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The Gates

The robberies started during the hottest time of the year, in a city in central Madagascar. The first victims were an Indian family, and all around the wealthier suburbs, other Indians looked up at their houses and wondered if they were safe.

"Even I could do it," Madhu's father said. "Just look."

Sweat gathered on his face, which was shining in the sun. With his foot on the window well and an arm on the iron shutter, he rocked back and forth. Madhu reached out to him as he dangled from the house in his cotton dress shirt.

"Daddy, no," she said. Madhu felt the light breeze on her face while her father looked up at their house. "Look," he said. "The pipe. They could step on the drainpipe to reach the balcony. Or use rope. Simple. Anyone could do it." He pointed this time, and Madhu was relieved he was making no further effort to scale the house.

She put out her hand for support and he hopped down to the yard. They walked out to the shoulder-high wall—just over it, they could see the houses in the folds of the hills. The family across the city, the Raghavans, must have had a wall just like this. And the robbers had just jumped over it.

Inside, Madhu's mother was telling the story of the robbery to a friend from down the street.

The overhead fan whirled and the curtains moved faintly in the window, the sun sharp against them. Madhu knew her grandmother must be asleep in the room upstairs, just like Mrs. Raghavan had been. Mrs. Raghavan had been the only one home, her mother explained, and she had been napping.

"She left the doors open on the balcony," her mother said, and the neighbor shook her head. "For the breeze!"

The robbers had walked through the open doors, one after another. One man woke her up and cupped a hand over Mrs. Raghavan's mouth before she could scream. Four of them, all Malagasy, dark black like they were from the coast, dragged her into the center of the house. They were wearing bandannas over their mouths and dirty white undershirts. Mrs. Raghavan screamed but no one heard her. One of the robbers held a knife to her throat and yelled something in Malagasy.

"She doesn't speak any," Madhu's mother explained. "Only Hindi."

There was a gold chain on the old woman's neck. The robbers ripped it off, Madhu's mother said, fingering her own chain under the thin cloth of her kurta. Then she made a fierce jerking motion of her hand. "And now she has a scar

here, behind her neck." The robbers kept shaking the chain in front of her and yelling, "Bijoux! Bijoux!" Mrs. Raghavan barely knew any French but she knew what they wanted. The problem was that she was crying and didn't respond immediately, so they hit her.

"Animals," the neighbor said. "An old woman."

Lying on the ground, Mrs. Raghavan took off her bangles, her rings, and tossed them on the floor. "They picked them up," Madhu's mother finished, "threw open all the drawers, found some money, and left. The poor woman is still terrified. She won't even let the servant come in."

Madhu thought of her parents' room. It had doors that led out into the balcony, and so did her grandmother's. Her brother was on the first floor. Madhu stared out through the curtains and saw the gardener pass.

"Where was the maid?" she asked. "The gardener?"

"Don't be stupid," her father said, wiping his forehead on his sleeve. "The servants are all in on it. They tell the robbers when to come, how to get in. They are all like this." The neighbor made sounds of assent and shook her head in dismay. Somewhere moving behind them was the dark, silent shape of Lantu, their maid, sweeping from room to room. Madhu felt the presence behind her, heard the scraping of the broom. But the family was speaking in Hindi, so Lantu could not understand.

"No one heard the screaming?" Madhu asked.

"No. The house is very big—the Raghavans

are very well off, you know. The father owns a shirt factory," her mother said to the neighbor, reaching for the remote control. She yawned. "He ships them to America."

Madhu's family kept a few of these shirts in their store. Tourists from France and Australia would buy them occasionally: pictures of Madagascar, lemurs and chameleons. The family owned a store near the city market that sold various things: electronics, packaged food, hygiene products, and—a recent addition—Internet access available by the minute. Now there would often be a tourist with sunburned shoulders sitting in the corner of the store, bouncing a leg impatiently while staring at the monitor.

Once, ten years ago, when their store opened, there would have been no one there but Indians. They specialized in pressure cookers and lentils and spices that could not be found elsewhere in the city. Then they started selling all sorts of things—anything that they could fit on the shelves and mark up. Lately, through a connection with a distant cousin in the Maldives and another in Singapore, they had managed to get various electronics that were not available in most parts of Madagascar.

These products were behind glass and only the family could reach them: three iPods, for example, for many thousands of *ariary* each. There were also electric razors and a printer, whatever Madhu's father managed to get shipped over. Somehow customs were bypassed, and the store dealt with its customers exclusively in cash.

Madhu went to the store after school on most

days. She finished her homework in the evenings. This week she needed to be in early, because her father was home supervising the construction of the new gates.

After looking at the wall for days, Madhu's father had decided that something needed to be done. The old wall had never been much protection. People walking by on the street could steal anything they wanted: roses, apples, bunches of litchis. Madhu's father had told the gardener to trim the trees back, and two years ago had even had broken glass glued along the top of the wall. People would still pick up rocks and smash the shards, and then put leaves over the powdered glass to lift themselves over the wall with their hands. Once Madhu had seen a few drops of blood smeared on the tips of the glass.

Sometimes she would see the neighbor's cat walking gingerly along the wall, placing each paw between the shards and then settling down to sleep on the roof of the gardener's shed. Now, with the new walls, that would be impossible. The cat would have to find a new route to the shed. The old wall had already been demolished and a skeleton of iron rods, more than ten feet high, was going up. The process had begun three days ago. Madhu would see the barrier growing in the mornings and evenings. This wall was going to be concrete, impossible to scale like the brick ones.

While the construction went on, though, the family would be uncovered. Yesterday morning, the milkman had walked right up to the door

through the forest of rods. Madhu's mother almost screamed. The milkman always rang the doorbell at the gate, and Lantu would go down with the green plastic jug and hold it out to accept the three cups of milk from the man's tin dipper. They would stand talking, sometimes for fifteen minutes if no one said anything. Madhu's mother sensed a flirtation. The milk needed to be brought in and boiled immediately, then put in the refrigerator if it was not going to spoil.

Soon, Lantu would begin to cook the meals for the day. She didn't know how to cook Indian food, so Madhu's mother would direct her on how to chop everything, and when to add the ingredients. Finally, her mother would add the finishing touches to the spices, and Lantu would back away and wait for further instructions; once Madhu thought she saw her wrinkling up her nose at the odors wafting from the pot she had helped make. Every day, she brought her own lunch in a small steel tin, and must have eaten dinner late at home, somewhere in the city. Madhu sometimes wondered, as she walked through the city's tents and little concrete hovels, what Lantu's life could possibly be like: did she have a family? Was she in one of the shacks that surrounded the city market?

After the entrance of the milkman, Madhu's father had explained to her slightly frantic mother that the gates had metal plates that would need to be installed separately, over several days. The huge steel sheets had been delivered and were sitting in their courtyard, where all of the trees were covered with gray dust from the

construction. Soon the walls would almost completely block out the top of the house, but for the next week, anyone that walked to the end of the narrow street would see the house emerge whole, white and shining in the sun, through the space that would eventually be occupied by the gates. Madhu could imagine her father standing in the gap, sweaty but proud, as the workmen scrambled around the surface of the wall, patching and smoothing.

Madhu slipped her satchel over her shoulder. Every day after school, girls from the *Academie* found walking companions as they left for home. A few of the wealthier ones, usually the children of French expatriates, boarded rickshaws together. Madhu walked to the store alone, surrounded by a group of tall, black girls talking in Malagasy, a sea of light blue skirts and white collared shirts. Most of the older girls went to the neighborhood of the market before they went home, and a few had boyfriends that they met outside the stalls. Some would come to the store and buy bottles of Coke and ice cream bars.

Madhu ran her hand down her legs. It was time to shave again. Since she had started shaving the hair seemed to grow faster and faster. She looked at the black down on her arms and grimaced. She didn't know the solution for that—the disposable razor box said nothing about shaving your arms, and that was where she had learned about the business since her mother did not shave her legs, or expose them to people at any time. But a *salwar kurtā* was not an acceptable uniform to

wear to school. Her father had stared at her when she had first come home wearing the skirt, which went just below her knees. "One day," he had said to her mother, "we need to start our own school in this country."

Madhu remembered, as she saw the store in the distance, that there was cream for facial hair. Could you put it on your arms too? The Malagasy girls—both the Merina and the black girls—did not have to shave, at least not that Madhu could tell. Their skin was always smooth. She liked her hair, though, and her skin was good too—she wasn't getting pimples like some of the other girls.

The storefront had two large glass windows; inside it was just one room, with shelves of products going up to the ceiling. Today, there was a young man—as usual, in a tank top with bright red shoulders—sitting and checking his e-mail in the corner. Madhu's grandmother was leaning against the shelf looking tired. Madhu's increasingly plump younger brother was eating an ice cream bar on the chair. They could have hired other help, but Madhu's father did not trust anyone but family with the store.

Madhu greeted her grandmother in Hindi, lifted the flap in the counter, and went to the back room. She slipped on her jeans, glad to cover her legs. The jeans were snug, although nothing like what the black girls wore. She applied deodorant to her armpits, taking in the smell of talcum as the material slid off the curved surface onto her skin. It was the expensive kind—only a little more than the others, two hundred ari-

ary, but much smaller, and with a strange, curvy dispenser that had a wide smooth head and tiny base. Only the French women bought it, the ones staying with husbands or boyfriends in the hotel in the center of the city. Madhu liked the way they said its name as they directed her to pick it off the shelves, pointing with their fingers: "Ah, oui. Là bas. C'est ça. *Azalée*."

Outside her grandmother was getting frustrated with a middle-aged black man. The blond-haired boy was still in the corner, apparently willing to spend hundreds of *ariary* while he typed. Near the counter, the black man pointed and asked again. "Oil," he said.

"I'll get it," Madhu offered. Her grandmother came off the rolling ladder and gave Madhu a secret scowl that meant, *Always, with these people*. "Baby oil," the man told Madhu in French, as she moved the ladder. "Not oil for food." Madhu's grandmother had been in the wrong row. There was no system behind how the items were organized, other than that they had fit there on the shelves once and were restocked in the same place. Madhu went up the rungs and fetched the bottle. The man slapped his money down on the counter and glared at her grandmother. He carefully counted the change Madhu gave him and then left.

The blond-haired boy was behind him, handling a huge bundle of crumpled notes in the careless way that younger male tourists seemed to have, like nothing bad could ever happen to them. How old could he have been? Madhu wondered. Not more than a few years older than

her. Maybe still in high school, and somehow traveling alone. It seemed incredible to her, and yet there were always whites his age wandering around.

"The computer," he began in French. "It should be about a thousand *ariary*."

Madhu checked the monitor and wrote the amount down in a notepad. She told him the number and gave him back the change from the notes he had handed her.

"Your French is very good," he said. "Like a native."

Madhu nodded at him.

"I'm from Marseille. Where is your family from?"

Madhu's grandmother had gone into the back room, but her brother was watching her.

"India," Madhu said. "But we have been here a long time."

"My name is Marcel," he said. "What about you?" He put his elbows on the counter and leaned slightly towards her.

Madhu had only recently considered that desire could be directed towards her in the real world. Her fantasies involved Indian movie stars and a few of the Indian boys from her class. But she had no idea what to do with a thin, freckled boy from Marseille, badly sunburned and smiling at her.

"Madhu," she said.

"I am here for three weeks. To see the city. In a week I'm going to see the coral reefs around Tulear. Have you been there?"

"No, I've never left the city," Madhu said. And

suddenly she felt embarrassed and added, "I've been to Singapore once." They had gone there to shop and pick up some electronics for the store.

"That's a shame. You should see more. You have such a beautiful country."

"I help take care of the store," Madhu said. Her grandmother emerged from the back room and Madhu burst out, "*Au revoir*. Have a nice day."

Marcel smiled. "*Adieu, mademoiselle*," he said. "I will be back here soon. For the Internet and for the company. Have a nice day."

Madhu's grandmother walked over to her. "What do these people do on the computer for so long?" she said. "They just throw money away. Mad, they're all mad."

Finally the gates were complete, and the family could rest easily. The only drawback was that one of the rose bushes was now in shade and probably needed to move if it was going to survive. Even Lantu was pleased, although one would have to look carefully at her slightly brisker walk to know because she showed nothing on her face. She had regained her small zone of space. Every morning as she went to fetch the milk she could stop at the gate and talk, instead of completing her transaction briskly at the front door. And the new gate was solid, so it almost formed a private corridor when one gate was only slightly opened, as it was when Lantu held out the jug to receive the milk.

Then, a few kilometers from their house, just when everyone was feeling safe, the robbers went after another Indian family. Madhu's mother

called it a kidnapping, but the family had been held in their own house. Four Malagasy had done it again, maybe the same four, more ambitious now. They had broken in again during the day, and this time one of them had a gun. The husband's parents were the only ones home.

The first question was from her father: "How did they get in?"

"They rang the doorbell," her mother said. "The Premchands have a guard. He was stupid, he opened it for them. God knows what they said to him. They pointed the gun and gagged him and threw him in the backyard."

Then they tied up the two parents inside the house, along with the maid, and waited for the others to come home. Madhu looked at her father—she could tell he suspected the guard. It was a shame the gates were solid, large flat sheets of metal, like theirs. When the car arrived with the father and mother, the man honked, to tell the guard the gates needed to be opened. If there had still been bars they could have seen that the robbers were on the other side; behind plates it was like the gates opened themselves. The car had already driven into the compound when they saw the four men, waiting. The men closed the gates and the car was shut in.

No one must have heard the first screams, or the sound of the men breaking the back windows and dragging the couple out. Or did they hear, and do nothing? Or hear and applaud? The only ones likely to hear were the maids, the gardeners, outside in the courtyards of the other houses in the neighborhood.

These were the questions asked, the subjects discussed—by Indians anyway. People stopped by the store all day, and her mother sat at the end of the counter, by the freezer with the ice cream, and talked to each of them, repeating the story again and again, imagining what it must have been like to open the gates and see the gun and the bandannas across those four faces.

Madhu looked around for Marcel. He had not come for a few days and she had been watching for him. At night, once, she even tried to imagine what he would look like if he was Indian, but it was a difficult transformation to produce.

But there were other things to worry about now. Her father wondered aloud how they could stay in a country where the police could not be relied on to catch such people, even though he had always maintained that the police were useless and in on everything.

No one, in any case, had called the police this time, according to the stories. The kidnappers had said they would kill the whole family at the first hint of trouble. The Premchands had two daughters, and they had both married into wealthy families—one of them had married the son of the man who owned Sarnalait, the second largest condensed milk company in the country. The kidnappers must have known there were children, but not who the eldest daughter had married. They didn't ask for enough money. Four hundred thousand *ariary*, her mother said. Sarnalait probably made that much money every fifteen minutes. The daughter's family did not complain, or hatch a scheme. They came to

the house late at night and threw the bag full of money over the wall, as instructed. Then the kidnappers left, over the back wall that divided the Premchands' property from their neighbors, and went through another person's yard—to somewhere. The family called the police, and they had to cut through the gates with a blowtorch to get inside. Everyone was still tied and gagged in the middle of the house.

Everywhere Indians began to retreat. Other people that had money retreated too—whites, Arabs, a few Koreans—but not as forcefully or visibly. It was clear who was being targeted, whose wealth was being harvested. That the robbers did not just break in but came and waited for the rest of you was the most terrible—it meant that at no point were you safe. Every time you drove through the gates with the car, or opened the door to the house, there was a second of doubt, looking for dark shapes moving in the corners. And when you were inside there was the rustle in the yard, the sound of breaking glass.

Madhu's father had learned the lesson of the Premchands': before the gates were fully opened, whoever was behind them showed himself, and then finished pushing the gates open from the outside. Madhu thought to ask him once, as she lifted up the bolt and moved the massive plates, what he would do if someone opened them from behind, invisibly, without a greeting. This meant the robbers were inside, holding guns to their foreheads. She imagined him sitting out in the driveway, thinking of calling the police, or storm-

ing in with the car. The gun held to the windshield as he burst through. The blood and the broken glass. It was too horrible to think about. The only thing keeping them safe was the fact that there were just so many people to rob. She had never realized how many Indians there were, scattered across the city. She thought her family had known them all somehow, and here were so many more, wealthy and being chosen instead of them. Now they were all locked away, talking to each other on telephones, or seeing each other on the street, in their stores and factories. And at night they separated and waited.

Madhu sat on the sofa now, watching Lantu. A damp rag moved across the floor. A smear of water was spread thin across the tiles; it beaded, rushed apart into individual droplets. Lantu moved on her hands and knees like a spider. The rag swept arcs across the floor, proceeding across the living room. Madhu's father was napping in the guest room. Everyone else had gone to the store, which had become much more popular than the house. Her mother had taken the small television from the bedroom and now watched it in the store, ringing up the occasional customer while her father or grandmother or brother slid around on the ladders. It was more relaxing to talk about the crimes all day at the store, where nothing could happen, than to stay at home, surrounded by walls and glass.

The bell rang. Lantu jumped up, stepped over a wet spot on the balls of her bare feet, and bounded to the kitchen. It was the milkman. She reappeared with the jug and headed outside.

Madhu walked across the damp floor and climbed up the stairs to her parents' bedroom. She went to open the windows, and spied the neighbor's cat walking along the top of the wall—she had found, somehow, a new route to the shed, and this made Madhu strangely happy. The warm breeze met her face, and then Madhu looked down and saw Lantu, jug already full, talking to the milkman. She was tucked behind the one open gate, her back to Madhu. The balcony was the only place from which she could be seen.

Madhu was annoyed; now she understood why her mother was always upset with Lantu. She was thinking of yelling something down to her when she heard a sharp peal of laughter, quickly stifled. Madhu had never heard Lantu laughing before. She looked down past the balcony rail, and Lantu's head snapped around and then back to the milkman, smiling and nervous. She put her hand out as if to stop his arm, which moved up to her chest, but she didn't push it away. She was wearing a buttoned blouse, and Madhu watched the milkman move his hand below Lantu's neck, then slide it lower inside the shirt. He held it there, moved it slowly around. Lantu's head fell back a little. The jug lowered in her arm, almost tipped over.

As the milk was about to pour out, Lantu jerked the jug upright. A little washed over onto the driveway. She took the milkman's hand and pushed it away from her. She whispered something to him, then closed the gate. As she walked back, Madhu saw her hand dart to her neck and

refasten a button.

Madhu's heart was pounding. She lay down on her parents' bed, too excited to go downstairs and face Lantu. The thought of a black hand sliding into her blouse, feeling the blood beat behind the skin. She had not seen Lantu's face when it happened, but she could imagine it—the parted lips, the neck loosening, the eyes half closed. Madhu tried to think of the words that she would need to use to tell her mother—surely Lantu needed to be punished somehow for what she had done—but Madhu couldn't imagine saying a single one.

Madhu got up, and saw the milkman reappear down the street, far over the gates, completing his rounds, and she thought of his hands. Was that, she wondered, what Marcel wanted to do? None of the Indian boys would ever think of such a thing. Maybe they would walk together, and some day the families would speak to each other and arrange a match—faintly, on the horizon, she could imagine a kiss, the vague touch of bodies. But she could imagine other men doing much more—unbuttoning her shirt, taking the things that they wanted.

Downstairs, Madhu woke up her father, who was sweating from the heat. Her father snorted awake and Madhu asked him if she could leave to go to the store. Once, during days when they were both free, they would have walked to the market to buy vegetables. But lately he had complained about exorbitant prices—they saw an Indian face, he told her, and they immediately wanted to cheat a person. So Lantu had been buying the vegetables herself.

Her father said it was fine for her to go. Soft clanging noises came from the kitchen as Madhu walked through the living room: Lantu stacking the pots to wash them in the tap outside.

Madhu walked to the store in a haze, the sun beating down on her. In the store, she changed into the same jeans and smoothed *Azalée* across her armpits. But she noticed none of it today—how nice she might have looked, and how lovely she smelled—and she walked mechanically around the store and followed the customers' fingertips, barely listening to what they said. Her mother and grandmother had wandered off to the other store to talk to the Muslim woman about the robberies. The only person left in the store was her brother, who was watching television in the corner. Madhu was getting a bottle of water purification drops for an Australian tourist when she noticed Marcel again at the bottom of the ladder. The drops were up high and she was conscious of Marcel's eyes on her. He smiled at her and then sheepishly looked away before approaching the counter. Was he looking at her bottom? she wondered, remembering her jeans. Was that why he had looked away?

"What would you like?" she asked.

He wanted sunblock, a tin of sardines, an ice cream bar. She had to climb again for the sardines. It was horrible, and she wished both that she had paid more attention getting dressed today and that Marcel had never come. Suddenly she felt angry—about Marcel's presence in the store, the element of disorder he had introduced. Then they were face to face again.

"I still have a few more days in the city," he said, and he was leaning against the counter, just a few inches from her face. "I went and saw the palace. What else should I see here?"

"I don't know," Madhu said.

"How about this?" he said, picking up a postcard from the rack. "This famous church. Have you been here? Or the market."

"I have been to the market," Madhu said. "It is just around the corner."

"You know," Marcel said. "I have been there, but I could use a guide, a native, someone to show me around the place. Would you like to take a walk with me?"

Madhu stared at him for a second. He was friendly; he had a broad smile on his face. But what did he want from her? There was nothing that she could do with him or anyone else. "I . . . I don't really know the market," she stammered. "I can't leave the store."

"Really? He's here," Marcel said, gesturing to her brother, who was looking up from the television show. "It'll just be for a minute."

"You don't understand," Madhu said, a little desperately. "Here." She handed him his bag of goods. "Enjoy your stay. I can't leave. I'm sorry."

"*D'accord*," he said, with a puzzled look, and turned and left.

When her mother came back to the store, Madhu told her angrily that Lantu had spilled some of the milk. "And she wastes so much time talking to the milkman," Madhu said, her heart pounding. "I have had enough of her."

Her mother agreed; Lantu was the same as all

the others, anxious to get away with whatever she could. "But I am always watching her," Madhu's mother said. "I can see."

"We should find someone else," Madhu said. She never wanted to see Lantu again, or think about what Lantu had the freedom to do.

"It is so hard to find anyone in this country," her mother said, leaning back to catch the breeze from the fan. "What can you do?"

In the month, there were two more robberies. They seemed to happen just when everyone was about to forget there was ever a problem. The family got a dog, a guard certain not to betray them. He would greet every visitor snarling, scraping his paws against the gate, shoving his snout underneath the space in the concrete worn away by the bolt and baring his teeth. The gardener was the one that got him meat every morning, so he was the only one whose approach made the dog happy—everyone else in the house was only tolerated. The dog was never let inside, so he sat all day in the shade of the gates, barked at the neighbor's cat walking along the wall, and charged at any sign of approach. Behind the house he got his food every morning, and he expelled the remains, usually in the afternoon, into a patch of dirt at the end of the driveway. The gardener mixed this with soil and used it to fertilize the plants.

Madhu thought about Marcel sometimes, and his arms, pale on one side and red on the other. And after him, she began to wonder whether other men were looking at her as she climbed

the ladder, then became sure that some of them were—one of the old French men that came looking for the women that hung around the Hotel, some middle-aged Malagasy man, one of those Malagasy truck drivers. It started to disgust her. All foreigners, no one she could want.

One day Lantu was two hours late for work. Her father was sick, she explained, in halting French. "Enough excuses!" Madhu's mother said. "This has gone on long enough." She didn't know enough Malagasy to fire her, so she had to bring Madhu into the room to translate some of the Hindi—about how she had been late for weeks now and was never working, and that she was not going to tolerate it any more. Madhu could not translate all of it, but she knew how to say that things were finished, and she said this several times. Lantu said that she would work longer if they wanted her to make up the time. She could stay late today. It was just that her father was sick this morning, and she had to go fetch the doctor.

"What?" Madhu's mother asked, looking at her daughter for a translation.

"Nothing," Madhu said. "More excuses."

Lantu stared at them; her forehead creased slightly, and her eyes could have been burning with rage or with simple annoyance. Madhu could not read her at all. After a few seconds of silence Lantu collected her bag, turned around, and left the house.

Madhu's father was furious. Lantu was one of the few reliable maids they had found. Why in the world had they fired her? Finally, after talking to the other Indian families in the neighbor-

hood, they found another Malagasy woman who was looking for maid's work. She was older and plump, and she began the next week.

Two days after Lantu was fired, someone threw a rock from the street and it smashed through a pane of one of the balcony doors. Madhu's mother suspected Lantu, but it could have been anyone. Madhu's father wondered if it was the robbers, or some other group of Indian-haters. They wondered whether they should put bars on the balcony doors too. They were all in the living room when they talked about it, and called a workman to fix the glass in the door. They had gotten a satellite dish that picked up a signal from South Africa, which meant more channels than they had ever had before, even one just for Indians: news in Hindi, movies, music videos—and cricket games, although no one in the family had ever followed the sport. Her mother and grandmother would watch the videos, the girls dancing in tight clothes, showing their stomachs, being sprayed with water, and they shook their heads and said one thing—"disgusting"—but they didn't stop watching. No one wanted to go to the store anymore, whether someone was going to break in to the house or not, because the store television only picked up the three Malagasy channels.

But no one was going to break in, or at least not the same people. They did not hear for days, because they never watched Malagasy television at home anymore. The police had caught the kidnapers. Madhu saw it first on the front page of the *Quotidien*. The police had not just caught the

robbers; they had killed them. The picture in the paper was of the four men lying dead in front of the house where they were living, surrounded by jewelry and money. It did not seem like they had spent any of what they had stolen, only hoarded. The robbers had shot at the police from the windows, and the police had emptied their weapons into the house. The bullets cut through the cheap wood, peppering the front of the house until it almost fell off. The four men were spread out on the ground, the legs facing the camera, and you couldn't see their faces, just the bottoms of their chins. Their bodies had been torn open by the shots.

When Madhu came home, her mother was talking to someone on the phone about it. The news on the national channel ran on a loop for several days, and this was still the lead story. They watched the piece; the camera moved over the same bodies she had seen in the picture. A policeman began to be interviewed, and they switched back to the Indian channel.

"So it's over," Madhu said. "Isn't it? We're safe."

"Someone else will start now, just watch," her father said. "We're never safe in this country." He said this casually, with only a hint of bitterness, as if their fear was now so ordinary that it was

not worth complaining about—like the heat or the flies buzzing against the screen. He smiled at his daughter.

"Come here," he said, patting the sofa, "sit down." The family went back to the music video, with men dancing around the actress. The camera moved in on the woman, and Madhu, sitting on the sofa next to her father, realized that there was some black down on the actress's arms—not too much, just a little, like what she had. She ran her hands over her arms and wrists. Maybe there was no need to shave them after all. She wondered whether the man she married would look like any of the men on the screen, chasing the woman. Eventually, the actress would choose one of them, Madhu thought, and she would too. She would go back with a man to a house somewhere in the city and create a link between the two families. Then her brother would marry a girl somewhere, and the web would expand, building more and more connections. Finally, someday, it would be large enough that she would feel at home anywhere she went.

Blocking the television screen for an instant, the new maid's dark shape moved among them again, silently sliding the rag across the floor. The streaks of water split into droplets, were wiped away.