudden, one day, she says to me, "If you're a Gujarati, why are you here?" Her eyes silently ask other related questions. I can almost see them flitting across her face.

I smile bitterly at her. "I lost everything."

"Oh," she says and turns quiet for a minute, awkwardly staring down at her own shoes. "I'm sorry. But don't you…er…have a family?" she finally asks.

People are casting strange looks at us and the fact is not lost on her. She looks about and starts to fidget with the zipper on her pocketbook.

I feel sorrier for her than she probably feels for me. "Lost that, too," I tell her.

"Oh dear. I'm truly sorry." The train is coming in and she looks in the direction of the platform. I'm quite sure she's said all there is to say and is glad to be rescued by the train. More people are staring at us. "Got to go," she announces. She dashes through the turnstile as the train pulls in. She doesn't bother to send me a backward glance.

"Nice kid," I murmur to myself. I wonder what she does for a living, or if she's still in school. Why hadn't I seen her here until recently? Does she live around here?

Each day Miss High Heels talks to me a little bit more. I look forward to the talks with all my heart. Those one or two minutes are the highlight of my day. Each day she looks less and less embarrassed by people's inquisitive stares. Then one day, much to my joy, she hands me a plastic bag that feels heavy. I catch a whiff of Indian food, specifically Gujarati food. I'm salivating even before I find out what's in the bag. "Thank you so much," I murmur, the gratitude overwhelming me.

"You must miss home-cooked food," she replies. "It's not much—just rotli and shaakh."

I draw in a delighted breath. "Lord, that sounds fantastic. I haven't had rotli and shaakh in years."

"Really?" she asks.

"Julie, my wife, was American."

"Was? So she's passed on?"

I shake my head. "Divorced."

"Oh." She seems speechless again. The poor kid probably hasn't come across any divorced, middle-aged Indian men yet.

"That's okay. I'm all right with it, Miss." I'm not quite sure if it's okay to ask her name. Will she be frightened if a homeless man starts to ask her personal questions? She really shouldn't be talking to strangers in any case. I feel that fatherly wave of concern beginning to well up within me. What if it weren't me that she was picking up a conversation with? What if he were a rapist, a murderer? What if he started to stalk her?

"Is it all right if I ask your name?" she asks, her voice hesitant.

"It's all right. My name is Ajay Shah."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Shah. And mine is Asha Patel," she says with a half-smile.

I notice that she's got nice, even teeth, just like Hope's used to be. But I'm struck by the coincidence. Asha! Good heavens! Even her name in the Indian language means *Hope*. Is destiny playing some malicious game with me? How bizarre is this?

"Is something wrong? Mr. Shah?" She's looking at me with concern.

"No, no. It's just that I…you…er…remind me of someone. Even your name, Asha, is the same as someone I cared about very much."

The train once again cuts our dialogue short. In a way I'm relieved. I realize with a shock that I've bared my soul to a complete stranger. My feelings about Hope and Julie have been locked up inside me for so long.

I'm starving, too, so I open the plastic bag and start to eat the food, shoveling the wonderfully soft rotlis, those thin, hand-rolled wheat bread rounds, and the vegetable shaakh into my mouth, one greedy bite after another. *Heavenly* is too mild a word for the way my tongue feels. *God bless the Patels*.

I walk to the hospital to check on Willy that evening. I'm ashamed to go up to the front desk. I'll surely be escorted out of the hospital. It takes all my courage to approach the receptionist at the desk. Fortunately, homeless cases are so common here that my presence doesn't seem to bother the large woman. She tells me that Willy's condition has become serious. She refuses to tell me anything more. I'm not Willy's family and she can't discuss his medical details with anyone else. I'm not allowed to visit Willy either. I go back to the shelter feeling depressed.

The next day is Saturday and I don't expect to see Asha, so I'm pleasantly surprised to see her walking toward me around late morning. She's wearing tight jeans and sneakers. Huh, no high heels. What a difference in her height. I realize she's a petite little girl. She hands me a plastic bag. "Brunch. Hope you like idlis. My Mom makes the best."

"I love idlis. But you shouldn't do this, you know. You don't know me. I could be dangerous."

She laughs and dismisses my comment with a wave. "A Gujarati uncle dangerous? Are you kidding? Gujaratis are the most mild-mannered people."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, but young ladies from decent families shouldn't pick up conversations with strangers, especially tramps."

"But you're different."

"How would you know? I look like a tramp, don't I?"

"Maybe, but I can read people. I minored in psychology," she boasts. Her chin comes up a little in defiance. *Just like Hope's*. "Besides, you sound…polished, you know…cultured."

I chuckle. Nobody has called me cultured or polished before.

"Can I ask you something personal again?" she says.

I nod.

"Why are you homeless, Uncle?"

Uncle? I bask in the warmth that spreads through my mind. *Uncle* sounds so nice.

"Is it okay if I call you Uncle?" she inquires. "It feels a bit strange to talk to a Gujarati gentleman and call him Mr. Shah."

In the Indian-American culture all men are uncles and all women are aunties to every child. "Uncle is fine. And it's a long story."

"Tell me anyway. I have all day. No classes today."

"You mean you came all the way here just to bring me food?" I'm surprised at the kid's generosity. Most girls her age would prefer to lounge in bed till noon on weekends. Feeding the homeless would be the last thing on their minds.

"I wanted to make sure you had something to eat. I told my parents about you."

"Your parents? They don't mind you talking to me?"

"Not at all. If fact, my Mom insisted that I bring you the idlis. She says no Gujarati should have to starve."

"Very kind of your parents. They must be generous people."

"They are," she admits with a grin. "They do a lot for the community."

"What does your father do?"

"He owns a chain of Indian grocery stores." Although the station is not as crowded as it is on weekdays, there are still people milling around. They continue to throw odd looks at us. She says to me, "Why don't we go to the park and talk? Too many curious people around here."

I don't want to embarrass her further by walking beside her, so I say, "Why don't you go on ahead and I'll join you in a couple of minutes?"

She agrees and walks out of the station. In a few minutes I follow her.

We find a quiet bench in the park to talk. It's a sunny day and the concrete bench feels warm against my thighs. Surprisingly, there aren't any cops around either. To Asha's credit, my unpleasant odor and appearance don't seem to bother her in the least. She sits only a couple of feet away from me. She has a big heart, this little girl, I realize. Why am I not surprised? Is it because my Hope was a kind child, too?

"So, you were going to tell me about yourself," she prompts. "You can eat while you talk. I don't mind."

Taking her up on her offer, I start to eat. I apologize for my lack of manners and she dismisses it with a casual wave. "Don't worry. I understand."

"I used to be a very rich man, like your Dad," I tell her.

"You owned grocery stores?"

"No, I owned a software company in California. I had forty-three employees."

She gasps. Her eyes are wide as saucers. "Wow! What happened?"

This is the hard part. I know I'll have to tell her eventually, but a part of me wants to hold on to my private anguish. She is so open and honest and so damned generous. That kind of candidness deserves the same kind of honesty and trust in return. I take a deep breath and stroke my coarse, tangled beard. "I became addicted to drugs and lost everything."

"Drugs? Oh no!" she exclaims.

I know what's going through her young mind. Educated Indian men with million-dollar corporations don't do drugs. It's been hard enough for her to accept the fact that an Indian man has become homeless. Now I'm shocking her out of her wits by telling her that I was a drug addict. I notice how she has instinctively moved a few inches away from me, how her eyes have taken on a slightly wary look. I shake my head. "Don't worry, I'm clean now. Took me two years, but I'm off that stuff."

She sighs, obviously relieved. "That's good. But why drugs, Uncle?"

"I lost my daughter in an auto accident. She was our only child." My voice sounds shaky. This is the first time I've said it aloud in almost three years.

Asha stares in the distance for a minute. Her eyes begin to glisten with a hint of tears. "I…I'm sorry. How…how did it happen?"

"A bunch of teenagers in an SUV on a wet road. The vehicle overturned on a sharp curve." It all comes out in a rush from my throat, leaving me breathless.

"I'm sorry," she repeats. This time she pulls out a tissue from her purse to dab her moist eyes. "What was her name?"

"Hope. Just like Asha."

Asha frowns. "Isn't that some coincidence? We sort of share the same name."

"She was named after Julie's mother. Her full name was Hope Leela. Leela was my grandmother's name."

"How old was Hope when she passed away?"

"Sixteen. She was beautiful. In fact, she looked a lot like you. When I first saw you at the station I almost thought I was dreaming. The resemblance is quite uncanny."

"Hmmm. Weird." Asha's mouth curves in a perplexed smile.

"She would have been twenty years old last month if she were alive." I study Asha for a moment. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"Really?" I laugh. "You look like a little kid, no more than nineteen or twenty."

Her pretty nose wrinkles up. "Tell me about it. I get carded at all the bars. You don't know how annoying that is. I have to keep telling them that I'm a grown woman. That I'm a law school student at NYU."

I wonder if Hope would have become a lawyer some day. "That's great," I say to Asha. "You must be very smart."

"I'm all right. Not as bright as my two older brothers, but I'm not exactly dumb either. My oldest brother is a doctor and the second one is an investment broker."

"I see. A smart family."

A fire engine races past the park, its lights flashing, its siren screaming. As if rudely reminded that she's sitting here shooting the breeze with a homeless man, she rises to her feet. "Sorry, got to go. My Mom will wonder what happened to me. I told her I'd drop the food off and come directly home."

I rise to my feet, too, the long-practiced politeness still very much alive in me. "Thanks a lot, Asha. Please thank your parents for me."

"I will," she says.

"I wish I could offer them thanks in person, but I don't want to offend them." I gesture at my own disreputable appearance to make my point.

She nods and starts to walk away. I watch her receding figure with a wistful sigh. I realize that I haven't had this much pleasure in a simple conversation in quite some time.

She comes to the station again the next day. Despite the clouds and the brisk wind today we go to the park and she watches while I devour parathas and lime pickle. Today she has brought me a bottle of Maaza mango juice to go with my brunch. She has brought me another bag that contains a used but clean pair of gray sweatpants, a matching sweatshirt, and a pair of socks and size ten Nike sneakers. I'm so touched by the gesture that I nearly break down and cry.

"Tell me more about your family," she presses.

"Hope's death was the lowest point in our lives." I realize with astonishment that I actually want to tell Asha all about Hope and Julie. "Julie managed to hang on to her sanity. She's a strong woman, Julie. But I must be a very weak man. I just couldn't handle losing Hope. She was a lovely, vibrant child. I sank into such a depression that my business started to suffer. A lot of software companies were folding up at the time anyway. Mine just crashed faster. I couldn't repay my loans, so we had to sell the house, the cars, Julie's jewelry—everything."

"Julie didn't stand by you?" Asha asks with some surprise.

I know exactly what Asha is thinking: an Indian wife would never have abandoned me. She would have stuck by me and would never have allowed me to sink to this—penury to the point of homelessness.

So I jump in to explain. "Julie stood by me for as long as she could. But I was a hopeless case. I started with prescription anti-depressants and ended up with street drugs. Julie's a nurse and did

everything possible. She even got a job to support us. But the more she tried to get me away from the drugs the nastier I became. I pushed her further and further away."

"Why did you do that?" Asha says.

Why? I wonder about that myself. "Deep down, I think I wanted her to leave me. I didn't want her to drown in the same dark pit that I had sunk into. I was convinced that I was a loser and I wanted to prove to the world that I was one. I begged Julie to divorce me and leave me alone."

Asha gingerly stretches her arm across the bench and touches my hand—the hand that now has wrinkles and bony fingers with dirt embedded underneath the long nails. Her touch is light, but I feel the warmth from her small manicured hand travel through my knuckles and all the way up my arm to my shoulder. *My Hope has come back from the dead in the guise of this kind little Gujarati girl*.

"Do you still love Julie?"

I venture to give Asha a wry smile. "Very much. She's a beautiful and kind woman. But I'm not sure that's enough any more. I hope she finds a good man to love and care for her."

"How did you end up here in New York?" Asha wants to know.

"I hitch-hiked most of the way. I had a little money from my last welfare check and decided I wanted to go as far away from California as possible. Too many memories there."

"Instead of living on the streets why don't you go to the temple? They provide a decent place to eat and sleep, you know," Asha counsels.

"I'm not comfortable going to the temple like this. How can I face them in my condition? It's humiliating to tell other Indians that I'm homeless."

She frowns and nods sympathetically. "Can't you look for a job here?"

"Look for a job?" This kid's sense of optimism is incredible, I decide, with an inward smile. Ahh, youthful idealism—nothing like it—until you grow up and learn otherwise.

"You have a good college background, I presume?" She cocks a shapely eyebrow at me.

I nod. "I have a Ph.D. from Stanford."

She holds up an index finger. "Well, there you go. You have excellent credentials."

"Who'd want to hire an ex-drug addict, Asha? Besides, software has changed a lot in four years. A mere four months can make a difference in technology. I've no idea what's going on in the world of computers lately."

"What about something else?" she asks, her frown deepening. I know her mind is furiously thinking of all sorts of possibilities. She snaps her fingers the next moment. "I have an idea. My Dad's planning to buy a good integrated software package to make his business easier to manage. He could use someone with a solid software background and business sense to guide him. You'd be perfect for that."

A sense of alarm shoots right through me. Good Lord! Me get a proper job? I've been away from the working world far too long. My heart starts to pick up speed. I feel a serious panic attack coming on. "No, I can't do that," I yell at her.

She recoils from me, alarmed. "Okay. Don't get so upset. I was just trying to help."

My breath begins to normalize and my pulse winds down after I close my eyes and take in several long, hard gulps of air, just like the drug rehab counselor had taught me. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you. It's…it's just that I haven't worked in so long that I don't think I know how to any more."

"That's entirely crazy. You know what's wrong with you?" Her eyes are shooting angry sparks at me now.

"I suppose you're going to tell me." *Little Miss psychology minor*.

"You like being a loser. You're enjoying playing the martyr, the poor, helpless, homeless old man. You're using your child's death as an emotional crutch."

"What the hell do you know about losing a child?" I snap at her.

"Lots of people lose their children. Look at all the young people who died so tragically in the World Trade Center. Did their parents go on drugs and start to live on the streets? No. They picked up their lives and went on living."

I'm still fuming. "That was different," I protest.

"Oh yeah? How was that different? Losing a child is the same, no matter how or where. Do you think it hurts any less in New York than it does in California?"

I don't want to admit it, but I'm looking at Asha now in a different light. Dammit, the child is right. I'm a stupid bastard wallowing in self-pity. I say nothing, but she observes me with interest. She probably realizes that I'm at least contemplating seriously what she's just said.

She says an abrupt goodbye and leaves. Today I don't bother standing up or showing her any courtesy. I don't even thank her for the food and the clothes. I'm too busy sulking like a little boy and licking my wounds.

Asha-Hope does not come to the station for several days after that. Is she angry with me, I wonder? Did I frighten her with my outburst the other day? Has she come to the conclusion that I'm mentally unstable, and therefore dangerous? Or has she given up on me because I'm a hopeless loser? Has she decided to use another station so she can avoid me? By the seventh day I'm very troubled. Is she ill perhaps? Am I a symbol of bad luck for everyone and everything that I touch? Hope, Julie, Willy, Asha…

On the eighth day she appears. I breathe a sigh of relief when she smiles at me. She appears a bit drawn though. "I was worried about you," I say to her.

"Thanks. I had the worst kind of flu. Really knocked me flat on my ass," she says, and rolls her eyes heavenward.

"But you're all right now?" My sense of relief makes me decide to overlook her unladylike language.

"The doctor says I'm fine." She gives me another plastic bag. "There are some clothes and food in there. I'd really like it if you'd wear the clothes and go meet my father."

"It's very kind you, my dear. But I doubt if your father will be interested in someone like me."

"I've already talked to him about you. He's very interested. He says he could use someone with your expertise. Please, Uncle, at least give yourself a chance. It's a shame to let yourself go."

"I'll think about it," I tell her.

"My Dad is Dhirubhai Patel. He can be found at the Indian grocery store on Woodhaven Boulevard right around the corner from here. It's called Asha Groceries."

I smile. Asha Groceries. Of course—named for Mr. Patel's charming youngest child. I nod absently and watch while she goes through the turnstile.

I look in the bag. Lots of food as always. But there's a lot more: a clean white shirt, a pair of black pants, an army-green cardigan, and a pair of black loafers. There's a clear sandwich bag with a tiny pair of scissors, a disposable razor, a bar of deodorant soap, and a comb. She's even added a toothbrush and toothpaste. There's a twenty-dollar bill thrown in as well. Underneath all of the items is a towel.

The hint is not exactly subtle. The kid obviously wants me to 'clean up my act.' Literally. She really wants me to meet her father.

All at once, my heart feels so heavy that I begin to sob. Passersby turn to look at me. I run to the park and find a quiet spot under a tree where I can cry without attracting attention. It's drizzling today so there aren't very many people around anyway. I indulge in a fit of body-racking sobs for nearly half an hour. I'm soaking wet from the rain, but I don't really care. I haven't cried like this

since Hope's funeral. It feels good, liberating, cathartic. Maybe I should have cried more often. Perhaps it would have prevented me from trying to obliterate the pain with drugs.

The next morning I take a shower at the shelter. It feels marvelous to wash away the grime and the stink. I shave—for the first time in God alone knows how long. It feels weird to touch my smooth upper lip, chin and cheeks. A stranger looks back at me from the chipped mirror.

I put on the shirt and pants. The pants are a bit short and the shirt is rather snug—a far cry from my old designer clothes. The cardigan, too, is a bit tight. But I'm quite satisfied with the way I look. Heck, I'd forgotten how wonderful it is to look and feel clean.

My fellow shelter mates stare at me wide-eyed. I ignore them and walk out the door. I take my twenty dollars and get my first haircut in over two years. I watch the long locks fall to the ground in the barbershop. After the haircut is done I can't stop touching my cropped hair and the newly exposed nape of my neck. It feels weird.

I head for the hospital first. Looking the way I do today they let me visit Willy. I'm nervous because I don't know what to expect. I stand at a distance observing him for a while. I find him looking thin and gaunt despite the regular meals. He's lying still in his bed, staring at the ceiling, oblivious to my presence. Even when I approach his bed he doesn't recognize me until I say, "Hey, Will. How's it going?"

He gasps before the missing-teeth smile flashes across his face. "Well, I'll be damned. That yuh, dog? What happen to yuh, boy?"

"Got cleaned up a bit, that's about all, Willy." I notice he's been shaved, too. His head is shaved as well, but now has light fuzz growing in. The neat row of stitches on one side of it looks like zipper teeth. He doesn't smell like the old Willy either. It's a strange visit—the two of us look unnaturally clean and we don't quite know what to say to one another.

"I'm going on a job interview, Willy," I say at last. I'm embarrassed to even mention the word 'job.' Who would have thought that looking for an honest day's work would be an embarrassment?

Willy chews on that bit of news for a moment. "Good for yuh, dog. Yuh used to workin' hard, boy, not to sittin' around beggin' for dimes," he says and closes his eyes. "I think I'm gonna stay right here and look at the pretty nurses." He chuckles.

Despite his attempts at humor I know Willy is seriously ill. My gut tells me he's dying. I wonder how long he's going to last. He looks tired. I put my clean hand on his for a moment. I realize that this is the first time I've touched him. "You do that, Willy," I tell him. "I'll come by and let you know if I get the job."

"Bring me a decent hot dog, boy, with lotsa rawr onions and mustard," he says and waves at me.

I nod and wave back. I have this gnawing feeling that I may never see him again. *Goodbye, Willy my friend. Thank you for everything*.

I make my way to Woodhaven Boulevard. There it is: Asha Groceries. It's hard to miss. It has a gaudy, red neon sign. Asha—my beacon of hope in high heels. I cross the street and walk into the store, with my back held straight and a smile pasted on my face.