



### Kiran Kaur Saini

*I have, and wanted to send, a photograph of me at age one and a half, sitting on my father's lap and writing at a desk, because I wanted the photo to reflect how much, and for how long, my father has supported me in my endeavor to associate myself with literature. But a friend remarked to me, "I can't see you in that picture." I thought that was a good point, so I sent this photograph in which I can be seen.*

Kiran Kaur Saini graduated from Smith College and is currently in graduate school there. She has written poetry for twenty years, and fiction for three.

Saini has spent time in many places, including **England and India**, but right now she and her husband live in **New York, where she supports herself by "doing clever and efficient things with computers in corporate settings."**

*Kiran Kaur Saini*

KIRAN KAUR SAINI  
A Girl Like Elsie

*T*ell Mama I waitress in the Village so she don't have to cut me out of her heart. But when I come home with bruises on my wrists and she's rocking in her chair by the window in that quiet rhythm, I want to say to her, Mama, the john wrench my arms down to the floor and slap me upside the head while he's getting his money's worth tonight. But I don't say this stuff to her, because she's blind and won't be able to see in my face that I love her even though I whore. She's my mama, but she don't love no whores, 'cause twenty years ago a whore took her husband. We weren't here in New York more than three months before Daddy was shot down outside the Susan B. Anthony Boarding House for Women, standing on the street corner hollering up at some lady. She finally came down and shot him in broad daylight with everybody watching. Cops thought it was a domestic quarrel till they found out about Mama. Mama recognized the woman from walks she and Daddy took in the park and picked her out of a lineup; cops said she was a whore. I been all Mama's got left for a while; so I can't tell her what I do, 'cause she can't turn her back on the last thing. But I think she's going to know soon, since, except for the johns, I ain't bled

in two months.

I come home tonight and she's sitting in that chair, looking out the window, not seeing snow, not seeing buses go by, not seeing me come up the sidewalk and cross the street to the building before I get here. She just sits there looking out, like she could see everything. Mama ain't always been blind. She started getting blind about half a year after Daddy died. At first, Mama worked at the five-and-dime. Then turned out that didn't pay for everything. So she got a job at Gimbel's, but after a while that wasn't much better. I wasn't but ten, so I couldn't do nothing to help. We stopped Daddy's subscription to the paper. Then we got the phone taken out, and Mama couldn't call down home no more. Mama started getting real tired at night and even during the day. And then she started touching things real carefully in the apartment, and she was getting blind.

When I shut the door she twists around in her chair, and once I see her face I don't want to fall on the floor crying anymore. She moves real slow now, the past couple years, and her face moves slow, too. It calms me down fast and I can almost forget about the john, the pain in my head, and the cold room I left twenty minutes ago.

Not all johns are this kind of shit. Some of them are real nice, guys you could fall in love with, if they was somebody's brother you met, or someone you saw in a park every day until you introduced yourself. There's this one guy, Marcel. He's like me, he takes care of his mother. He ain't no big risk-taker; he always want to go upstairs straight off, and not stay downstairs long enough to have a drink. Marcel don't want no one to recognize him and word get back to his mama. He don't want to have nothing to do with the bar. This ain't no real sleazy place, just dark and brown, cheap and loud. Just me and two other girls work it. Together the three of us rent a room above it with a bath so we can take up the johns who got no place to go. Marcel likes it because it's private, he can come here on his way home from

the office, he says, and just relax. Only thing like a girlfriend Marcel's got is me, on account of his mama, and he gets all upset when he sees me after I've had a hard night. He gets uppity, just like we're going together, talks about killing the guy, but that don't stop him from getting in the swing of things and forgetting all about that once we're in the bed and he's really going.

I sit on the floor in front of Mama and let her rub my temples. Mama knows I always come home with a splitting headache. I smell the bleach in my hair and I know Mama does too. I put a little Clorox in the tub water and soak in it at the end of the night before I come home. Mama always thinks I been on the cleaning-up detail. She runs her fingers over my face. I don't always let her do it. She can feel a rainstorm coming in a windowsill, but so far tonight I think nothing's swelled. **She says** my name, Joanna, and asks me how my night was. **I say**, "I'm tired, Mama. You know, the customers, they're always asking for more stuff than we got. They're asking for codfish and we ain't got no codfish in the back, just fancy steak things. **Getting** angry when we don't got them." **She understands this. In the** five-and-dime Mama waited tables and the counter in the cafeteria. Mama knows about food and customers and cleaning up after other people. It's almost twenty years since she worked, but that don't stop her from remembering.

"How's Elsie?" Mama asks me. Elsie's a girl I work with. Mama loves Elsie. She knows her real well from my descriptions. Only thing she don't know about her is that she ain't a waitress. Elsie sprained her ankle about two weeks ago and was having some trouble getting around and working.

"She's getting all her charm and good temper back," I tell Mama. "She pulled in tips big tonight."

"Good ol' Elsie," says Mama, even though she's never met her. "Always bouncing back. She oughta stop strutting around on them high heels of hers."

I tell Mama Elsie bought a new pair just to celebrate not

walking with a limp. What color are they, Mama wants to know. And I tell her, "Red, Mama. Elsie's new shoes are lipstick red."

I stand up and Mama looks at me disappointed, but I'm getting more tired these days when I come home, so I don't feel like talking and I start unbuttoning my blouse. After a minute Mama turns her chair around and says, "Whatever happened to that new girl?"

I stop unbuttoning. I don't remember no new girl? "What one is that?" I say.

"The one with the big red hair," says Mama. "You know . . . Maxine."

"Oh, right," I say. "Well, she didn't last all that long. She kinda had a falling-out with one of the customers and had to quit. They asked her to leave."

"What happened?" asks Mama.

She's a whore, Mama, I want to say. She got knifed on Lenox and went back to her pimp.

"It's kind of a long story," I say, pulling off my stockings. I always wear the same thing home. A white blouse I bought at Gimbel's when they was still open, a straight black skirt that Mama used to wear when she was my age, and sheer stockings with no toes, completely nude. I say to Mama, "I'll tell you the story another time. Right now I just want to go to sleep."

I help Mama get undressed and into bed, then I wash my face and get into my own. It's quieter here than anyplace else I've been in the city. Mama hums a little bit and then I hear her breath puffing short and I know she's asleep. Every night I lay awake awhile after Mama falls off, feeling my body curve into my own bed and smelling Mama's old perfume and clean sheets.

Tonight I lay with ice on my face. It ain't every night I got to do this. Normally, some different guy gets like this every couple of weeks. But lately there's been this one. Once or twice a week for the past three or four weeks. He come across the state line for me. He pays. I don't have to go with him. I just ain't made up

my mind not to yet.

He wasn't too bad tonight, like usual, just yanked me around and slapped me up a bit without looking at my face. Nothing like a couple weeks ago when he cracked my head up against the side of the car and punched my gut. I couldn't barely walk the next day, but I still didn't get the curse.

In the morning, I get Mama dressed and we go out to shop. Every Tuesday. We go to Gristede's and even though Mama only saw it for a few years, she remembers the lay of the aisles and the yellow color of the walls. I told her they painted it blue about four years ago, and she says she don't like to come so much since it's been blue because it's a sadder color. She can't see it, but she says it makes the air cooler.

Mama wants to buy apples. I know I'm going to be cutting them up for steaming. Mama used to stew apples before we came to New York. It smells the same up here as it did down home in the big house. Only I'm doing the stewing now. If we were down home in that old house, Mama'd be sitting by the stove in her chair and I'd be standing with my head in a cloud of steam over a pot. My little girl'd come in the way I used to, following her nose. I wonder if Mama ever wanted to be a grandma. She pulls a plastic bag down off the roll and starts feeling over the apples for the ripest ones.

Marcel must take his mama shopping, too. But not here, he lives up on West Fifty-second. I went up there once just to see what his street was like, whether I could tell which building was his. I didn't know what number it was, but I knew he was between Eighth and Ninth. I looked for a building that looked like Marcel'd live in it. I thought it must be the one at the far end with three stories and kind of dingy-looking windows—the sort of squat one, like Marcel. I thought about going up there, maybe, and meeting his mama. When I'd knock on the door she'd call out who was it and I'd say Marcel's gal, come to bring you **some home-baked** bread. Marcel wouldn't be there, but

she'd open the door and I'd go right in and put my basket down on her kitchen counter (and she'd have a whole kitchen, too, not just a corner of another room). We'd sit down together in her living room and she'd show me pictures of Marcel when he was a little boy. Marcel on the bathroom floor in a diaper, Marcel in a puffy snowsuit with his arms sticking out, Marcel standing up front of the church singing his first choir solo. And Marcel's mama'd be wanting something, too, like a glass of milk or tea, and we'd shut the book and I'd get up to get it for her just like I'd do my own mama. And then Marcel'd come home, apologizing for being late. He'd have two arms full of groceries and I'd go up to him and take one from him. But he'd say, don't you dare. We can't be having the little mama carrying nothing. Now you get out of the kitchen and get off your feet. And he'd pull the bag back out of my arms.

A slew of apples thump to the floor as Mama pulls the wrong one from the bottom of the pile. I get the apples up off the floor and pile them at the back and take new ones off the front. I put the last few apples in the bag and then pick us out some peaches, too. No telling when Mama's going to crave peach preserves.

In the checkout line Mama hears the beeping of the price scanner. She says she could do this job because you don't have to read the labels, just sweep the stuff over the hole. The register girl looks at her and says, "How would you know the total?" But then she looks at me and forgets what she's talking about. I'm heavy on foundation and my face must look like a mask. I don't want no one asking about my bruises when Mama's there, but she says to me, "Goddamn, girl!" but then sees me glaring about Mama and shuts up. I seen this girl before, but she ain't seen me like this.

Mama don't say nothing, but starts rooting through her purse. That's all I need, to have to make explanations to Mama. She ain't going to understand that six nights a week at Chock Full O' Nuts don't carry the medical tab of a sixty-five-year-old woman.

It ain't like I never did nothing else. I did the waitressing and the secretarial. But these days I spend a lot more time with Mama, even if it means I got to stare down the cash register girl in the grocery store. She finally finishes ringing up our stuff and I pay and we get the hell out of there.

A couple of nights later when I start getting ready to leave for work around ten, Mama gets out of her chair and starts touching things around the stove.

"Joanna," she says, "why don't you bring Elsie home with you some time? Why don't you invite her over for dinner tonight? I'll cook you girls something real special. How about you two girls getting waited on for a change?"

I about shit, because Mama knows all about Elsie, but Elsie don't know nothing about Mama. And probably don't want to. Elsie don't believe in mamas about as much as Mama don't believe in whores. I make like I'm struggling with a sweater over my head so I don't have to talk. Finally I say, "Well, I'll ask her, but she's not too sociable, I don't think she'll come."

"Not sociable?" Mama says. "Elsie? All those wisecracks she makes at work? About the customers? All those jokes? She always sounded real sociable to me."

"Well, maybe she's not as sociable as she sounds. Anyway, her ankle's still sore. She probably don't want to come this far."

"But she's working okay, isn't she?" says Mama. "She can take the bus here. Elsie's not the kind of girl that'd let a sore ankle get in her way."

"I just don't happen to think she'll come," I say. "That's all there is to it."

"But why?" says Mama. "Didn't you say she was single? I can't picture a girl like Elsie turning down good home cooking."

"Well, I know her and you don't!" I yell at her. "So don't be telling me what she's like, for God's sake!"

Mama drops a frying pan on the floor. The guy downstairs screams, "What the hell's going on up there?" Mama leaves the

pan where it fell and starts feeling her way over to her chair by the window like she suddenly don't remember how many steps it takes to get there or what's in the way.

"Look, I'm sorry, Mama," I say, going over to her and easing her into her chair. "I'm just not feeling so great right now. I'm just not doing too good."

"No, you sure ain't," she says, shaking her head. "You been uptight for weeks."

"Well, maybe I'll get a chance to call you from work," I say. "I'm going now."

I put on my coat and go.

At the bar, they've put up winter decorations. A couple cut-up snowflakes and stars pasted to the mirror behind the bar. Makes the whole place look cheerier. Elsie and Clarisse, the other girl I work with, are taking it easy and making eyes at the bartender. I go over and throw my purse on the counter and undo my coat. Elsie's telling some outrageous joke. I forget about Mama for a while.

Marcel comes in and heads straight for the bar. He's sweating and his hair is flying all over the place. Looks like he's already had a few. He slumps down near us and I say, "What's wrong, Honey?" Elsie and Clarisse slide away.

He orders a double whiskey straight up and bangs it back. I try to get him to say something, but he just keeps knocking down drinks. Then he hauls me out of the bar.

Upstairs Marcel just paces back and forth in the room. I ain't sure what he wants, so I don't draw a bath or nothing. He don't look like he needs a bath, his face is already all pink and wet. I sort of sprawl on the bed and look seductive but he ain't biting. Finally I say, "All right, what gives?"

And he says that he don't want to see me no more. That after tonight he ain't coming back and that even if he was staying in town he wouldn't never come and see me again, but anyhow he's taking off. He won't say where he's going, says he don't

know and maybe don't care. I ask him if I'm included in his plans and he says I just don't get the idea. He says his mama died, only he calls her Mother, and says he's goddamn forty-nine years old.

I try to be nice about it, his mama dying, that is, but then he throws me down on the bed and fucks me almost like the guy from out of state. I try to say, Marcel, ease up, but he just backhands me across the mouth. When he's finished he leaves me lying across the bed and slams the door on his way out. It's the first time he ever left without paying when I didn't say it was okay.

In a couple minutes Clarisse comes up and says Elsie needs the room, could I get out. I pull myself together and get the rest of my clothes on. Clarisse comes in to fuss about the bed but sees me wiping the blood from the corner of my mouth with my spent pair of stockings. She gets me a fresh pair from the drawer and comes over to me, biting her lips. She don't say nothing, but puts a hand on my shoulder. I get up and go downstairs to the ladies' room in the bar. The cut is only on the inside of my cheek, it won't show. I want to wash up right away, but I got to throw up first.

When I come out of the ladies' room, Elsie's still upstairs and Clarisse has just left off flirting with some guy at the bar. She comes over to me and says she's going to take him up after Elsie gets down. That's the problem with the room. With three of us, sometimes we got to wait and maybe lose a customer. And then there's all the times we got to go out and get into a car and take a ride. Sometimes there's a room at the other end and sometimes not. Every time I get in a guy's car for the first time, I see Mama sitting at home in her chair. Mama don't go to bed until I get home. When I slam the door and the car starts to roll I think maybe this time I'm not coming back, and I see Mama sitting in her window rocking herself away waiting for me until, finally, she rocks herself to sleep.

**Might be one night** some rich guy comes by and I get into his

car and we drive to California and live in his mansion and set Mama up in the summer cottage and hire a housekeeper to take care of the baby. Might be one night some john pulls a gun and gets trigger-happy and Mama gets a phone call about someone finding me in a gutter. Could happen either way. Tonight I ain't sure which is better.

Elsie comes downstairs just as the guy from out of state comes in the door. Elsie cuts her eyes at him and then glances over at me, which is right where he's headed. "Let's go for a drive," he says. He don't like to be nowhere where people could hear us. He don't like to be nowhere where Elsie or Clarisse can come banging on the door if he takes too long.

When we pass by Elsie she looks at me with her eyes slit. She thinks something's up, but she don't know what it is. I know she thinks I'm taking on a pimp.

I go out with him and get in his black Buick. We don't talk on the drive. He told me once his name's Barry, but he don't like it when I call him by his name. He don't want to be called nothing, and he don't call me nothing. So we just sit there and don't talk as he drives.

We drive up to Twentieth Street, and he pulls up in front of the Susan B. Anthony and shuts the engine.

"We can't go in here," I say. "It's women-only."

He don't answer, but opens the door and gets out of the car. "Stay put," he says and goes in. After a minute he comes back out with a kid in a miniskirt tripping on his heels. I think about getting out of the car right now, but he puts her in the back and we take off before I actually do anything about it. He drives up Third and starts making his way west.

He never goes to the same place twice. I just always wait to see where we're headed. We pull up outside a Parks Department garage in Central Park. It's dark and just one car goes by and don't pull in. He gets us out of the car and we walk into the woods a ways. He has me get down in the frozen leaves on my



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back and starts pulling on my skirt. The girl is behind him with her hands down his pants, like she's been given instructions beforehand. He starts grunting and his breath is all hot and wet in my face. Then he gets into hitting me with his hands open and then with fists. Harder than last time, harder than a couple weeks ago. I feel his fists sinking into my chest and my gut like I'm not even a real body. This time for sure I'm going to bleed, I'm going to get the curse and there'll be no more worrying about babies or getting sick in the morning. Maybe even there won't be no more Mama, won't be no more nothing.

He's getting close now, panting and spitting in my face. Above his head I see the tree branches crossing out the sky and then double black comes down over me and I feel like I'm choking. I got to get up or scream bloody murder. I throw my arms out into him and feel my nails in the skin of his face, my thumbs in his Adam's apple. I wind my fingers in his hair and wrench him off of me, and the girl at the back goes rolling into the leaves. He's swearing and trying to get onto his knees, but his pants are down around his calves and he can't get up fast enough, and I'm running into the woods. My heels crush down into leaves and catch in dirt, but I just keep running with my arms up to keep the branches off of my head.

I get to the edge of the park on Eighty-sixth. I run the two blocks to the subway and go down. I don't know if he's chasing or not, but I don't take no chances. I go to the end of the platform near the stairs to the tunnel. I'd see him first from here. If I had to, I'd just slip down...

When the train comes I get in and head downtown. It's cold in the train, but I feel the heat from the vent behind my calves blowing up between my thighs. Across the car there's an old lady sitting with a big plastic bag full of cans. She's got some paper out and she's scribbling on it with a stubby pencil. I can't read it; it don't even look like words, but she's writing the same thing on the same line, over and over, **darker and darker**, until

her pencil scrapes through the next page and starts again.

I got to get off or transfer at some point; otherwise, I'll wind up in Brooklyn. I don't want to be at the bar if he comes back looking for me. I think about heading up to Marcel's, looking for his place again, but who knows when he'll be going back. Elsie's got an apartment, but I know she's got the keys.

I'll go home to Mama, and she'll be sitting in her chair. When I open the door she'll say, That you, Joanna? Baby, what you doing home from work so early? You get fired?

And I'll say, No, Mama, I ain't fired. And I'll tell her a big story about what happened at work tonight, how Elsie had this one customer she took a special shine to. How he was real nice to her and how she had a special deal with him. He'd come in for coffee regular three or four times a week and some of those times she'd give it to him free, and maybe a meal besides. So tonight he comes in and she wants to give him supper 'cause he looks all bent out of shape. But he's all drunk and crazy, like Elsie never seen him before, and starts acting up, pinching her behind and other stuff he never done. She brings him a whole meal anyway, because she's just that kind of girl, but he tries to put his hand up her skirt and calls her things. And Elsie, well, you know Elsie, she don't stand for no shit, so halfway through his meal she comes over to his table all prim and neat and holding a fresh hot pot of coffee and says, Would you be wanting a refill? and when he says yes, she just takes the whole pot over his lap and dumps it down his crotch. He screams at the top of his lungs and the manager comes running out and fires Elsie on the spot and I say, If she goes, I go, too! And I pull off my apron and fling it down in the puddle on the floor.

When I get home Mama ain't sitting in her chair by the window. She's up by the stove stirring a saucepan. The whole apartment smells like pot roast and baked yams. She turns around and says, "Joanna? What's wrong? Dinner ain't ready for another two hours. Where's Elsie?"

I don't move from the doorway. "Elsie ain't coming," I say. "Not coming?" she says. Something drips off of the spoon in her hand to the floor. "Why not?"

"Mama," I say, "didn't it never occur to you that people don't eat supper at this hour?"

Mama don't say nothing, but holds her face completely still for a moment. "Did you ask her?" she says.

"We got kind of busy tonight."

"You didn't even ask her?" Mama says. "You know I was expecting her tonight, getting the whole place ready for company. You know I asked you to get her to come over. Elsie was coming. I got half a mind to send you right back out to get her."

"Mama," I say, taking half a step in from the doorway, "I ain't going to see Elsie again."

She takes a step toward me.

I see Mama come over and I'm wearing my waitress clothes again. She'll put her arms around me and pull me into the apartment saying, My poor baby, you sit down in front of me and tell me all about it. And she'll put her hands in my fresh Cloroxed hair and pull it out of my way. I'll lean my head into her and start telling her how it was tonight, about Elsie's customer and how she burned him, how I blew up, too; and she'll say how I didn't need no place like that anyhow and could get a new job in no time, and damned if she wasn't going to help me read the papers in the morning and pick out which ads I should call.

But she's still coming across the floor with her spoon out in front of her like a cane, taking a million tiny steps like it's miles to the front door. When she gets to me I'm pushing into the apartment, trying to get the door shut behind me and the wood against my back. She says, "What in tarnation!" and her hands are jabbing into me, the spoon is crushing up against my chest, gravy slopping into my bra. She's fumbling her fingers through my sex-damp clothes and dank-smelling hair, and mumbling

stuff that I can't hear. I open my mouth and I'm starting my story, but I can't tell if something's coming out, because Mama don't listen, her fingers are flying over me. She's running her hands over my body like she can't believe what she feels.

