



UNEMPLOYMENT

by Shilpi Suneja

AT the unemployment office, the coordinator asked us to stand in ascending order of our social security numbers and that was how Dad ended up at the back of the queue by the exit, and me and Maa near the front, right after the white people. A cornucopia of Asian faces separated him from us—Vietnamese, Filipino, Cambodian. We seemed rather to be arranged by the color of our skin, light faces in the front, dark ones in the back. We had our papers out and our hopes up—the room was bursting with hope—even though the line was moving slowly, people disappearing one by one behind a cluster of cubicles. Maa shoved my social security card into my hands, pushed my braids behind my shoulders, told me to stop

slouching. My number was a digit behind Maa's, and I was grateful that an invisible umbilical cord made certain I followed her. What I couldn't understand was why Dad had ended up thousands of digits away. I was afraid by the time his turn came all the good jobs would be gone. I craned my neck to see if he was furious about his place in the queue. Even from this distance he looked small, barely a few inches taller than me, and stocky, like he was hiding milk pails under his jacket. He was consulting his papers, no doubt rehearsing answers that would impress the people behind the cubicles. But it was equally possible that he was thinking of other things. Like the cities he'd lived in around the world before he'd met Maa, long before I was born. Bali. Sydney. Dubai. Sharjah. Abuja. Cape Town. Port Au Prince. I could hear him say in his thick-as-molasses voice: *Nni kya baat thi? Why you worry? I am there.* But just as easily I could hear him say, like he did sometimes when things went wrong, when he was angry with Maa or me, that he would one day resume his vagabond life, choose the open sky over the monotony of family life. I wished I could switch my social security card with him so that he and Maa would stand together, and I would take his place in the back. But the cards carried our names. I couldn't think of what else to do to help him. I suppose that was because I was still sixteen, and, as Maa said, not yet capable of charting the course of my life, let

alone control my parents' fates. Since I was their sole motivation for moving to America, it seemed I had done just that.

“What kind of job they got for us?” the woman behind us asked. She was carrying a crinkly shopping bag featuring women wearing straw hats. From it, a neat stash of laminated diplomas peeked out. In school, we had learned about the Vietnam War. America had lost. Vietnam had won. Still, here was this woman standing in the queue, hopeful like the rest of us.

“Wal-Mart dey done employ de most,” someone from the back of the line said. The woman wore a brown turtleneck the same color as her skin. From time to time, she lowered a bag of peanuts to the two children beside her.

“You want the community college,” said the man in a sharp suit behind her. He held a yellow envelope in both hands. I waited for him to say more about the college, but he didn't.

“De one in de next town?” asked the mother. “How you gone get dere?” But the man did not answer.

“The local 'ospital is 'ayaring,” announced a woman dressed in smart athletic wear and sneakers at the very back.

“What about you?” the woman from Vietnam nudged Maa. “What kind job you wanting?”

Maa did not have an answer. The gentle slope of her small shoulders on which Dad’s shirt hung like a curtain, gave nothing away. She and Dad hadn’t done their research. They hadn’t even circled ads in the local paper. We’d been in the country two weeks. Everything was new. The littlest things surprised us, like not having to queue up for drinking water, the lack of people on the streets, the abundance of food at Hannaford. The way the streets did not smell of smoke or rioting or death. No sirens or curfews. Nothing threatened to drive us out of our home. We were adjusting to these lacks and abundances.

“Not to worry,” announced a familiar voice a few paces behind us. “Job for all of us. All kind of job.”

“You will say you don’t need job.”

Henry ran an Asian Food grocery store in North Raleigh. He was here to file for unemployment for his wife who’d been laid off from Hannaford. We all knew the story because we’d all been to his shop. It was the only place in America that felt familiar, more familiar than home, the way it greeted us with the smell of cumin, coconut, and incense. Its distance from

our new home was the reason Dad said we needed a car. While me and Maa hunted for turmeric and allspice in the plastic bins, Dad chatted with Henry. Behind them, Henry's family smiled from photos tacked alongside magazine cutouts of Angkor Wat. Even though the shop was barely as big as our kitchen, it felt like the center of the world. Most everyone in the queue had been there. Now we were all competing for the same jobs.

I wondered if the people in the front of the line would know about the types of jobs available. But they weren't looking our way. They were busy tapping pens on thick leather portmanteaus, pens without logos, helping themselves to the free coffee. I wondered whom to ask—the man in the jogging pants jangling keys in his pockets, or the woman in the business suit, perfect legs sprouting from fierce heels. The lady looked preoccupied but not unapproachable. I could talk to a white lady. I'd done it before once, in Delhi. She was a traveler from Russia. Dad and I had met her at India Gate. Dad was doing most of the talking, telling her about the bargains at Janpath. "India is wonderful," she declared, raising her arms stacked with bangles and charms and red thread. "Don't you just love it here?" she asked me. And suddenly motivated to speak, I said, "You should go to the Baha'i Temple. It's new. It's beautiful." She thanked me for the

recommendation, her blue eyes staring into mine, and I said, quite emphatically, “Welcome to India,” feeling like an ambassador.

In the unemployment office, I felt the opposite. The lady in heels caught me staring and looked at me with disapproval. Her number flashed on the screen and she proceeded toward the cubicles. I wondered if upon her return she would recommend landmarks, tell me to go see someplace new and breathtaking, or someplace old and full of history. It was more likely she thought I’d come to take her job. The truth was, I did not want a job. Secretly, I wished some kind of child labor law would prevent me from securing employment. Perhaps a kind lady would order Dad to drop me off at the library each morning so that I could have my fill of the *National Geographic*. They had intensely beautiful pictures of the very bottom of the oceans. All I wanted to do was to look at glossy photos and think of whale sharks, stingrays and demersal fish. But this was wishful thinking. Dad said that I would very likely need to defer school and college until we could get firmly on our feet. We had bills—rent, phone, and soon the car Dad wanted to lease. And then there were Daadi’s medicines, a different pill for each day of the week. *There is nothing wrong with living with just one kidney*. I could still hear her saying. And I could see Dad’s tears. His body

supplicating at grandmother's feet, shaking her knees until the whole of her shook.

The lady in heels returned from the cubicles, a square piece of pink paper in hand, a triumphant look in her eyes. All the necks in the room turned toward her and watched her go. Faint whispering followed, everyone tried to guess what was written on the pink slip, but soon they gave up, and the general panic that the good jobs were dwindling settled upon us all.

It occurred to me that the people near the end of the line might end up working for the people in the front—the white people—serving them coffee, making their egg sandwich, looking after their children, cleaning their hotel room, servicing their car. Possibly even me, Maa, and Dad, if we didn't get the jobs we wanted.

The woman from Vietnam was talking to Maa. She was telling Maa she had just arrived from Hanoi to live with her sister and her sister's family, while her husband still waited for his papers, back in Vietnam. Everyone in her sister's family had jobs. She was the only one without one. She was ready to do anything. "Rent covered. Food covered. I save for diploma."

“We just shifted to our own place. Cricklewood Apartments,” Maa said. “Behind the bank.”

I wondered if we should be getting friendly with the woman. She was competition, after all. She didn’t have bills like us. But Maa was like this. Once she started talking to someone she couldn’t stop. If Dad were standing close by he would instruct Maa to be more cautious, but he was too far to give us guidance.

“It’s \$500 rent,” Maa was saying. “Per month. Can you believe?”

The woman threw her hands up. “Where you get that much money?”

“We should be in Chicago, where my brother is. He would have helped us. Good schools for her also,” she said, pointing to me. “But we are here.”

“At least you got space.”

“Oh, so much space. Two floors. Two bedrooms. Two bathrooms. It’s like a big tomb. But it is good for her.” Maa pointed to me. She meant the move to America, not the apartment, and I tried to stand as straight and proud as possible, despite the weight I suddenly felt on my shoulders.

“Just you and your daughter? You going to have to work two job.”

Maa pointed to the back of the queue. “My husband is there.” She turned to look at Dad. He was standing by the noticeboard near the

entrance, studying a flyer. He snapped the paper off the peg and put it in his pocket. When he saw us he tossed his head back to say *kya ho raha hai*, is everything fine? He returned to his place in the queue, folded his arms satisfactorily, as though he'd just pocketed a piece of good news, and his handsome face spread into a smile, one of those rare occurrences of nature that caused me to feel warm all over. We were going to be okay. We were going to get jobs and we were going to be happy. I could feel the warmth radiating from his face to mine. I felt it on my cheeks, I felt it spreading down my sides, like Dad was hugging me.

“Three income. Good!” pronounced Mrs. Tran. “You from Turkey? Iran?”

“No,” Maa said. “Delhi. India.” She opened the flap of her plastic folio to reveal the top half of her resume. She pulled out the paper, and I noticed she'd listed more jobs under the ones already mentioned, by hand.

She tipped the paper to me and asked, “Is my writing legible?” My eyes glanced over the long list of jobs held at various schools illustrating her stellar career as a teacher. Public schools, private schools, schools run by American NGOs, schools run by local think tanks—she had done it all. Her resume should have filled me with hope, but it did the opposite. I

couldn't help thinking that Maa's resume appeared stronger than Dad's. She would likely get the better job. Dad wouldn't take it well. She knew this. Why had she then embellished her resume? I looked at her with the question burning in my eyes, even though I had some knowledge of the answer, and she stared back, defiantly, calmly.

“What?” she asked, and I shook my head.

I supposed she'd added the text one night after I'd gone to sleep. She'd had to do it herself because Aunt Sunita hadn't let her change the resume once it had been printed.



Aunt Sunita hadn't spent much time on Maa's resume. She was Dad's youngest sister, his favorite. She'd hosted us our first week in America out of “sheer obligation” (Maa's words). Out of “sheer obligation” she offered to create Maa's and Dad's resumes on her desktop and print them on her printer so that we could “get on our feet” (Aunt Sunita's words) as quickly as possible. But when she began work on the resumes all she asked Maa for

was her last three jobs, the name of her undergraduate institute, the correct spelling of her full name.

“You don’t even know my name?” Maa said. Aunt Sunita sat in an office chair before the computer, Maa and Dad flanking her on lawn chairs, while I hovered like a mosquito. We were inside her massive house which crouched like a tiger on a hill. The house had many rooms for many purposes, but not one that Maa, Dad and I could use “indefinitely.”

“Don’t want to misspell it,” Aunt Sunita replied.

Maa pointed to the screen, finger hovering below the word EDUCATION. “I have two Master’s degrees. You haven’t mentioned.”

“People don’t want ancient history,” replied Aunt Sunita.

“But I’m using all three degrees. I am a science teacher; they have to know I have a Master’s in education.”

“No use listing them. Your degrees will likely not even translate into the American system.”

Maa stared at Aunt Sunita blankly, her mouth open.

“I am only saving you the embarrassment. The people at the unemployment office will tell you the same thing.”

Maa began to protest, but Aunt Sunita had moved on to Dad’s resume.

Dad wanted Aunt Sunita to mention his college boxing medals. His captaincy of the swim and the cricket teams. His secretariat in the student government. He took over the mouse, his cigarette breath hitting Aunt Sunita's face until she excused herself to get one of her own. Dad and his sister adjusted identical glasses on identical noses, their smoke streams blending into one, while Maa and I sat on the side, watching them both. We waited with baited breath as Aunt Sunita pressed print. I knew Dad's resume was going to be as impressive as he was. I had no doubt. If Maa had excelled as a teacher, Dad had done even better in his engineering career. Before they met, he had lived a grand life. He always had spectacular things to say about his adventures, about his life with the Dubai sheikh, the litany of servants once under his command—things Maa could never claim.

But when the deskjet spat out his resume, our jaws dropped. His name in all caps, his sole degree from the Indian Institute of Technology, the two jobs he'd held in Dubai, even his hobbies, filled a third of the page. It looked terse like a government notice.

Aunt Sunita picked up the paper and held it close to her eyes. "Hmm," she said, breathing out smoke. "This is going to need some work. What else have you accomplished?"

Dad stared at a spot on the floor, thinking hard. After a while he said, “It’s in the talking that the real personality comes out.”

Aunt Sunita disagreed. “You have to let the hiring managers do all the talking. Perhaps I could make bullet points out of your job responsibilities. Bullet points take up space.” Dad tilted his neck to peer at the list of jobs on Maa’s resume. As he read, his breathing got heavy.

Dad believed that he’d peaked in his early twenties—as an engineer in Dubai. When he returned to India, Maa insisted he take a rest. Except that his year of rest turned into five. He tried his hand at various things—launching a yoga center, a computer school, a natural ice-cream parlor. Then the riots happened and we lost our house and everything inside it. It was only because Maa had a job that we were able to rent a new place. But Dad must have been upset by it all because he spent several months with Daadi, not returning our calls. When he came back he was different. He shouted at Maa every time she tried to mention work. His eyes went blood red and he would forget what he was upset about or whom. Everything bothered him—our cramped apartment, the food Maa had cooked, the grades I’d failed to get, even the color of my and Maa’s skin.

In Aunt Sunita's study, Dad's eyes were that same shade of red. He tossed Maa's resume at the printer and said, "All these two have to do is powder their face and they can pass for white. Jobs no problem."

Aunt Sunita tried to calm him down. "They are not *that* fair," she said, handing Maa her resume.

But Dad was too far gone. I knew this because he could no longer face us. He lowered his eyes, and spoke through his teeth. "What kind of a child is this?" he pointed to my feet. "No part of her looks Indian. No part of her looks mine. Look at this, her skin and mine—so much difference."

My fingernails had dug red hot crescents on my arms. Aunt Sunita shook her head and walked away to indicate she wanted no part in the family quarrel. But Maa was furious.

"Please stop this nonsense. I beg you, just stop. How many times are you going to bring that up?"

Dad was walking away. I relinquished the grip on my arms. But then, he turned around and said, "Good thing this is America. They want brains. They want hard work. We shall see who gets what at the career center." He pulled out another cigarette and lit it before his current one burned out.

That night, in Aunt Sunita's spare room, after I'd done crying and wondering yet again what had prevented me from getting Dad's strong, dark arms, his thick, smooth calves, I joined Maa in her bed.

"Is Dad going to leave us if he doesn't get a good job?"

I could see the soft curve of Maa's hip. Dad was somewhere in the house. We could hear the thick swirl of his voice, like heavy furniture being dragged.

"Only God knows who will get what," Maa said. "You just focus on getting into school."

"You want me to go to school?"

"As long as I have breath in my body you are going to school. From August itself you are joining. I don't care if I have to do three jobs."

"But Dad said—"

"Does Dad have any grasp on reality?" Something in Maa's voice caused me to shake. She was watching out for me. And yet the way she spoke of Dad made me want to turn away, refuse her love and care and guidance until she agreed to speak of Dad like the man we both loved. At the same time, I knew that lately Dad had done nothing to deserve Maa's

kindness. Knowing these two truths made me want to run away from this house on the hill and keep running.



At the unemployment office, the line had shortened. All the white people had left, smiles on faces, pink squares in hand. All that remained were us, Asians and black folks. Some were sitting now, but most were still standing, still in order, lest someone from behind the cubicles come and shout at us.

Maa's number flashed on the electronic display.

"You're coming with me," she told me, and grabbed my hand.

We were on our way when Dad called us to stop. "Listen!" he said to Maa in Hindi. "Don't go on about irrelevant things. Don't talk too much. And freshen your lipstick." He pursed his lips and pointed. Seeing me laugh he fluttered his eyelids exaggeratedly. Maa pulled out her the little trial-size stub of red, smaller than my pinky, and did as she was told.

The maze of cubicles reminded me of our Delhi neighborhood—the thin, corridor-like alleys, eyes behind partitions. Except in Delhi, whole

families lived inside rooms roughly the same size as those cubicles, cooking, sleeping, eating, birthing babies.

The counselor who greeted us looked young, barely older than me. She had on a thin cotton jacket, hair tied into a ponytail at the top of her head. I wondered where she had gone to school, if I could ask her about it. But Dad had warned us not to talk about irrelevant things.

Maa put her resume on the table. The girl picked it up, and as soon as she did, my heart began to beat like a drum.

“Can you tell me an accomplishment you are proud of?”

Maa shifted in her seat, her eyes unable to meet the counselor’s, even though the girl looked on encouragingly. Maa stared blankly at the desk, and after a long while, in a quiet but steady voice she began to speak. “I set up a lab in one of the poorest schools in Old Delhi. We had mostly slum children. I taught them to do electrolysis experiment. I also wrote them a play which they performed for parents.”

“My mother is a teacher too,” the girl said, her face brightening. “A chemistry teacher.”

“I did a Master’s in Organic Chemistry. Also in Education.”

The counselor smiled. “You are overqualified for all the jobs I have on file, Mrs. Singh.”

“No job is too low.”

“That’s the spirit. Let’s see what I can do for you.” She scrolled through a page open on her computer browser. “You can report to Apple Tree Daycare.” She took a pink piece of paper and began writing down the details. “They have an opening for Lead Teacher, Toddler-2. I am sorry it is well below your capabilities. But look into becoming a substitute teacher. That’s a good way to get your foot in the door.”

“What about her?” Maa asked, pointing to me. “Is there something for her at the daycare—something part-time? She tutored my students with me. She is good at math and English.”

“Is that so?” said the girl, surprised.

“She can go to the interview with you. I am sure they can find some use for her. If not in the Raleigh branch, then something in Cary.”

Maa took the pink paper and thanked the girl. She wasn’t smiling, but her hold on my hand was firm, like she was on the verge of telling me something significant. Even though I was a little upset with her, I couldn’t help looking at Maa with pride. *Overqualified*. That’s what the college-

educated American girl had called Maa. I let myself feel happy, happy that Maa held me, still.

“*Kya?*” Dad asked as soon as he saw us. “What did you get?”

“I have an interview at a daycare.”

“Daycare? You mean changing nappies? *Bas?* Is that all?”

“It’s a start.”

“Very good start,” chimed in Mrs. Tran. Even Ms. Nurse nodded, her curls bouncing. Mr. Community College was also pleased, quietly so.

“Teachers are respected,” said Henry.

“What you talking about?” said Dad. “Car salesmen make more money than teachers.” He pulled out a packet of cigarettes. “Did you ask about pay?”

“No.”

“Hours?”

“No.”

“Then what you are celebrating for?” He put a cigarette to his lips and looked away. I didn’t want to look at him. I wished he would throw away

the cigarette, prepare for his own interview, but he pulled out a lighter and walked out of the office.

While Dad was out of the office, Mrs. Tran went in for her assignment. She came away from the cubicles beaming. She ignored everyone's *what happened, what did you get* and went straight for Maa's hands which she took in hers and shook vigorously.

"I too going to Apple Care!"

"The daycare?" Maa asked.

"Yes! Yes!"

I couldn't understand it. Mrs. Tran had no Master's degree. She didn't even finish college. Still, she had received the same job lead as Maa.

"We can work together," Mrs. Tran said.

"Of course," Maa said. "It will be nice. I hope it happens." I couldn't understand why Maa ignored the slight injustice in this. She looked perfectly content sitting beside Mrs. Tran, telling her about Delhi, learning about Hanoi. After a while, I gave up and joined them. It didn't take long for me to feel Maa's sense of relief of knowing that we would see a familiar face at a new job next week. I wish Dad was here to see this, to feel some of this relief, but he was still outside, smoking.



By the time Dad came back inside most of the people had left. Henry, the community college man, the mother. Only the nurse from Ghana and Mrs. Tran hung behind.

Dad's number flashed on the electronic display.

"Take her with you," Maa urged, but Dad was walking away. Out of my own volition, I followed him.

The woman interviewing Dad was older. She had short, clipped hair, thin lips, an air of severity about her.

"Sit, please," she said curtly, without looking at us. "Tell me about your past experience."

Dad waited for the lady to take her eyes off her computer. When she didn't, he said, "You see, I started my career as Civil Engineer. In Dubai. In 1975. Hotels, mostly. And a hospital. I had two hundred men under me. Rashid—you know Rashid—Sheikh Rashid, the prince, I worked for him also. But we were like brothers. I had my own room in his palace."

The lady looked at Dad, her eyes narrowing, no smile on her face. “Is any of this relevant?”

Dad tapped his lips with a finger, taking slow breaths. He began speaking, still about the Sheikh, about the hotel he’d built for the man. At any other time Dad’s stories would have filled me with a sense of wonder. I would ask for them over and over again. *Tell me about the time you and the Sheikh were friends. Show me photos of your room at the palace, all the plates of food, and the time you went on a ship.* But even I knew that the lady’s cubicle was not the place to share these stories. The counselor was not like the Russian lady out on a stroll, looking to make friends with an Indian family, looking for bargains, looking to fall in love with a new culture. I couldn’t understand why Dad didn’t seem to know this, and why I did.

“Daily I had to make solutions for problems,” Dad was saying now. “I built this motor. What was it for—how I can explain—” He shut his eyes tight. “We had a fire. Trouble with insurance. But I knew the right people. You have to know the right people. I always know them.”

The lady let out a sigh. “Resume?” she asked.

Dad put the paper on the table, his thick, dark hands still hovering over it. But I knew as he did that the page was woefully quiet. Quiet about

his accomplishments and exploits. Dad was right. What could a piece of paper reveal about a man?

The lady scanned the page with a pen. “Retail experience—no. Hospitality—no. Any customer experience? N—no.” She put down her pen.

“You can leave now, sir. We will be in touch if something comes up.”

“But I can do anything. I am good at math. Ten-on-ten in math. Human calculator.”

“If something matches your experience we will give you a call.”

“I am very very good with people also.”

“We will give you a call, sir.”

“So now I leave?”

“Yes, leave.”

Maa knew not to ask Dad any questions like *what happened? what did you get?* His face gave everything away. She didn’t need to see that he hadn’t come away with a piece of pink paper. Except, Mrs. Tran jumped on him before Maa could intervene.

“Get good job? Top pay?”

“Let’s go,” Dad said firmly, avoiding Mrs. Tran, and we gathered our things.

Maa shook hands with Mrs. Tran. “See you at the daycare.”

We clung to the shoulder of the road as best we could, except the road had no shoulder, only a thicket of weeds we had to pick our way through, and broken beer bottles, cigarette packs, a mangled rabbit. The highway began and when the grass thinned, we strayed onto the road— Maa and Dad walking ahead, me trailing behind. A red Jeep with music blaring came up the bend, and as it neared us, it slowed, beeping its horn. I stared at the men inside—their hair hidden under baseball caps, eyes behind sunglasses. As they passed us the driver leaned out. “Trying to get killed, nigger?” he shouted. He threw something out the window which landed steps away from the shoulder, white buds flying.

Maa and I looked away, pretended we hadn’t heard, but Dad stared at the Jeep disappearing up the highway, then at the thing they’d tossed. He studied the popcorn kernels like they were a terrifying, absurd organism multiplying on the road. We could smell the butter, see the yellow greasing the blue-white packet. The way Dad paused, we wondered if he was going to pick it up, deposit it inside a dustbin. But instead he bent over, picked up

a kernel and put it in his mouth. “It’s popcorn,” he said to no one in particular. “It’s good popcorn.”

“What are you doing?” Maa asked, ready to slap the second kernel out of Dad’s hands. But Dad’s face was full of rage. “Why you following me, woman? Go home. Go!”

Maa said nothing. We watched Dad pick up the packet of popcorn and turn back toward the highway, toward a new part of town we did not know. Quietly, Maa took my hand in hers and pulled me home.

“Are you looking at him?” she asked me, “Don’t look at him. I’m telling you, don’t.”

But truth be told, I couldn’t look away from the absurdity—Dad nestling the gift of free food in the crook of an arm, marching to God-knew-where, his sense of adventure and his desire to desert us leading him far enough away. He would come back the next morning, I knew, with a new story to tell, and once again I would believe all over again, that he was something special.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shilpi Suneja was born in India. She holds an MA in English from New York University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University, where she was awarded the Saul Bellow Prize. Her work appears in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Bat City Review*, *Hyphen*, *Consequence*, *Kartika Review*, *Solstice*, *Stirring*, *Breakwater Review*, *Kafila.online*, and *TwoCircles.net*, among other places. A 2018 NEA Literature Fellow, she is currently at work on a novel about the long shadow of the Indian Partition.

LF #115

© 2018 Shilpi Suneja. Published by **LITTLE FICTION** | **BIG TRUTHS**, February 2018. Edited by Beth Gilstrap. Cover design by Troy Palmer, using images from **The Noun Project**.

Read more stories at littlefiction.com