

A Convergence of Solitudes

a novel

Anita Anand

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for my mother, Kailash Anand

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DISQUE 1

Face A

1. Prélude: Six solitudes (instrumental)



1996

“**SUNIL, WHAT HAVE** you done with my keys?”

Hima’s voice reached Sunil in their bedroom, where he was getting dressed. He gazed around, spotted her change purse and opened it. The silk lining was torn, which made a new pocket just big enough to slide a finger inside.

He froze as he felt something like two tiny metal buttons. The bugs! So this was where they’d been all along.

He did not want this to be true.

His finger pressed against one of them, pushed it up through the lining, pulled it out. Relief swept through him. An earring, a small, glittering diamond. He put his finger back in and pulled out the other one.

Hima appeared in the doorway. Sunil gave her a sheepish smile.

“Your jewels, Madam,” he said.

She shook her head and disappeared from the doorway. Before the front door shut she called back that she was taking his keys.

And if I want to go out? He did not much enjoy being alone with his thoughts. They could be so treacherous. An idea came to him. He'd call Rani. He brightened at the thought of an excuse to spend time with his daughter.

ON THE BUS returning from the airport, Mélanie glanced at her mother, fast asleep across the aisle. Someone had left a copy of the *Montreal Gazette* on the seat beside her. Mélanie reached over, picked it up and began flipping through the pages. The Letters page. Surprise, surprise. A *Gazette* reader had more to say about the former premier's infamous declaration—blaming the loss of the referendum on “*l'argent et le vote ethnique*.” She counted on her fingers. That was almost six months ago. God. Time to move on!

But she was one to talk. Until very recently, she'd spent all her time scouring newspapers from two decades ago. Way too distracted to pay attention to anything happening around her. Her father would be heartbroken. He'd be livid if he knew she'd basically ignored the last referendum. She didn't care. Yes, she did. Maybe her old self wouldn't have. Poor Serge. The tug of regret combining with shock as she recognized Sunil Roshan's face on the Obituary page.

JANE STOOD WITH her back to the wind. She held the line in her left hand, and lifted the kite she'd painted in the other.

There were people walking by in the park, mostly people with dogs. She felt their stares. She was alone, and enjoying herself, and this would always be considered odd. This was the first time she'd ever taken one of her paintings outside. A swirl of vibrant colours. It was the first warm day of spring. There were still patches of snow mixed with gravel on the field. Her last kite had been a giant fleur-de-lys, guaranteed to keep strangers and their small talk away in this Anglophone neighbourhood. As she let the wind catch the kite, she wondered why she had never done this simple activity with Mélanie when she was a child. The top lit by the sun now. The pull of the kite, its strength always surprising.

HIMA WAS RE-LEARNING. Needing to wear warm socks at night. Waking up to an empty bed, eating breakfast alone. At the grocery store now, training herself not to fill her cart with food she'd enjoyed with Sunil. The cashier was the woman from two buildings over who had suddenly started talking to Hima when she'd returned alone from the hospital. She'd noticed the ambulance.

“I feel so bad for you,” this woman was saying as she placed Hima's items in a bag. “It was the same for me. Such a shock. Some wives are more prepared for the death of their spouses. They get to witness a slow decline.”

The implication being that those wives were the lucky ones. What is lucky about having to look after a sick person? Hima felt impatience for this woman, and cut her off, shaking her head and waving her hand in her face. She walked down the slope to their—*her*—apartment, with careful, heavy steps to avoid slipping on the black ice. Irritable now, the cashier's words still in her head, causing trouble. Her legs