I wake to blinding disorientation. I am in a strange room, and sunlight lies in unfamiliar lines along the wall. From beyond the window comes the *snip-snip* of garden shears. Slowly, reality settles back into place, and I pad through the sunlit house and through the cracked front door.

My mother is waging war in her garden, wearing a pair of men’s jeans at least two sizes too big belted about her waist. When she sees me, she straightens, wiping her forehead on her forearm.

“Looks better, doesn’t it,” she says.

I look around and take in the riot of marigolds and fat yellow roses and zinnias red like heart’s blood. “Guess so.”

We moved here two years ago, when I was halfway through school. I had come home to Chicago for Christmas to find my mother standing amidst a home full of boxes. “We’re moving,” she had announced. Later I will try to recall the set of her mouth, the look in her eyes. Our lives had been invaded but it will take me three years to realize that.

“How are classes?”

“Hard.” I rest my chin on my knees. Then, carefully, “I don’t know about med school anymore.”

She looks at me for a moment, and I wait. My mother seems like a strange new person now. For years I had felt that she had been scarcely recognizable when not wearing scrubs, her stethoscope slung about her neck, but now there is little left of Dr. N. Shathri, the first Indian-American woman to grace Chicago’s operating rooms. The woman who stands before me is barefoot and sweaty and alive in a way I have never seen before.

“Okay,” she says finally. *Snip*.

“Okay?”

“When I say ‘okay,’ I tend to mean it,” she says drily.

She had never said *if* you go to medical school; it was always *when*. Not if you’ll be a doctor, but what kind of doctor. I am floundering.

“There’s no need to look so stunned,” she says.

“You always wanted me to be a doctor.”

“No, I didn’t. I just wanted whatever you wanted.”

“Well, you moved us *here*,” I snap, and here is this place where I am lost in a world of perfectly manicured lawns and casseroles and neighborhood women who wear flowered dresses. I grew up eating pierogiat my friends’ apartments and losing myself in a city where everyone was different. Here the neighbors stare at my dark-skinned mother and make comments about adoption. That they are right stings all the more.

“Jul ⎯,”

I go inside.

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My mother comes to my room in the afternoon. She has showered and tucked her hair up into a neat bun. “Can I come in?”

I nod.

“I always thought you would have made a great doctor,” she says. “Just a feeling.”

“Thanks. I haven’t decided against it. Not completely, at least.”

She seems to accept this, and we sit together. Her shoulder feels sharp and bony against mine, as though she’s lost weight. I lean my head down and it is like old times, just the two of us, as though nothing has changed. It’s a moment frozen in time.

“Any boys?”

I trace a pattern into my knee. “One. You wouldn’t like him.”

She pats my hand. “Don’t be so sure of it. I’d like to meet him.”

“*Mom*. We’re not like that yet.”

We are silent.

Then she says, “I just want you to be ⎯ you know.”

It has always been just the two of us, and neither of us ever saw the point in talking about feelings. We already knew all that.

“I know,” I say. Then, finally, “I don’t mind the house.”

I go back to school a month and a half later. My mother and I talk once a week, and in October she tells me that she’s accepted a job writing a weekly gardening column for the local paper. She’s looking at potted plants; once winter comes, her garden will die. I tell myself that indulging her new obsession will do no harm.

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She dies before I get my first acceptance letter. I’ve decided on ophthalmology. I come home for two weeks to pack up the remainder of a life into boxes and the garbage bin, and I decide to keep her bookcase full of gardening manuals. Outside the garden is in full blossom. I think of my mother standing there, her bare feet pressed into damp earth, her fingers full of life even as the cancer that I had never known about ate at her from the inside out.

I meet with the buyers on the day before I go back to school. Unorthodox, but I had insisted. They are a young couple, and they bring their six-month-old baby with them. She begins to wail halfway through the appointment.

“You’ll keep the garden?” I ask them.

The husband says, “The house will need some work.”

“I love the sunflowers,” says the wife wistfully.

“They were my mother’s favorites,” I tell her.

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I drive back to the city that night. In the back of the car sit my mother’s pots of herbs, nestled carefully amidst the boxes.