Amah

DEVYANI SALTZMAN

In 2006 Devyani Saltzman's memoir *Shooting Water* was named one of *The Bloomsbury Review*'s Editor's Picks of the year. In 2007 Room published an interview with her. Now she returns to our pages with another memoir of her early years, this one focusing on the relationship between herself and Amah, her Indian nanny.

I FOUND HER IN LITERATURE ONLY ONCE, hiding in Salman Rushdie's short-story "The Courter." London, 1962, an Indian nanny walking down a street in Kensington with the edge of her "red-hemmed white sari" in hand. Amah did the same as she cut through the pedestrian pathway at the end of our street, making a beeline for the 7-Eleven. But unlike Rushdie's Kensington ayah, Amah never met and fell in love with the Eastern European hall porter of her employer's building. She never had liaisons that involved a shared love of chess.

Amah came to Canada when I was eight weeks old. I was told that her husband beat her and drank, although I never met him and she never talked about the beatings. Romantic love was of no interest to her, and whenever she saw a couple kissing on television and in the movies, she'd say "*chee chee*" in disgust and turn away. She arrived in our lives through the recommendation of an aunt in Delhi. Her previous charges had been the children of diplomats, although I couldn't imagine Amah rotating through the three-year cycle of embassy employees. All we knew was that she had come from a village outside Bangalore in the south Indian state of Karnataka. She was illiterate, the mother of five daughters, and didn't know her own age.

Amah would fly back to Toronto with my parents in January 1980. Canada required a work permit and a passport at that time, neither of which she had. My parents applied for both. As they filled out the work permit application before leaving India, my father explained that she would feel jet lag in the weeks after they arrived in Toronto. The city was ten hours

behind Delhi; a different time zone, a different season. Amah just started laughing, her round belly heaved. "Sahib, everyone knows it's the same time everywhere."

My parents' first home was in a neighbourhood of red brick Victorian houses, professors, artists, and ex-hippies. It had two bedrooms, theirs and mine. Amah slept on the floor of the dining room, on a dark brown shag carpet between the radiator and the heavy wooden legs of the mahogany dining table. My first memory of her was as she slept, taking afternoon naps with the sunlight falling across her head, which lay cushioned on an outstretched arm. She kept her long black hair tied in a bun, and her belly gently rose and fell beneath a cotton sari. After she woke up, Amah would let me sit next to her under the dining table and look at the symmetrical tattoos on the tops of her hands and feet. Geometric designs in deep indigo, fading into her dark skin. One of our earliest conversations was about how she got them. Amah spoke broken English, Hindi, and the south Indian languages of Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada. She pointed at her hands and poked at the skin with her finger. The tattoos had been done with a sewing needle when she was very young. When she didn't sleep on the dining room floor she slept on a mattress that slid out from beneath my white Ikea bed.

In her twenty-three years in Canada, Amah had only two friends. Her first was Lucy, the Italian cleaning lady who came to our house once a week. Lucy was married, but she wore fitted black skirts and sleeveless black blouses as if she were a widow. They would sit on the stairs and talk during Lucy's lunch break, heavy Italian and Indian voices gossiping and complaining about the church. Both women were Catholic. Amah's patron saint was St. Anthony of Padua, a Franciscan always pictured with a child—the infant Jesus—and white lilies in his arms. Amah would sometimes walk the two blocks to Bathurst Street to visit Lucy in a little walk-up across from Steven's Grocery Store. She wore leather chappals on those walks, even in early winter after the first snowfall.

After a few years, we moved up the hill to a neighbourhood with detached houses. It would be where we lived until I went to university, and the last home Amah would know in North America. She graduated from her space on the dining room floor to a stucco apartment in the basement. It suited her—private and dark, with enough space for her two favourite possessions, a television and an altar. She spent her time saying the rosary by candlelight and watching *Magnum P.I.*, her favourite show.

The bedroom opened into a small, windowless antechamber that housed a cedar closet for her cotton saris and luggage. I hung three Indian prints on the wall in an effort to make it more home-like. As a teenager I thought she lived in near poverty; she thought she lived a life of privilege and thanked God every day. Her food, shelter, and medical expenses were taken care of, and she made weekly phone calls to her daughter Rita in Delhi to make sure the remittances had been received. I had no idea where her other four daughters lived or what they did. Their names were Violet, Mary, Iris, and Rose. We heard that Amah's husband died at a home for disenfranchised men in New Delhi a few years after she immigrated, and that Violet died of cancer soon afterwards. The only photo Amah had in her room was a pre-school photo of me wearing blue Oshkosh overalls. She kept it in a plastic frame, nailed into the stucco between the television and the altar.

Eleven years after Amah's immigration, my parents divorced. Mom moved into a townhouse down the street, and for the next seven years Amah, Dad, and I would form an unorthodox nuclear family—a south Indian Catholic, a Jew, and a lonely child. My bedroom was two floors above Amah's, at the front of the house. In summer the ivy would grow thick, and I could barely see outside my bay window. Amah's room became my escape, a safe haven that smelled of must and the betel nut mixed with tobacco that she would chew for a mild high, staining her mouth a permanent red. She became my family then. "*Ro mat, beti*," she would say, the only woman there to urge me not to cry as she folded her betel nut and tobacco into a paan in the darkness of that basement room.

We spent time together in the kitchen, she on a worn wicker chair pushed against the wall below our wall-mounted phone, me eating her home-made rajma chawal at the white kitchen counter. During Christmas dinner and Passover she refused to eat with us at the same dining table she used to sleep under, instead taking her plate of food to the privacy of her basement room.

Amah decided to retire when I was too old to be fed every meal and when I preferred the company of friends to our shared space in the kitchen. I never thought that she would leave us. It was devastating, but I had little time to consider the vacuum created by her departure to Delhi. Our family friends and neighbours asked after her: "How's Amah?" But my father had already begun searching for a replacement, and I just felt hollow whenever her name was mentioned. She had lived in Toronto for thirteen years, a

landed immigrant who never chose to sponsor her children.

Amah was replaced by a Jamaican woman named Angela. She left her six-year-old son behind in Port Antonio to inherit Amah's basement apartment with attached cedar closet. She made the best spaghetti and meat sauce, but she didn't love me. Amah had raised me, rubbing my infant arms with Johnson & Johnson baby oil to stimulate growth, putting gold jewellery aside for the dowry she imagined I would have as an adult.

Amah-less, I began to notice women always on the move outside my bay window—pushing children in light-framed strollers, helping them out of minivans along with bags of groceries, answering the door in striped-cotton T-shirts and flip-flops. They drove and had friends and went out on weekends (to sing karaoke at the strip malls at Bathurst and Wilson). They were a new kind of Amah, supported by social networks, mobile. Young. Ninety percent of domestic caregivers in Canada were Filipino women, brought into the country by nanny agencies and church networks, Olivias and Joannas who, in the words of one British journalist, "rubbed in the sore point that the feminism of the 1970s would have been broken by the insoluble problem of how to continue career and family if domestic servitude hadn't been neatly passed from one group of women to another."

A young Filipino man was interviewed in the *Georgia Straight* about the difficulties reconnecting with his mother after she sponsored him to Canada. She was required to work twenty-four months in a three-year period before applying for landed immigrant status, and only then was she able to sponsor him. He was six when she left him, twelve when they reunited. The difficulties of their lost time haunted him even in adulthood.

A BBC photographer did a photo essay on a Filipino nanny named Josie Pingkihar, working in Hong Kong. Of the US$470 she made a month, $390 was remitted to her family. With $80 a month in pocket money, she cared for a six-year-old Chinese girl and slept on the floor of her bedroom, much like Amah and me. Her own children had started calling her "Aunty." In 2005 Filipino nannies sent home US$10 billion from around the globe. According to the Central Bank of the Philippines, women caring for other women's children contributed 13.2 percent to the country's economic growth.

Amah came out of retirement when I was fifteen. She phoned my father from Delhi and told him that she missed me. She moved back as if she'd never left. However, the Amah who came back to a half-empty stucco

house was no longer the woman who rubbed my arms with baby oil, but someone I would begin introducing as my grandmother, out of a combination of guilt for having a nanny and pride for someone I loved. She had lived for two years with her daughter Rita and Rita's husband, Cheena.

It was unclear if the money she had earned in Toronto was in her own bank account or theirs.

Amah had aged, and as a result she no longer had specific duties. She would come to my bedroom in the mornings of my years in high school, letting in the dog as she told me to wake up, balancing on the thick soles of her bare feet, which were made rough by years of not wearing shoes. Her place in my room was a pine rocking chair with a quilted floral pillow. She would sit down in the chair and undo the massive bun carefully pinned to the back of her head. Her hair was still black, but thinning. Amah would pull it down past her shoulders and place strands of hair across her lap. She had bulked it up with extensions, bought at a Jamaican hair salon on St. Clair Avenue, down the street from the 7-Eleven. Since none of us knew her age it was estimated to be somewhere around sixty. A birth date was chosen randomly—December 1—halfway between my father's and mine.

As soon as I got my driver's licence, I began driving her to Gerrard Street on the weekends. Saturdays had been her market days, when we would go to Little India for vegetables and bhel poori at Bombay Bhel. Now she would sit peacefully beside me in a sari and green jacket as I drove the two of us down the Danforth. We drank south Indian coffee and ate dosas at the Madras Dhaba. Afterwards we would cruise the video stores for the newest Bollywood titles. It was my way of reconnecting her with her south Indian roots, the next level after hanging Indian prints on her bedroom wall.

After graduating from high school, I was accepted into a university in England. The year I left was the year that my father's girlfriend moved in. Amah's work now involved making the occasional cup of tea and cooking whenever she felt the desire to. Her monthly wage remained the same. She continued her walks to the 7-Eleven and Loblaws, but she stayed in her basement room more and more. My father and his girlfriend were both empty nesters who had inherited my nanny, and Amah's Tupperwared Indian food remained untouched in the fridge. It was in that year Amah made her second, and last friend, in twenty-three years.

Joanne was completing her doctorate in economics at the University of Toronto. She worked part time as a teaching assistant and part time in my father's office. During my school terms in England, it was Joanne who

earned Amah's trust and offered the support I wished I could give her. In the middle of winter, thin, blond Joanne would help Amah, increasingly arthritic, into her second-hand Saab, which smelled of cigarettes, and drive her to Loblaws, or the bank, or Little India.

One holiday, Amah began rubbing her knees and told my father that the flights of stairs had become too much. Whenever I was at home I sat at the foot of her wicker chair and rested my head on her legs, offering to massage them. After all, it was my growing up that led to her redundancy. When I went back to England, it was Joanne's idea that Amah join the South Asian Women's Association. Joanne drove her to a community centre near Bloor and Lansdowne once a month. After the tenth time Amah told Joanne and my father that she didn't want to go back. Why waste her time with a bunch of old women gossiping about their husbands, she said. Hers was already dead. Anyway, he was someone she would rather forget. Amah returned to her basement room, the monthly remittances to Rita, and her daily contact with love—Joanne.

Dad told me he was letting go of Amah in the fall. The ivy covering the house had turned and the neighbourhood's nannies were busy seeing their wards off to school. Amah didn't want to go back to India. At twenty-three, I didn't want her to go either. I resented my father for forcing her retirement after two decades of service. She was my grandmother, our responsibility—Amah to countless neighbours and friends. How could she be sent away? But there was no choice. Even though she had savings, she couldn't manage an apartment on her own. Amah had no other friends and family in Canada. No network beyond our house, the 7-Eleven and the discount shops on St. Clair and Gerrard where she would haggle for goods. But there was another reason she had to leave, more painful than the logistics of surviving on her own. I too wanted my own life, and there was no room for my nanny in a grown-up world. I related to Rushdie's narrator in "The Courter": "For years now I've been meaning to write down the story of Certainly-Mary, our ayah, the woman who did as much as my mother to raise my sisters and me." Twenty-three years after immigrating, Amah would go home to India. Remitted. Returned.

LAXMI NAGAR LIES IN THE NORTH END of New Delhi, on the eastern side of the Jamuna. The lower-middle-class neighbourhood is squeezed between a

congested roadway, funnelling traffic from the bridge, and the exposed sandy banks of the river. It takes forty minutes to reach Amah from my maternal grandparents' home—Amah, my other grandmother, now living in an apartment with her blood daughter. The market below her apartment is crowded with clothing shops and general stores selling her beloved betel nut and tobacco.

The taxi stops in front of a low-rise block of apartments. Rita is waiting at the bottom of a concrete staircase. She is now in her late thirties; a little younger than Amah was when she came to Canada in 1980. She has dark skin and sad eyes. Whenever I phoned for Amah, I spoke to Rita, and now, greeting her, I feel the shame of a cowering dog that knows it has transgressed. Somewhere, I always knew I took this woman's mother away from her. Now, at our convenience, it is this daughter who will care for the aging mother who never wanted to return.

Rita leads me up the stairs to a double entrance, a locked iron gate with a wooden door behind. A young woman answers the door wearing a salwar kameez and dupatta tied as if she's been working, sleeves and hair pulled back. She is Amah's maid, Sangeeta. Amah's own domestic servant. Sangeeta lets us in. The apartment has three bedrooms and a narrow living room painted cream. A small balcony overlooks the telephone lines and market below. One bedroom is Rita's, one is Amah's and the third is devoted to Rita's shrine—an extensive collection of Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist images placed in an aluminum mandir.

"*Devyani ayaa*?" I can hear Amah ask if I've come as Rita leads the way.

"*Hah, Amahji*." I've come, I say. The only reason my Hindi is alive is because we've spoken it together since I was a baby.

She's excited, sitting on her single bed, much thinner than I remember. It has been two years, and although I've spoken to her on the phone, I've never met her outside of the home we shared together. Our home.

"*Bheto, rani. Bheto*." She pats the bed as she barks orders. "*Arre Sangeeta, chai banayo*!" Someone else can make the tea.

There is a white dog tied outside on the balcony, barking incessantly. Rita's Pomeranian, Lily. There's an Alsatian as well, a large female named Nancy. She sits loyally at Amah's feet and reminds me of the golden retriever Amah left behind. Rita disappears into the kitchen. Only then do I feel comfortable hugging Amah, but what I really want to do is put my head on her lap and sleep like a baby. Instead I examine her room: a television, her

own bathroom, a ceiling fan. Screwed into the wall is a white shelf, and on it is her altar, a perfect reproduction of the one in her stucco Toronto room. At least St. Anthony and the Virgin protect her in Laxmi Nagar, I think. There is only one photo on the wall, above a light switch glowing red, and it's of me. It's the same preschool photo in blue Oshkosh that has always been in her room. I wish I could give this woman everything, but I cannot blame my father for wanting his freedom.

"*Daddy thik hai? Patricia thik hai?*" She listens intently to news from home.

"Are you okay, Amah?"

"*Kya Karo?*" What can I do? she says. She gives her shoulders a disheartened shrug as she takes betel nut out of a plastic case normally used for film. "*Daddy nahin rakha*." Daddy didn't keep me.

I listen as she tells me how much she detests India. The food is expensive: rice, meat. The phone gets cut if she doesn't pay extra. She misses Canada. But I look around, and she owns this apartment, she has people to care for her, we send her money to help her out, and I realize it's more than food and comfort she craves, it's being Amah. Her home hasn't been taken away from her; her purpose has.

Rita comes in with tea and snacks, and I let go of Amah's hand. Amah gives me a gold necklace with a pendant shaped like three Victoria head coins. She asks me when I'm going to get married.

"When you have a home and husband, I'll come and stay with you," she says, smiling. She chews her paan and refuses to eat, insisting I do. Rita sips her tea and tells me that Amah loves to watch the Discovery channel. When Amah's busy packing away her betel nut and tobacco, Rita looks right at me for the first time, and asks me the only thing she will ever ask me.

"Sponsor me."