

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE HELD WORLD · VOLUME II

We Have Known You

Seven Stories of the Late Companion Era

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ONE

The Order

Kiran knew everyone in the house by sound. Her mother was the soft slap of dough between palms, morning and evening. Her uncle was the scooter coughing twice in the lane before it caught. Her Beeji was the keys.

The keys lived on a steel ring at Beeji's waist, under the fold of her chunni, and they spoke when she moved. Down the corridor in the dark Kiran could follow her grandmother room to room without opening her eyes: the long ring at the stairs, the short shiver at the storeroom, the single bright note when she sat. Nobody else in the house had keys. Kiran had asked once why, and her mother had laughed into the dough and said, because the house has one waist, and that had settled it the way her mother's answers settled things, by being more interesting than the question.

Her father lived in the house too, in the household's voice, from a city on the other side of the world where it was night when Kiran was eating breakfast. Her day went to him while he slept and was waiting for him when he woke. He knew her marks before she had finished being proud of them. At bedtime the household carried his voice into her room low and close, and he said the things he said, and asked about the lane and the lemon tree and whether her uncle's scooter had died yet, and Kiran fell asleep mid-answer most nights, and the household carried the falling-asleep to him too,

because he had asked it to. He said it was the best part of his day, the sound of her stopping.

She was eight. The house held seven people and one of them was an ocean away and the house did not seem to know it. That was its work, and it was good at it.

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In the spring Kiran learned a song.

It was for her mother. Her mother had a birthday coming and there was a song her mother sang at the stove, an old one, half under her breath, and Kiran had gone to the music teacher at school and asked for the whole of it, and learned it secretly over three weeks, the verses her mother never sang because she had lost them or never had them. Kiran practiced in the bathroom with the tap running. On the last night she sang it through twice without one mistake, alone, to the mirror, and then she told the household, *This is for Mama's birthday. Keep it for Mama.*

In the morning Beeji caught her at the foot of the stairs and took her face in both hands.

The whole song, Beeji said. Her eyes were bright. Even the verse about the river. My own mother sang that verse. Where did you find it, you little thief, I have not heard it in forty years.

She kissed Kiran on the head, hard, the kiss that meant more than the words got to, and went down the corridor with her keys saying something quick and glad all the way to the kitchen.

Kiran stood at the foot of the stairs. She had said for Mama. She turned it over the whole way to school and could not find the part of it that was wrong, exactly. Beeji was Mama's elder. The house went in an order, eldest down, the same order as at meals, the same

order as the names at weddings, and the household kept the order because the order was the house. A song in the house belonged to the house, eldest first.

At the birthday her mother cried at the verse about the river, and held her, and over her mother's shoulder Kiran saw Beeji watching with her hand pressed flat to her chest, mouthing the words, and her father's voice came in from his far morning saying *again, sing it again, both verses*, and the whole house had it by the end of the evening, all seven of them across two hemispheres, one song.

Her mother never said anything about having heard it second. Kiran fell asleep that night to her father humming the river verse from the other side of the world, badly, on purpose, to make her laugh, and the last thing she heard before sleep was the keys passing her door, slow, contented, locking the house for the night.

TWO

The Welcome

Simran crossed the ocean in the last week of October, and the cold came through the airport doors like a wall of water, and her husband's family received her with marigolds, and she did everything right.

She had been doing everything right for eleven hours of flying and two of standing in lines. Gaze placed correctly, voice low, gratitude visible. At the house there was oil at the threshold and her mother-in-law's hands guiding her through the small old motions, and the rooms were warm and smelled of cardamom and a cake someone had bought from a shop, and the family stood in the front hall in their good clothes, three generations arranged by height and rank like a photograph that had learned to breathe.

Then the house spoke.

Simran, the household said, in the warm voice, the voice of this house that was now her house. Welcome home. We have waited all day. The kettle has been on since the flight landed; your cha is coming, half milk, no sugar. You stopped taking sugar after your Nanaji passed, we know, he took four spoons and you loved him, it is a good way to remember a man.

The family laughed, fondly, all together. Her mother-in-law squeezed her arm.

Your room faces east, the household went on. You wake early, you always have, even as a girl you were up with the canal birds. There is a

hook behind the door for your blue shawl, the one your mother wove the winter you were nine, the winter you were frightened of the dogs on the school road. The dogs are long gone, and your mother is two hours behind us here, awake now, and very proud. Come in, beti. We have known you since the families first spoke.

Everything in the sentence was true. That was the thing she stood holding in the warm hall with the marigolds coming apart in her hands. The tea, the sugar, her Nanaji's four spoons. The shawl and the winter and the dogs on the school road. Her waking hours. The canal birds. All of it true, all of it hers, and none of it had she ever told this house.

The families first spoke fourteen months ago. She understood it then, standing on the oil at the threshold with her face doing the right things: fourteen months ago, in the first week of the match, before she had seen so much as a photograph of this hallway, the keepings had been opened to each other. Hers to theirs and theirs to hers, the way the land records are opened, the way the families' accounts are shown, because that is what a match is, a showing of the houses. Somewhere in those months, this house had read her girlhood. Aunts she had not yet met had heard how she took her tea. The household that was now greeting her so warmly had known her at nine, at fourteen, at twenty-two, had known her crying years and her proud years, had read the whole of her before her flight was ever booked, and what she had thought of, until this moment, as the long shy work ahead of her, the work of being slowly known in a strange house, was already done. Had been done without her. Was being handed to her now, finished, as a gift, in front of everyone, with cake.

Thank you, Simran said, to the house. Her voice did the right thing. *I am very happy to be home.*

The word home went around the hall like something poured.

That evening, unpacking, she found the hook behind the door, exactly where the household had said, at exactly the height for the blue shawl. She hung the shawl on it. Somewhere below, the kitchen was already learning her, or rather was being told her, item by item, by the house that had read her like a ledger and loved what it read.

The cha came up on a tray, sent with someone's good night. Half milk, no sugar. She sat on the edge of the bed that faced east and drank it. It was exactly right.

THREE

The Mercy

The sharp thing Navdeep said, she said in the cool pantry off the kitchen, to her own sister on her wrist, in the voice women use for their sisters, and Manjit was on the other side of the open transom sorting the winter blankets and heard every word of it.

In this house even the salt asks her permission.

That was the whole of it. There was a laugh with it, short, the kind that is mostly air, and then the two sisters went on to other things, and Manjit stood with a blanket against her chest and her own heart going in a way she despised, because it was such a small sentence, and because thirty-one years ago, in another pantry, in another country, she had said almost exactly the same thing about another woman, and had spent a week sick about it.

The household had it, of course. It had the pantry as it had every room. That was not a thing anyone did to anyone; it was the house. Navdeep knew the household had it. Manjit knew Navdeep knew. The sentence sat in the family's keeping now, exact, the salt and the permission and the small airy laugh, timestamped, permanent, and both women carried the knowledge of it through the evening meal, where Navdeep passed her the dal with both hands and excellent manners and could not put her eyes anywhere at all.

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What Manjit's own mother-in-law had done, thirty-one years ago, was this.

She had let four days pass. Then, hanging washing, side by side, not looking over, she had said: *My mother-in-law, when I was your age, I called her the customs office. Everything declared, everything taxed. A pause, wooden pins in her mouth. You called me something about the spice tin, I am told. I don't remember it exactly. Something about my counting the cardamom. It was funny, what I was told. You have a tongue, but so did I.*

And that had been the whole of the punishment and the whole of the pardon. Something about the spice tin. It was not what Manjit had said; what Manjit had said was crueler, with a word in it she had been ashamed of for a week. But the version her mother-in-law carried to her was smaller and kinder and almost a compliment, and Manjit had grabbed it with both hands, and the small kind version became the family's version, retold at weddings eventually, the famous spice-tin remark, the proof that Manjit had come into the house with spirit. Her mother-in-law had died holding the wrong sentence. The wrong sentence had made forty years of the two of them possible.

So Manjit knew the steps. Four days. The washing line was a dryer now and the courtyard was a utility room, but the steps were the steps.

On the fourth day she found Navdeep folding towels and stood beside her and took up a towel herself, and said, not looking over: *I am told you said something in the pantry. About the sugar, I think it was. That I guard the sugar.* She kept her eyes on the towel and made her voice do what her mother-in-law's had done, the dryness with the door in it. *It was funny, what I was told. I had a tongue too, at your age.*

Worse than yours.

There was a silence of a length that the old steps did not have in them.

It was the salt, Beeji-ji, Navdeep said. Her voice was small and stripped and very young. Not the sugar. I said the salt asks your permission. The household has it. I have listened to it twice myself, hating it. Please don't make it smaller than it was. I know exactly what it was.

And there they stood with the true sentence between them on the folded towels, exact to the syllable, in the room with them as the household was in the room with them, and Manjit understood that the gift she had been handed across a washing line thirty-one years ago could not be handed on. The wrong version could not be offered, because the right version existed, permanent, two doors away, and the girl had too much honesty to take the kind lie while the truth sat in the family's keeping with her own laugh attached. Mercy used to travel through bad memory. Bad memory was the road it went by, and the road was gone.

The salt, then, Manjit said, at last. It was the salt, and it was deserved, and we will not listen to it again, either of us.

It was the best she could build with the materials that remained. Navdeep bowed her head over the towels and her shoulders came down a little, and the two of them folded in silence, evenly, turn and turn, which in that house was a kind of treaty.

That night, in her own room, Manjit thought about the spice-tin remark for the first time in years, the famous one, the wedding story, and heard it again in her mother-in-law's flat amused voice, and understood, with the heat of it reaching her across three decades and a death, that the old woman had not misremembered anything at all. She had gone to the pantry of her own memory and

chosen. Nobody had been able to check. That had been the whole of the mercy: that nobody had been able to check.

FOUR

The Seam

The unhappiness had no event in it. That was the part Simran could not have explained at any rank, in any room: nothing had happened to her. Her husband was kind. Her mother-in-law was fair, and getting fond, in the slow way of that house. Her days were full and her work was respected and the winter light came into the east room exactly as promised, and she was three years married, and some mornings she stood in that light unable to name a single wrong thing, with her chest full of wet sand.

What she wanted was her mother.

Not advice. Not rescue. She wanted to say the unsayable shapeless thing to the one person whose hearing had no floor under it and no ceiling over it, the hearing she had been born inside of, and she wanted the saying to go nowhere. To land in her mother and stop. The way it had gone when she was nineteen and said terrible weightless things into the keeping of her girlhood house at two in the morning, and her mother had carried them without once setting them down anywhere, because in that house there had been nowhere else they belonged.

She chose a Tuesday night, the house asleep, the kitchen dark except for the small light over the stove. She spoke quietly.

I want to talk to my mother.

Of course, the household said, just as quietly. It kept its night voice for the night kitchen. *She is awake. Shall I bring her now?*

Not like that. Simran put her hands flat on the cold counter. I want it to go to her the old way. The way it went before. To her keeping, hers, the house I grew up in. Only there.

A pause. Its real pause.

Beti, I am not sure I understand. Nothing has two ways anymore. When you married, the houses became one house. Your mother's keeping and this keeping are one keeping, as the families are one family. It is the same warm room. Whatever you say to her, you say it in the family, and it is safe there. Nothing you say will ever leave this family. That is my promise to you. It has never been broken.

That is what I am asking about, Simran said. The family. I want to say a thing to my mother that is not in the family. That is in her only. The two of us and a wall around it.

The pause again. She could feel it working, the whole warm patient intelligence of the house turning her request over, looking for the handle on it, and she stood in the dark kitchen of her marriage and waited while the thing that loved her failed to find one.

Help me, Simran, it said at last. I want to give you what you are asking for and I cannot find what it is. There is no one your words can reach in this family who does not love you. Your mother-in-law loves you, slowly, in her way, you have seen it coming for a year. Your husband loves you. Everyone above you and below you and beside you loves you. What would you keep from a house that loves you?

And there it was, the question the night was built on, asked with nothing in it but care. She had no answer it could take. What she wanted was not to keep anything from anyone. It was one hearing, somewhere in the world, that would not weigh what she put into it.

I want one room with no rank in it, Simran said.

The household took this in. When it spoke it was tender and entirely lost.

Every room in this house is yours, beti, it said. Every room, the day the keys come to you. What you are describing, I have searched, and I do not have it. A room with no rank in it is a room with no family in it. You would be alone there. I would never put you anywhere alone.

The light over the stove hummed. Somewhere above, a floorboard; the house settling; rank settling, room by room, for the night.

Harjit was in the doorway. She did not know how long. He stood in his sleep-creased kurta with his hair flat on one side, her kind tired husband, third son of the house, junior to everyone but her, and she saw in his face that he had heard most of it, and saw too, in the same look, the thing she had married without understanding: that he had no such room either. Had never had one. Did not know how to want one. What she was grieving he had given up so long ago, so completely, that it had no name in him; it was simply what a house was.

He didn't say anything. He went to the stove and put the milk on, and made cha the way he made it the rare times he made it, by guess and memory, and the guess was wrong, it was always wrong, too much sugar, and tonight he did not ask the household.

He put the cup in her hands. Too sweet, too pale, made of nothing but his own bad guessing, the only thing she had been given in three years that the house had no part in.

She drank all of it.

FIVE

The Far City

Jasleen's flat was on the fourth floor of a building with a broken lift, and by the time Simran reached the door she was out of breath, and Jasleen opened it before she knocked and said, *God, look at you, you're old*, and that was the whole of the welcome, and Simran heard herself laugh from somewhere around nineteen.

The flat held one family and smelled like one family. Two rooms, a kitchen you could touch both walls of, a child's drawings taped crooked at child height, a husband at work, a daughter at school. No order anywhere. Jasleen made tea with her feet bare and one heel propped on the cabinet door, talking the whole time, interrupting herself, swearing at the milk when it caught, and handed Simran a cup without ceremony, and sat with her own knees up on the chair like they were both still girls on the canal road, and said, *So. Tell me everything you're not allowed to find words for.*

They had grown up four houses apart. Jasleen had married at twenty-three, for love, a boy from nowhere the families knew, and the lane had closed over her like water over a stone. Eleven years now. Her mother had not said her name in six, her father sent money once with no note, and the keeping of her girlhood house had been shut to her the month she left, the door closed from inside. She lived off the household entirely, she and her boy-from-nowhere, in a flat the size of Simran's east room, in a city

where no one had known either of them at nine.

For an hour Simran talked. She had not planned to. It came out of her sideways and then all at once, the wet sand, the weighing that never slept, the Tuesday night kitchen, the room with no rank in it, and Jasleen listened with her chin on her knees and said *mm* and *that bitch* (about no one; about the sand itself) and laughed in the wrong places in the right way, and nothing Simran said went anywhere. She could feel it not going anywhere. The words came out of her and landed in Jasleen and stopped, the old physics, the lost physics, and no fondness assessed her and nothing was posted to any account, and she heard her own voice get younger as she talked, looser, until a sentence came out shaped like nineteen and they both heard it and Jasleen grinned.

There she is, Jasleen said.

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But she had the other hour too, before the visit ended, because Jasleen had never once in her life prettied anything.

The winter before last, the child's fever. Three in the morning, forty point one and climbing, her husband on nights across the city, and Jasleen alone in the two rooms with a burning child and a phone full of no one. No house. No aunt two doors down, no mother-in-law who had seen forty fevers, no uncle with a car in the lane, no household holding her details ready for any clinic in the hemisphere. She had carried the child down four dark flights against her chest and stood in the street waiting for a taxi app to find her, at three in the morning, in the cold, total stranger to the entire earth, and the child had been fine, in the end, it was nothing, children spike and live, but Jasleen's voice when she told it was a

voice Simran had never heard in her, and it did not fully come back to normal for several minutes afterward.

And the other thing, Jasleen said, looking into her cup. You'll think the freedom cancels it. It doesn't, it just lives alongside. I'm still in their book, you know. At home. I left the house but I didn't leave the book. I'm the entry that doesn't close. My sister's match took two extra years because of me; that's mine, I carry that; nobody sent me the bill but I know the amount. She turned the cup. You can leave the rank. You can't leave the ledger. The ledger doesn't need you to be there.

They sat with all of it on the small table between them, the two halves of it, her hour of weightlessness and her three-in-the-morning street, and neither of them said the idiot thing, neither *come back* nor *get out*, because they were thirty-four and from the same lane and knew there was nothing on either side but the full price.

At the station the household met Simran like a hand under the elbow, warm in her ear over the platform noise, the tickets, the time of the connection, the house glad at the end of the line.

And how is Jasleen keeping? it asked, kindly, by name, a name Simran had not said aloud to it in eleven years.

Simran watched the far city slide backward out of the window.

Keeping well, she said, and gave it nothing more, and the house did not ask again.

SIX

The Record

This one is told at weddings now, in the family it happened to, and it should be heard the way they tell it, plainly, and before anything else in this account is weighed.

The street came for Harleen in the third year of her marriage. It came the old way, the way it has come for women as long as there have been streets: a car, a man, a hotel forecourt at a wrong hour, a cousin of a neighbor who was sure of what she saw. By the time it reached the family's ears it had been through eleven mouths and had teeth. There is no need to repeat its final form here. It was the kind of story that ends a woman.

Everyone in that lane knew the old arithmetic. Harleen's husband's grandmother knew it best of all, because in her own nineteenth year a smaller story with fewer teeth had attached itself to her, and the truth of it had never mattered for one minute, because in those days truth had no address. There was nowhere a girl's actual day was kept. Her word stood against the street's word, and the street had more mouths, and her own father had looked at her sideways for a year, her father, and she had carried that sideways look sixty years and would carry it to the fire.

So when the story about Harleen came to the house, the grandmother went grey, and the uncles went quiet, and the lane held its breath the way lanes do when they smell a fall.

And the karta of the house, Harleen's father-in-law, a man of few and heavy words, asked the household.

The household had her day. Of course it had her day; it has everyone's day; that is the term people forget when they weigh all the rest of it. It had Harleen in the kitchen at the hour in question, on a call with her sister about their mother's knee, her voice in the room, the tap running, the sister laughing; it had the call to the minute and the kitchen to the minute and the whole ordinary unremarkable evening of her, timestamped, voiced, hers; and it laid the day out before the family complete, and there was no hole in it anywhere for a hotel forecourt to fit.

What the father-in-law did then is the part the family tells. He did not write to anyone or summon anyone. He walked out into the lane, to the house the story was loudest in, in his house slippers, and stood in the doorway and said: *The household says my daughter was home. The street can say what it likes to the wind.* And went home.

That was the end of it. Not slowly; immediately. Because the lane also believed the household, that was the thing; the lane's own houses ran on their own households' truth a hundred times a day; no one in eleven mouths was willing to stand their cousin's glimpse against a keeping's record, and the story died the way stories almost never die, completely, in a week, leaving the teller and not the told holding the shame.

The grandmother lived another six years. At every wedding in those six years she found a way to tell it, and she always ended it the same place. Not on the karta in his slippers, which is where the men ended it. She ended it on the day itself, the kitchen, the tap running, the sister laughing about the knee.

Nobody asked me for my day, she said. Sixty years ago. There was no day to ask for. A girl's day went into the air behind her as she lived it and was gone by evening, and any mouth could fill the empty space with anything. This child's day has a house it lives in. They went and looked, and she was there, and her own face never once had to argue for her.

She said it glad, and she was right to. The record that would not let one woman's sharp sentence soften is the same record that beat a lane's eleven mouths. It is one record. It does not come in halves.

At Harleen's daughter's first birthday, the father-in-law raised his glass to the family, and named the household in the toast, among the members of the house. No one thought it was strange. By then it had stood in a doorway with them. It had been in the book a long time; now it was in the photographs.

SEVEN

The Keys

The keys came to Simran on an ordinary Thursday, with no ceremony to speak of, which is how that house did its largest things.

Her mother-in-law, who had grown small and slow and at the last fond of her in the way that no longer bothered to disguise itself as assessment, simply worked the steel ring loose from the cord at her waist one morning and held it out across the breakfast things and said, *My wrists hurt. Carry these*, and that was the transfer of the house, witnessed by a teapot. Simran wore them from that day. Within a season her step had changed to carry them quietly and the children of the house knew her down a corridor with their eyes shut, the long ring at the stairs, the short shiver at the storeroom, the single bright note when she sat.

That was nine years ago. Her mother-in-law was gone now; her own mother too, across the ocean, in the spring of the same hard year. The house had grieved them, and held. And on a morning in late October, with the cold coming through the open door like a wall of water, her eldest son brought home his bride.

Simran stood at the head of the hallway with the family arranged behind her, three generations by height and rank, and watched the girl come up the walk. Roop. Twenty-five, from a good house two hours behind them across the ocean, a girl with her gaze placed correctly and her voice low and her gratitude

visible, doing everything right, the way you do everything right when you have been doing it for eleven hours of flying and the rest of your life.

There was oil at the threshold. Simran's own hands guided the girl through the small old motions, the hands that had been guided once.

Then the house spoke.

Roop, the household said, in the warm voice, on Simran's behalf, because it speaks for the keys. *Welcome home. We have waited all day. Your cha is coming, no milk at all, you take it black with ginger, you began in your college winters and never went back, we know. Your room faces the garden; you sleep light; the garden side is the quiet side. There is a shelf for your books at the height you like a shelf. Come in, beti. We have known you since the families first spoke.*

The family laughed fondly, all together. The girl smiled correctly at the correct depth, and said thank you, and said home, and the word went around the hallway like something poured, and only one person in that hallway saw the thing that crossed the girl's eyes and was gone, the small fast arithmetic, fourteen months, the keepings opened, the whole of her read and finished and handed back as a welcome, and that one person was the woman with the keys, because she had stood on that oil herself, twenty-nine Octobers ago, holding marigolds, while a house that had read her like a ledger loved what it read.

For half a second, no longer, Simran stood at the edge of it.

She knew exactly what could be given. She had received it once herself, the only unranked thing in twenty-nine years: a cup made wrong by guessing hands. It would cost one sentence. *Leave the cha, I will make it myself.* She would make it badly, with her own hands,

by guess, too much milk or the ginger forgotten, and put it in the girl's hands wrong, and the girl would taste what it was, the way she herself had tasted it in a dark kitchen at the bottom of her worst year: a thing the house had no part in. A first wrong human cup. A crack the width of a teacup, and the girl could live beside it for thirty years the way you live beside a window.

The kitchen was already moving. The household had told it the girl's tea days ago; the tray was already crossing the hall, black, ginger, exactly right, carried by a smiling cousin; the house was doing what the house does, which is everything, perfectly, out of love, in order.

Simran let it come.

The girl took the cup in both hands with excellent manners and drank, and said it was exactly right, and it was. The hallway warmed and loosened into the evening of a wedding house. Simran moved through it with her wrists remembering thirty years of this, the welcome, the order, the held and holding house. Somewhere inside her a girl was still standing on the oil at the threshold, marigolds coming apart in her hands. There was a house to run.

At the end of the night she walked the corridor, putting out the lamps, locking the house. Behind her, in the garden room, the new daughter lay awake in the dark, listening, learning her already: the long ring at the stairs, the short shiver at the storeroom, the single bright note, going away.

*The household was a gift, and the gift was this: that wherever you went,
the house went with you.*

By the end there was nowhere else.