

SEE

Mummy tells me
to climb up this chair
to reach that top kabaat
and pull out from the cabinet
our family photo album,
to which will be added
the pictures that will be taken
tomorrow.

Mummy places the album on our center table
and we all gather around her

to look

and I can't believe

that only I can see

this secret.

PICTURE PERFECT

Today is my twelfth birthday
and it is also the inauguration
of my mother's second clinic,
Chandni Hospital,
that is named after me,
like Suraj Clinic
was named after Suraj.

My family of five
is here since 7 a.m.
waiting for the whole town
to come and see between 9 and 11 a.m.
how shiny and sparkly
everything is.

Mummy circles her two fingers
to wipe off the dust on the ledge of that window
and uses her right foot to swish the mop
to wipe off the water Suraj has just spilled
and straightens this huge artwork of our national bird,
the Indian peacock,
that she made from mosaic tiles when we were little,
when she still had
time.

She directs the staff
to line up the rows of white plastic chairs again—
Straight nathi—They are not straight
and to check on the kesar pista and cassatta ice cream
and the foam cups and the wooden spoons
and the Bisleri—*Paani?! Where is the water?!*

and at 8:50 a.m.,
Mummy, who never wears a sari,
who is today wearing the most beautiful deep blue patola silk sari,
uses the pallu to wipe the late June sweat off her face.

At 8:55 a.m., when the first guests walk in,
Mummy turns to Daddy
and the feathers in her eyes tell him

Perfect

before they both walk together
towards the guests
with big smiles and big welcomes.

Aavo aavo! Come come!

And when the photographer says

Doctor Saheb,

let's get a family picture first

and our family of three doctors and two kids
lines up,

I fix my beautiful deep green bandhani dupatta
and I force feathers in my eyes
that mirror Mummy's,

and I'm determined
to tell this future photograph
that everything is

perfect.

FAMILY OF FIVE

India's national family policy is
Hum do, hamare do
(two of us, two of ours),
[Mom + Dad] + [Kid 1 + Kid 2] = how it is supposed to be,

but we
got it wrong.

Many families,
like Rima's family,
get the 2nd half wrong.

Her family is also a family of five,
but that's different.

Hers is
[Mom + Dad] + [Daughter 1 + Daughter 2 + Son 1].

More than two children make sense
when there are two daughters in a row,
because it's no secret
that my country loves boys.

Boys will get to own everything parents own.
Boys need never learn to cook.
A boy's education is more important.

And girls are
a responsibility-worry,
a burden.

It's not ideal,
but it's
understandable.

My family
is the only family I know
that got the 1st half wrong.

My family is

[[Mom + [Dad] + Diya Masi]] + Suraj + Chandni

Not understandable.

HOW AND WHY

But luckily,

no one ever asks us
how,

and even Suraj and I have never asked each other
why.

BHAI

Suraj is only two and a half years older than me
but he just started 9th standard
which is the start of Secondary
and I just started 7th standard
which is still just Upper Primary,
and I don't know
if it is the Secondary
that has become
our divisor.

He told me he's my senior now,
which means that I can no longer talk to him
in school or anywhere in front of any of his friends
because he says it's embarrassing
to have a little sister interrupting his time with his friends.

Neha's brother, Sanju Bhai, is in 12th standard
which is Senior Secondary, the most senior of all,
and he has no such embarrassing rules.
Sanju Bhai knows that twelve is not "little."
Neha can run to him and interrupt any time
Sanju Bhai! Sanju Bhai! Sanju Bhai!
and she won't stop telling us
Sanju Bhai this, and Sanju Bhai that.

No Suraj Bhai for me.

Just Suraj,
who I now don't talk to in front of his friends.

Or ever.

DODH DAAHYI

And also,
when Sujit Sir,
who is Suraj's class teacher,
who is also my English teacher,
sent Suraj's friend to interrupt
my social studies period last week
and made me go to Suraj's class,
and gave me his summer vacation homework
that had five out of twenty-five
circled in big bright red
and told me in front of Suraj's whole giggling class
to make sure I give it
to my parents,

and on the bus home,
Suraj walked over to me
 to the front of the bus
and said to me
 in front of his friends
 Chandni, please, please don't

and I didn't listen,
and I gave the big bright red
to Mummy and Daddy,
who then gave Suraj
a really really really hard time,

and I felt sorry,
but I didn't say sorry,

Suraj glared and glared and glared
big and bright and red

and when we both happened to meet at the sink,
I—to wash my hands,
and he—to wash his tearstained face,

he hissed without even looking at me
Remember, you're my little sister.
Stop acting like my older sister.
Stay away from me
and mind your own business

and then he turned
and from the back of his head
I could still hear
the boom
of his final hiss

Dodh Daahyi

which means
over-smart;
too good
for one's own good.

And now he talks to me
never,

and now
there is no remainder
in this
division.

KNOWS

And now
there is

n
o

w
a
y

I can ever ask him

if he also knows

what I know

about Daddy

and

Diya Masi.