3-1-2003

Understanding India

Audrianne Porter

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol23/iss1/28

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inscape by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Sarah went to India. That's what she always told people. In all the stupid get-to-know-you games where everyone is supposed to say something unique about himself, hers was always, “I lived in India for three years.”

And well-meaning people always asked, “And how did you like that?”

Her placid blue eyes would look off just above their right shoulder and she would say, “It was a good experience,” which is what she had learned to say when asked to describe something difficult and confusing to someone who didn’t care anyway. And they would nod as if that was an adequate response because it was really all the response they wanted.

Sometimes they would follow it up with, “Was your dad in the military?” and she would say, “No, it was just my dad’s business that moved us around a lot.” Sometimes she just said, “Yeah.”

She had lived in India and Texas and L.A. and now she was in Ridgeland, South Carolina, living on the edge of a saltwater river in a house her grandparents bought decades ago. She was staying with her aunt and uncle and her cousin Annie until her parents found a house. She remembered she had liked her aunt when they came for Christmas a few times when Sarah was younger, but, for the most part, they were strangers
to her. Sarah supposed that South Carolina was her home when people asked because she was born there and had aunts and uncles and cousins there, but the Spanish moss hanging from the trees and the white, waxy magnolias didn't bring a feeling of familiarity. Nothing really did that. Her dad told her that people who moved around a lot were well-rounded individuals and good at making friends. Her dad also said they would stop moving some day.

2

Sarah pulled out a navy blue address book from her suitcase and flipped through the pages. She saw addresses and phone numbers from India and Texas and California, but she knew she'd never use them. It was just part of the ceremony of moving away.

The people she didn't really know yet would say, “You're moving? Already? You just got here. Well, here, let me give you my address. Keep in touch.”

And they smiled while they said it, but something inside her would always feel uncomfortable and hot and strained as they wrote in her navy blue book and when it was over she would feel tired and she would hope no one else would try to be kind because it always made her so tired.

A few reckless, impulsive times she had dialed one of the telephone entries in her book. She would fill up with a strange excitement at the thought of talking to someone as a friend, of asking and being asked genuine questions, and for a few moments she would almost believe it. So she would pick up the receiver and dial, but always, just before the last digit, the play would run through her head.

“Hello?” Let's say it was Becky from Texas.

“Hi, is Becky there?” Sarah would nervously fidget with the address book or a loose thread on her pants. And she would always be pacing.

“This is Becky.”

“Hi, Becky. This is Sarah.” Then nothing. There would be a pause and Sarah would hear maybe a weather forecaster's voice floating in the background.

“Um . . . Sarah Robbins,” she would stammer as the blood flooded to her cheeks.

“. . . Oh . . . uh . . . Sarah! Hi, how are you?”

And that was when she got tired, when she heard the tension in the girl's voice and could even see the polite, forced smile as she tried to
think of the right questions to ask. She could even hear her after she hung up the phone, talking in the kitchen to her mother.

"Becky, who was that?"

"This girl named Sarah Robbins. Her family moved a couple months ago. Do you remember?"

And Becky's mother would scrunch up her face and look up to the ceiling and then shrug her shoulders and continue peeling potatoes.

"Were you very good friends with her?"

"Um . . . She was nice."

Sarah slumped down in the far corner of an old booth at Mudcat's Diner observing the new arrivals. Annie had overlooked Sarah's reluctance and dragged her out of the house insisting that meeting new people would be fun. Sarah had her doubts. The plastic covering on her seat was in the process of disintegrating and the rough edges rubbed against the back of her legs. Annie had left her seat next to Sarah to mingle with the rest of the group.

Annie was easy with things. She was good at talking. She drew people in with her words and intense, bright eyes.

"Like one of those Sirens in the Odyssey," Sarah thought. "The Sirens probably had beautiful hair flowing down beautifully feminine shoulders too."

Sarah watched a boy walk confidently into the diner and immediately approach the group, which had been slowly gathering for the past fifteen minutes. Sarah watched him go from one person to the next, meeting them and then carrying on a perfectly appropriate three-minute conversation before moving on. Annie was talking, but Sarah wasn't paying attention. She was vaguely aware that she was being introduced to the group and Annie was making some reference to India. Sarah uncomfortably smiled at the listeners as if to confirm whatever Annie had just told them.

She suddenly realized the boy had exited a conversation and was making his way to her corner booth. She involuntarily shifted her legs across the rough seat. Her breath shortened and she turned to stare out the wall-length window at the drizzling summer rain, pretending not to see his intimidating figure in her peripheral vision.

"I'm Adam. What's your name?" he said as he plopped down across from her as if she were an old friend. Sarah knew there was no question
in his mind whether Sarah, or anyone else for that matter, wanted to have a conversation with him and even share their booth with him. He had never encountered an exception and his ease mocked her discomfort.

His question was simple, but apparently overwhelming because Sarah couldn’t speak. She mumbled something in response to his few polite questions and then sunk further down in her seat as he touched her elbow with a “Well, it was nice to meet you,” and moved on to the next person, which happened to be Annie still jabbering in the neighboring booth.

“So natural,” she thought, while she mentally crucified herself for the completely forgettable first impression she had just made. She let all her air out with one frustrated huff. “Why should this time be any different?” She watched him the rest of the night as the newcomers of summer were introduced to the regulars. And she envied everyone who felt his equal. The chief offender, of course, was her own flesh and blood, her cousin Annie.

After they got back from the party, Sarah tried to escape off to the marsh behind the house to breathe, but Annie accompanied her without an invitation. Once each month, during spring tide, the river receded and left a long stretch of marsh naked and muggy. Annie plopped herself down next to Sarah and they watched fiddler crabs run in and out of the sandy black mud while Annie effortlessly carried the conversation. Sarah admired and hated her ability at the same time. It was undeniably comfortable around Annie, not like around other people when awkward silences hung in the air and everything felt so forced. They tried too hard. But as the two oddly paired cousins sat together, Sarah didn’t try and Annie didn’t have to.

“So what’d ya think of the party?” Annie asked as they settled down in between the wildly positioned weeds. A few random raindrops were still falling.

Sarah shrugged.

“Don’t you hate those stupid get-to-know-you games?” Annie laughed.

“Yeah,” she mumbled. “I do.” She absently scanned the horizon and the slow pace of the river.

After a dozen more attempts at trying to get her cousin to talk, even Annie began to feel a slight challenge. She shifted her position on
the ground and watched a floating branch passing by out on the river. She thought hard until she found something and began again. “And what I really hated was when they had us all go around and say a memory cue to help people remember our name. Man, I couldn’t think of anything.” She turned to Sarah for a response.

But the summer humidity was pushing down too hard and Sarah suddenly jumped up and bounded across the marsh, stomping pointlessly on as many fiddler crabs as she could. Silhouetted against the fading sky, trampling through the weedy marsh, Sarah looked rough, exasperated. And Annie, for maybe the first time in her life, felt inadequate for the situation.

“Sarah,” she called, her smile fading, “what are you doing?”

Suddenly Sarah stopped, spun around, and shouted across the marsh, her voice muffled by the humidity, “I don’t CARE if anyone remembers my name! I couldn’t care less if ANYONE EVER remembers my name!”

That night was almost awkward at dinner. Nothing could ever really be awkward with Annie, but for once Annie hadn’t known what to say out on the marsh.

Annie’s mother set down a plate of biscuits next to the greasy fried chicken she was famous for. The table was loaded and Sarah wondered when her aunt would stop bringing out steamy dishes. Sarah had realized soon after she came to Ridgeland that it was a Southern thing, this mass amount of food at every meal. Apparently, it was a point of pride with every Southern cook. She didn’t understand it, coming from a world of microwavable dinners, but she liked it. Sometimes her aunt’s frequent stomachaches prevented her from making dinner, but she always apologized profusely and went on and on about not being a decent hostess.

Her face was always pink, permanently tinted, perhaps, by her pots of green beans and black-eyed peas through all those years of cooking luscious Southern meals. She also never quite quit talking and her abundant questions about the party caused Annie to become quieter than usual, while Sarah consumed herself with the movement of the brilliant beta fish swimming around the plant bowl. Finally, the focus of the questions shifted and Annie and her mother carried on in their usual, pleasant manner, joking and laughing and thoroughly enjoying each other’s company. They talked about the preparations for the upcoming crab boil, the leather sandals Annie had just purchased, and the stomachaches Sarah’s aunt seemed to never be
rid of. As soon as Sarah felt she had stayed long enough to avoid any pleas for her to stay longer, she excused herself from the table and left them laughing together in the dining room.

6

Sarah stood awkwardly next to the piano, not quite sure what to do with her hands. It was a late Tuesday afternoon. Her uncle was working and Annie was at volleyball practice. Her aunt was playing the piano, and when Sarah walked through the living room to get a drink in the kitchen, her aunt had asked her to come and sing with her. Sarah tried to refuse, but her aunt seemed so oblivious to any awkwardness inherent in the situation that quite a bit of the awkwardness Sarah was feeling seemed to dissipate. Her aunt swung into “Moon River” and her low alto voice was full and calming. Sarah began singing softly, lips barely moving. She cringed and waited for her aunt to look over and evaluate her poor posture or deliver a reprimand to sing louder. She always got that. “Stop singing like a mouse! What are you afraid of? Just shout it out!” and Sarah would try and fail and get hot inside as everyone gathered around and tried to give her singing tips. “It’s all about support from the diaphragm.” How many times she had heard that!

But as they sang together through “All the Things You Are” and “When I Fall in Love,” Sarah’s aunt never once stopped to critique so Sarah forgot about her volume and posture. As they sang, a gentle smile tugged at the corner of the older woman’s mouth and Sarah wondered if the light reflecting off her glasses looked a little more like a tear. Sarah listened to the words and the harmony her aunt filled in around her soft soprano, and, as the last note faded, Sarah was vaguely aware that her voice had grown almost loud enough to match her aunt’s.

7

Sarah threw Annie’s bedroom door open and then threw in the words, “Adam called for you,” as fast as she could before whipping around to return back down the hallway. She thought she heard Annie say something but decided to ignore it as she headed back to her room.

She sat down at her desk and began her reading assignment: A Tale of Two Cities. She realized after three pages that she hadn’t understood a word and determinedly slammed the book open flat against the desk and bore into the sentences with her eyes.
It wasn’t really Adam. It wasn’t really the boy who came last night. It wasn’t really even the other five people who’d been by in the last forty-eight hours. It was why Annie possessed the innate ability to connect and Sarah didn’t and it was why Sarah knew it would always be that way.

Then came the sound of the doorbell, then the creaking screen, then her aunt’s cheerful Southern greeting, and then . . . Adam’s voice, like all the other voices before, comfortable and excited.

Something rose up through her and stopped at her throat. It was tight and it hurt and she couldn’t swallow as the sound of a third voice, Annie’s, floated down the hallway intermixed with Adam’s laughter. She had said something funny. Annie had said something perfectly funny.

She slid her chair over to the window and watched the mosquitoes buzzing outside. The trees and the river looked beautiful from where she sat in the air-conditioned house, but she knew its deception. The stifling heat and suffocating humidity would drown anyone who stepped outside. Sarah could almost feel it through the window. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe.

Adam and Annie walked outside and into Sarah’s view. Sarah watched the circle of fog on the glass expand and contract in front of her mouth. Annie climbed into Adam’s car and they drove away, neither of them noticing her face in the window.

Sarah’s aunt looked beautiful under the big live oak trees. She just did, beautiful in a motherly way. She was spreading newspaper over three wooden picnic tables in preparation for the crab boil. Sarah was watching from the window. She had gone out earlier to help shuck the corn alongside her aunt, but the mosquitoes had eaten her alive in a matter of seconds, so she was instructed to go inside and apply calamine while the South Carolina “natives” got everything ready. They had been talking about the crab boil for days now and Sarah couldn’t repress her curiosity and even excitement about this family tradition that had never been a tradition for her. Her dad said it was better than Christmas.

Unknown and semiknown relatives slowly gathered to the open yard in between the house and the river. The men were filling up the huge metal pot positioned over the stove while the women brought out cut sausages and corn on the cob. Sarah watched the sun going down behind the river and decided the stinging bugs had reduced their numbers sufficiently for her to
attempt another outing. As she pushed through the screen door to the back porch, she was met by her aunt coming inside, one hand over her abdomen.

“What’s wrong?” Sarah asked as her aunt swept past her into the kitchen.

“Oh, nothin’,” she called back over her shoulder with her same easy smile. “Just these stomachaches. They come and go, usually at the worst times. I’m fine. Just goin’ to lay down for a second.”

Sarah knew there wasn’t much she could do for a sick adult who refused to admit she was sick, so she continued out to the backyard to watch the lively chaos up close. She observed with a smile that the men were decidedly more excited about the live blue crabs in their wooden crates than the children, although all took turns sticking a small twig in the box and watching it break under the crushing power of the claws. The kids would squeal and the men would jump but pretend not to. Sarah peeked over the edge of the crate in time to see one crab grab hold of another crab’s claw and snap it in half. She looked at the exposed gray flesh as the injured crab sunk out of sight beneath the crawling crustaceans. She wondered if it hurt.

Annie walked up to the boiling pot and stole a piece of sausage. She shoved half of it at Sarah and dared her to eat it. A man called LeGrand, apparently Sarah’s great uncle, had dumped an entire bottle of cayenne pepper into the pot to spice things up.

“You gotta know how to flavor it,” she had heard the old men discussing earlier. “That’s what makes all the difference.”

As Sarah bit into it, her eyes began watering and the numbness started to spread to her cheeks and the inside of her lips. Conscious of the eyes upon her, she determinedly ate all of it, trying very hard to act as if she was capable of eating another piece if so called upon.

“Oooh, just like a born and bred crab-eater!” Annie announced loudly. “Mom should’ve seen it.”

Once Sarah could feel her mouth again she said, “Your mom went inside to lay down. She said she had a stomachache.”

“Oh, yeah. She gets these stomachaches lately. Don’t really know what they’re from, but they go away after awhile and she’s good as new.”

“Don’t stick yer fingers in there now. They’ll come right off, ya hear!” the old men warned the little boys who would never have thought about placing their chubby, pink fingers into the mess of vicious saltwater creatures, who sometimes fell to attacking each other while they waited for their imminent death.
Sarah was a quiet but contented observer of all the latent excitement in the humid air. She loved the accent, the slowness, the hospitality of the distantly related Southerners surrounding her.

For the evening’s climax, the men opened the wooden crate with adolescent joy and dumped the frantic crabs into the boiling pot. They struggled silently for a while and then just floated in and among the reddening shrimp and spices. The cooking was timed to perfection, and then the whole lot of boiled sea life was drained and dumped in large piles over the news-covered tables.

A second cousin once removed, Eugene, took great pleasure in showing Sarah how to thrust her thumbs into the middle of the crab’s shell, right between the eyes, and rip back the top to expose the sweet meat inside. There was something disgusting and utterly splendid about it all to Sarah. She ate with fervor and imagined an awakening inside her, true Southern blood flowing a little more freely through her veins.

When she couldn’t eat anymore, she pushed back from the table and surveyed the carnage. Piles of crab and shrimp shells, empty cobs, and sausage skin sat in front of each eater. The reddish-haired man next to her, either a relative or a neighbor, glanced over and declared for the rest of the group to hear, “Well, looky there! Not a bad pile for an India girl. Not bad at all.”

Sarah beamed and felt her face getting red, partly from the spices, but mostly from something else and, in spite of her swollen stomach, she reached out for another crab.

“What?” Sarah looked up in confusion. Cancer. She’d heard the word cancer.

“They’re all at the hospital. She was having those stomachaches and finally went in and they found a tumor. She has a two percent chance of surviving according to one of the doctors. The other three say there’s no way.”

The neighbor lady, possibly a relative (it seemed, last night, that all of Ridgeland was somehow related to her), kept talking as if the talking would help things, but Sarah just stared at a spot on the kitchen wallpaper that was tearing away from the ceiling. The paint was a baby blue underneath. The scent of spicy crab and shrimp still permeated the room from the night before.
“She should be around a couple more years if she starts heavy Chemo,” the concerned neighbor continued. “I just feel so awful about the whole thing. It was just so sudden . . .”

After that, the lady went on forever. The neighbor had accosted Sarah as she walked up the sidewalk to the back door and just spilled everything out before Sarah had a chance to realize that she was being told her aunt had cancer.

“My aunt is going to have Chemo therapy and she will lose her hair.” For some reason, the hair was all Sarah could think of. She kept trying to picture her aunt without any. As the woman continued on with her heartfelt sympathies, Sarah mentally compared it to what it must be like to change an elderly person’s diaper—painfully undignified.

The front screen slamming shut behind someone interrupted Sarah’s Pythagorean theorem exercises. She heard the voices of her cousins talking in the other room and then the door shut again and things were quiet. A few minutes later, banging noises came from the kitchen. Sarah got up and hesitantly walked into the kitchen. Annie turned around with a large smile on her face and a fork in one hand.

“Do you know how to make guacamole? Adam said he loves guacamole and I have no idea how to make it.”

Sarah looked over towards the table at a half smashed avocado, its green and yellow guts clinging to the sides of a bowl.

“So . . . how’s your mom doin’?”

“Isn’t there some kind of mix you’re supposed to use? I can’t find it.”

Annie was attacking the contents of the cupboard with such force that Sarah thought it would come off of the wall. When Annie saw her staring she casually said, “They said we have another two years. She’ll be here for at least one more Christmas. It’s not like I’m losing her right away. I’m staying in school and everything. She’ll probably even be around for graduation . . . .I mean, of course, I wanted my mom to be there for my wedding and my first kid and everything, but . . .”

Annie might as well have been lamenting the fact that a sweater had shrunk in the drier; the emotion just wasn’t right. She sounded, to Sarah, like she was reading a script from a play and doing a bad job of it.
“So Adam asked me if I knew how to make guacamole. I guess he really likes it. You know how to make it, don’t you?”

Something seemed wrong with making a chip dip when her aunt was just diagnosed with cancer, but there was a frantic, pleading look in Annie’s eyes that Sarah had never seen before.

“Sure,” she said as she reached into the next cupboard and brought out Produce Partner’s Great Guacamole mix. She brought it over to the table.

“Just finish mashing it up while I get the mix ready.”

Annie started to stab at the avocado with her fork and then began laughing again. It was a strange laugh, choked or muffled, not like her normal laugh that was always free and uninhibited and filled a house.

“Is it supposed to be this hard?”

Sarah looked over at it and took a couple stabs herself. She bent down and smelt the acidic scent of premature produce.

“Well, maybe it’s not quite ripe? Let’s try another one,” Sarah suggested. She became aware of the distinct feeling that she was talking to a child, being careful not to disappoint her. The fate of the whole world suddenly rested squarely on the shoulders of the unripe avocado.

“This is the only one I have. I just bought one on my way home today.” Annie’s smile was fading.

“Well, I’ll pick another one up tomorrow.”

“No! I have to . . . I mean, I want to make it now. This one will work,” Annie said as she tried in vain to control her rising voice. She picked up the fork and began stabbing away again. Sarah stood silent on the cold kitchen floor for what seemed like a long time.

Annie’s head bent forward and the fork dropped to the floor. She crumpled into a chair as her arm fell against the messy bowl, sliding it across the table. Sarah started for her. She felt like she should touch her but didn’t know how. Standing there while Annie cried was awkward, but leaving the room didn’t feel right either. After three minutes or so, Annie raised her red, streaked face. She apologized as she left the kitchen and headed down the hall to her room.

“We’ll make guacamole tomorrow,” she said.

The next few days were strange. Adam stopped coming over, probably because he, like Sarah, had no idea what to do. Sarah didn’t blame
him, but still found herself hoping, for Annie’s sake, that he would come to see her or at least call. Annie acted differently, of course. She always held on to herself, but it was a delicate balancing act to Sarah.

One night, a couple days after her aunt had begun Chemo, Sarah woke at 1:30 in the morning. It took her fuzzy mind a second to identify the sound that had woken her. Quiet sobbing was coming from Annie’s bedroom. Sarah lay on her bed staring up at the ceiling as the yellow porch light shone through the window. She listened to the sound for a few minutes and turned to watch the giant bugs flying around the light in the hot summer night outside. Her throat got tight again. Tears ran down her cheeks and landed on her pillow.

It was hard for Sarah to slowly pull back the blanket and walk down the hall to Annie’s room. She felt like an intruder, trespassing into a private world, not knowing if there would be a place for her when she got there.

Annie was on the floor, face buried in the mattress. Sarah stood still in the darkened room for a minute and watched the movement and rhythm of Annie’s childlike shoulders as they rose and fell with her sobs. Finally, she reached out and touched Annie’s arm.

Annie immediately whirled around and began wiping her face as she said a little too quickly, “Oh, Sarah! You scared me. What’s up? Whaddaya need?”

Sarah felt the power of the temptation to just let Annie carry it as usual. Annie was the one good with words. Annie had other friends and people to lean on. She would be fine. Sarah knew Annie would let her leave right then if she wanted, both pretending, and both knowing it.

Instead, she looked at her cousin, straight in those intensely bright but reddened eyes. Now it was Annie’s turn to make a decision and Sarah was waiting for her to make it. Both cousins stood facing each other . . . hesitating . . . awkward. Even though the room was dark, Sarah saw it happen. Annie’s face lost the smile and her chin began to quiver. They both bent down to the edge of the bed. Annie slowly crumpled down onto Sarah’s lap and cried for a long time. Sarah felt the dampness of the tears spreading out over the leg of her pajama pants. Her face trembled, but she was very still, afraid something would break if she moved.

After a while, Annie turned to look up at her. The sound of the buzzing mosquitoes outside filled up the room.

“Will you tell me about India?”
Sarah’s usual, preconstructed answer came to the tip of her tongue, but then it stopped. She sat for a moment on the bed while Annie looked at her and waited. Annie’s eyes had the same intensity Sarah had always seen in them, but they were more searching and somehow more familiar than before.

Still being careful not to move, Sarah told Annie about India until she was stopped by the sound of slow, heavy breathing.