

# Maya's Diary

October 28, 1984

A brand-new diary

How to begin.

*Click.*

How. To. Begin.

*Click. Click. Click.*

I like the sound of a ballpoint pen.

*Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.*

I'll start with the date:

October 28, 1984.

Now the place:

Floating in air over ice.

Thirty-seven thousand feet, the pilot said.

But where exactly?

What latitude and longitude?

Is it Canada or Greenland

that fell away like a great sinking heart?

Is that a rising sun or a setting one?

The golden rays cut loose from India's plains.

Where am I really?

Nowhere, I guess.

Somewhere between an old life and a new.



# Salutation

Every diary needs one.  
A word of greeting to begin it all  
the gentle endearment—

*Dear*

(My *D* bulges into the  
margin like a soft balloon.)

Now, a name.  
For the one who will listen.

Anne Frank used *Kitty*. The cat left behind, I  
once believed. I was wrong. It was just a name. I  
could use *Smoke*, my real cat left behind, but his  
eyes are too pale. You can't confide to yellow  
irises and patchy fur. Besides, the cat likes to  
carry the dead in his mouth.

Just a month ago I might have used *Helen*. My  
only friend. *Helen of Elsinore*, we used to joke. *The  
face that launched a thousand tractors*. But even in the  
country, the beautiful never understand the lonely.

I think of *Michael*.

(I can't stop myself.)

Backrow Michael, sitting behind me in homeroom.  
Blue eyes. Blond hair. Perfect white  
teeth gnawing on his lower lip. Angelic. I  
imagine the entry:



*Dear Michael,  
I am flying and thinking of you. This is what I  
remember: You took my braid and wrapped it  
around your neck like a black satin ribbon. You  
pulled my face to your cheek. You breathed on  
me, whispering, Who are you? When you bit  
my hair, I thought I'd die. Pleasure. Shame.  
Your lips. On me.*

But you can't address a boy in a diary, even if you  
like him.

*There's a black snake around my neck, Michael*  
shouted. *It's choking me!* Everyone in the hallway  
looked. Laughed. Michael pretended to wrestle  
with my braid until I slipped and fell. On top of  
him. My sari unraveling like I was coming apart.

No, you can't address a boy, even if you think you  
love him.

And especially, if he loves someone else.



# Dear Diary

This remains the simple choice.  
The anonymous confidante.  
Clear and to the point.

But then what's the point of private words  
lingering on the page, undirected? There must be  
a listener. *The truest friend*, Anne had insisted.

Yes. A friend. And now I know.

I write the letter *M*.  
Four strokes with the pen,  
two peaks, a mountain of a letter.

The letter *a* follows—lowercase,  
the necessary vowel.

And then I mean to write a *t*  
and then a second *a*—  
a perfectly balanced word for my longing:

*Mata*

The name I call my mother.

But my hand slips or is it my mind? The pen dips  
on the page, ink fading with the sudden upturned  
sweep of a *y*. A second *a* appears:



*Maya*

The name that only my mother calls me.

The pen continues to move across the empty page.

*Remember.*

*Remember that I love you.*



# Ghost

Can the dead really speak?  
Through the hand and pen of the living?

A mother's voice floats in from the edge of the  
world. A daughter hears the whispers.

Or is it loneliness that conjures  
the loved one from the ash?

No one wants to be forgotten.  
Not the dead or the living.

*I loved you too, Mata.  
But why did you do what you did?*



## Northern lights

The pilot steers along ribbons of light. Green polar flames rippling in the dark. Long silken scarves floating on the air. It's like watching the wind on fire. Pulsing.

Bapu sleeps beside me. His face is peaceful for the first time in weeks. Perhaps he's dreaming this aurora borealis into being—streams of wedding garlands waving like underwater weeds. Guests dancing.

My father's yellow turban rests on his knee. *A closed lotus blossom*, my mother had once described it, her hands tracing the folds, looking for its beginning and its end.

I don't often see my father's hair uncovered. Only on Saturday mornings when Mata washed his belief in the bathroom sink. The long black river flowing from his head. As long as his faith.

I caught glimpses of the tender ritual when I passed down the hall. Bapu, in a chair, leaning back against the white porcelain. My mother's hands pouring water over the brow, the crown, and behind the ears. He smiles with the anointment. He laughs when the water trickles down his neck.



And then she combs. Pulling the wide teeth  
against the scalp. Pouring oil until the strands  
are thick and iridescent. Over and over Mata draws a  
wooden comb through my father's hair. His  
measured self.



# Aurora

I shake my father awake.  
He stirs and opens his eyes.  
*What is it, Jiva?*

(*This* is my real name.)

*Look.*

I point outside.  
He leans across me, presses his  
face to the small plastic oval.

The sky shudders in coloured waves.

*It's beautiful*, he whispers.  
*Like a rainbow coming apart.*

(Like a sari unwound.)

*Peaceful.*

His words brush the window.  
*She would have loved this.*

He grips the paper-wrapped box  
balanced on his left knee.  
What remains of *she*.



We are bringing Mata home

In a box Bapu holds under his arm.  
An urn. Brass.

He held it on his lap all the way  
from Elsinore to Winnipeg.  
One and a half hours on the bus.  
On his lap in the taxi.  
He can't bear to be away from her.

*This is my wife*, he explains to airport security.  
*Be careful with her. Her name is Leela.*

The blond man in uniform hikes up his blue pants.  
*I don't care if her name is Sally-come-lately.*

They x-ray her anyway. Someone shakes the box.  
*Can't be too careful these days.*

My father stares angrily but says nothing. His  
body is in pain as if it's his own heart they're  
tossing.

*This is my wife*, he pleads with the flight attendant.

*I understand*, she says. *But for everyone's safety . . .*  
He slides the box under the seat for takeoff.

*I'm sorry*, he whispers to my mother. *You should  
never be at my feet.*



*Dear Maya,  
Watch over your father.  
You will need each other.*



# Blame

Bapu is heavy with grief and remorse.  
Blame too.

*Where were you? Why did you leave your mother alone?  
What were you doing that was more important than her?*

*I am not her caretaker!* I shouted before running out  
of the house into the fields.

My father claims Mata lost heart while waiting for  
me.

(What was she playing?  
The Bach that I loved?  
Schubert?  
No, it must have been  
Beethoven.)

And where was I?  
Why didn't I rush home  
like every other afternoon?

Because I had something to do.  
I had to find out if my suspicions were right.



## The piano

My father bought the piano when things got bad.

They're cheap in the country.

Every old farmhouse has one.

Always a piano for sale somewhere on the prairies.

Two hundred dollars.

And it's yours.

Mata insisted it be carried up the stairs to the yellow wallpapered bedroom on the second floor. The railing and a piece of a wall had to be removed to make it fit. *I want it in a room with a door*, she insisted.

It helped for a while. Instead of finding Mata crying in the kitchen every afternoon, I came home to music. The second-floor window propped open. A waltz carried on the wind.

When she wasn't playing, she hummed. My father and I exchanged smiles. Maybe this would help. Forget the loneliness. Forget about going home.

But over the years, the music got louder. It was angry, weeping, beautiful, and sad. I was frightened and thrilled at the same time. She played with such passion that I couldn't believe it was my mother. This small quiet woman who sat



at dinner with her hands folded like an old-fashioned schoolgirl. Refusing food. Eyes staring ahead, always open, wet with tears. Even her weeping was controlled. But on the keyboard she was possessed.

Above the kitchen the floorboards groaned with music. Some days she even forgot and called me Jiva.

The day I heard Bapu weep at my mother's declaration, I knew things wouldn't get better.

*There won't be another child, Amar, she said in English. I have nothing to feed him.*

She put her hand on her breast to show him it was flat.

My mother never spoke Punjabi again. Hindi became the language of her demise.



# Beethoven

Piano Sonata no. 23 in F Minor.

Twenty-three minutes from the first to last touch of her fingers on the keys. Twenty-three minutes from the bus stop to home. Up the single-lane gravel road into Mata's music.

I hear it before I see the window propped open with a book. The melody escaping under the glass. Winding between the trees, a grove of oaks, and into the open fields. Like a scarf loosened from a woman's neck, the music floats on air.

It is always Beethoven after 3:00.

*The sonatas, Mata explains, are my favourite. Four movements. Like the four elements or the four directions.*

The bus drops me at the end of our road and I run *North* on the freshlyturned *Earth*.

*But Beethoven's Appassionata has only three movements, Maya. The allegro assai is quick, lively and cheerful. The andante con moto-attacca is slower, hymn-like but still demanding to be listened to. But the allegro, ma non troppo-presto is to be played with passion. Like time is running out.*



If I leave the road and cross the pasture, I can catch the last.

*There are only three. Like the stages of a life.*

I pick up the pace, my feet springing out of the field's autumn stubble. The andante con moto calls to me. *Hurry*, the piano urges. *Run, Maya, run.*

When I reach the house, the last chords strike like prairie thunder and without a breath the allegro, ma non troppo begins. In the kitchen I kick my shoes into a dusty corner and take the stairs two at a time. At the top of the landing, a door swings open and I see Mata's long black braid swinging with the metronome. Arms fly out from her body, hands clawing the black and white keys. She plays as if the house might fall and only her music keeps it standing.

For the last two minutes, the sonata beats out my breaths. The music despairs. The building madness—the unhinged mind seeking order in music.

But there is something else too.

Something buried deep in the allegro, in the short melodic fragments. Is it love I hear? Not the



sweet melody of early devotion when hearts cannot  
imagine their cracks, but a complex love:  
disappointments and betrayals tempered over time.  
Acceptance.



My parents had the most romantic love story

Like *Romeo and Juliet*. Warring families.  
Montagues and Capulets. Khuranas and Dwivedis  
plotting against each other, discouraging the  
young lovers.

But Mata told me he looked like a warrior.  
Tall and regal. A turban of molten bronze.

And my father, when pressed to remember,  
says my mother glowed as if her body was the only  
source of light in the hall. All shadows  
disappeared. Then the rest of the world followed.

There was only her.

*Leela*. Meaning “play.”



They meet at a wedding

A good omen according to my Hindu mother.  
*Auspicious.* She is hiding behind a pillar ribboned  
with green vines. Jasmine blossoms fill the hall  
with honey sweetness.

*No, it was the scent of your mother,* Bapu insists.

His turban ought to have warned her away.  
The families would never allow it. A marriage  
between a Sikh and a Brahman would be full of conflicts.

But my mother is reckless. She rearranges her  
sari. Silk the colour of a sunset. She steps from  
behind the column and dares to look my  
father straight in the eye.

From that moment on, he is lost.

*Drowned,* Mata had claimed.

*Saved,* Bapu says.

Or was it doomed?



## The Courtship

For two months Leela is not allowed to leave the house unaccompanied. Her mother warns,  
*You will be dead to me if you marry a Sikh.*

In my father's house, his mother doesn't talk to him for six weeks.

*Actually, I enjoyed the quiet.*

Bapu's father is not silent. He lectures that a Sikh's duty is to God. His son's lust for the Brahman girl will bring about my father's spiritual downfall. He quotes the poet Bullashah:

“Be content with thy circumstances,  
Do not be blinded by glamour,  
Fix thine attention on the seed,  
Ignore the branches, leaves, and fruit.  
That which comes and goes is transient,  
The wise do not become attached to it.”

My father is not moved.  
God is in his love for Leela.

My grandfather tries to scare my father.  
My mother is an example of Maya,  
the world of illusion, not the true world  
of God. *A Sikh attached to Maya cannot escape  
the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Amar, you  
will be bound to the Wheel of Existences!*



But the couple will not relent. They choose to believe that their parents' condemnation is for show. To save face, both families must express their displeasure at the union.

Three months later there is a wedding.  
Leela holding his gaze.  
My father rendered blind.

*Amar.* Means “*immortal.*”



*Dear Maya,  
Love is like watching the approach of  
one's beloved. Our hands reaching out.  
A willingness to wait all eternity for the  
touch.*



## At the Occasion of Bliss

The Sikh and Hindu families both celebrate.  
They can't help themselves. All are swept up in the  
wedding drama like a storm that blows in one  
direction.

The groom arrives on horseback wearing a turban  
of red. The couple walks around the sacred fire.  
My father's scarf is tied to my mother's sari.

*O God! I lovingly surrender to you.*

To love each other is to love the Divine.

There are moments during the celebrations  
when Mata's family whispers whisper that  
Sikhs are really just Hindus anyway. Just taller  
and a bit arrogant. And lacking in religious  
imagination.

Bapu's family whispers in kind that  
Hindus are just un-evolved Sikhs. A people who  
had yet to cast off their pantheon of gods and  
goddesses. Still too romantic in their religious  
philosophy.

But during the days of the wedding, they accept  
each other's shortcomings. Families are united.  
A peace is necessary.



And since the couple is emigrating, there will be few reminders of the ill-thought marriage. They will all go on as before. Ignoring the new relatives.

Before my parents leave for Canada, advice is given: *Insist she become a Sikh*, my grandfather tells his son. *Only then will you have real peace.*

Amar's answer: *I'll not step inside a temple without her.*

My mother's family says nothing.  
Leela is no longer their daughter.  
Already dead to them.



What are you writing?

*A family history.*

*Ab*, Bapu says, looking down at the box on his lap.

He shifts in the narrow airplane seat, moving my mother so she rests on his chest. He closes his eyes and goes back to sleep.

The sky outside the window blackens like soot.  
A nightmare erasing the colours of the wind.



We begin in Elsinore

Seventy-five miles southwest of Winnipeg. A prairie town where sunflowers grow in neat, tall rows. The sun drags the yellow faces from east to west. The faithful adoration of the masses.

There are one thousand, four hundred, and seventy-two Christian-like souls living in this oddly named town. A Danish settler's choice? Or a literary scholar who saw a castle in the clouds?

(Helen thinks a spinster English teacher crafted the lofty name and then went slowly mad with small town bordeom and the lack of marriageable men.)

There are also three pagans in this community.  
That's us.

We rent an old farmhouse near the cemetrey.

*(Just until we can buy our  
own piece of land, Leela.)*

Bapu runs Jack's Mechanic Shop. A lease-to-own deal negotiated with Jack's widow, Lucy, just before she moved to Florida. My father's offer for the shop was the only one.

Mata's job is to take care of the home, her husband, a yard full of chickens, and two goats.  
And me.



## Fate

A man steps on the moon at the exact  
moment I am born.

July 20, 1969. 9:56 p.m. (CDT)

When my mother learns this, she puts her lips  
against my cheek and says, *Auspicious.*

I cry as if the man is walking over me  
instead of the grey ash of Earth's satellite.

*You will fly,* Mata whispers.

My eyes are gelled. Closed like a kitten's.



## Birth day

I arrive at the Brandon Hospital. Glistening like the moon on a summer's night. Bapu says that I'm so white I must be a changeling. A switch in the womb. A fairy child. A delusion.

*But Mata says, Wait, Amar. It's just chalk dusting her skin. The chalk from her story written across the sky. The goddess Maya's hand is telling her future.*

*Rubbish, Bapu says. There is only one God.*

They are both surprised to hear Amar say this. He has always been tolerant of Leela's beliefs. But today, they hear the voice of his father.

*Let me clean her,* says the redheaded nurse. She wipes away the sticky vernix, the chalk dust, the story written in the clouds, and then I take my proper colour.

The nurse holds me up for inspection. Bapu nods his approval.

I am dark. Dark as Manitoban soil.  
The earth he wants to own.



On the Eleventh day

*Let's name her Neil.  
After the astronaut.*

*You're delirious, Leela.*

*What about Luna?*

*No. My daughter will  
not have a crazy name.*

*Then let's give her a Canadian-Indian name:  
Strong-Arm-Swinging-at-Moon.*

*Are you mad? Did your brain fall  
out with the baby? Listen, wife.  
I have chosen a name.*

*What?*

*Jiva.*

*No, Amar! It's a boy's name.*

*It's a name for girls as well.*

*I will not name my daughter  
after your father!*

*We'll talk about it later, Leela.  
When you're back to normal.*

*We'll talk about it now!  
The child should have a beautiful name.*



*It is beautiful!*

*It is a Sikh name.*

*It will offend my goddess.*

*Leela, there is only one God!*

With the utterance of these words a second time,  
my parents' world tilts on its axis. The horizon  
moves. Somewhere a river floods over a field.  
Islands are forming, drifting.

*Maya. I will call her Maya, my mother whispers.*  
*It is her destiny.*

My father goes out the back door. His black eyes  
red with anger. *Maya*, he spits. *Goddess of Illusion.*  
Not reality.

He remembers what his father said:

The world is a dream,  
Any moment it may pass away;  
Thou has built a house of sand,  
How can it endure?  
All this is Maya.

*I should have listened and insisted you  
become Sikh, Leela, or never married  
you! That was your destiny!*



## Name

My birth certificate reads *Jiva*.

It means “*soul*” in Sanskrit.

But my mother privately called me *Maya*.

“*Illusion.*” “*Change.*” From Sanskrit too.

The truth of it—

what my two names really mean—

is that I was born into a division

that began long before me.



# Munsa Devi

*This is where we pray, Maya.  
In Hindi. Not Punjabi.*

(In the red barn  
behind our house.)

*This is our goddess.  
Of desire.  
And fertility.*

(But I'm afraid of her.  
And that snake in her hand.)

*This is our altar.  
And these are our gifts to her.  
Water.  
Fruit.  
Incense.  
Blue vermilion.  
Golden turmeric.*

*Mata, is Munsa Devi married  
to the man in Babu's picture?*

*You mean Guru Nanak?*

*Yes. He is Sikh. She is Hindu.  
Like you and Babu.*

*Maya, never let your father hear  
you ask that question.*



*Now on your knees.*

*Three times.*

*Every day.*



Maya means “dream”

This is what my mother tells me when I’m five.  
*So dream away, Maya.*

*Her name is Jiva, Bapu says, rolling a piece of  
chapati in his hand.*

*Why not Maya, Bapu? Why can’t my name be Maya?*

He sighs and leans close to my face.  
*Look at me, Jiva. What do you see?*

*Your beard?*

*What else?*

*My Bapu!*

*Yes, your Bapu. But one day when you are older, you  
will see that I was just a dream. And your mother too.  
This life isn’t real, Jiva. It’s a veil that prevents us  
from seeing the truth. The truth that is God’s life.  
This life is nothing but an illusion.*

He turns back to his food.

*Amar! my mother shouts. You’re scaring the child.*



(Actually,  
I'm just confused.)

*She needs to know the truth, Leela.*

*She's five!*

*Maya means "Delusion," Leela. Maya is what a Sikh tries to escape from during his life on earth. He pushes away from the table.*

*But why do you want to escape from me?*

(Now I am crying.)

*Not you, Maya. I mean not you, Jiva. The point is one can only attain spiritual enlightenment by escaping the trance of Maya.*

*Mata picks me up in her arms and argues back: One can also attain spiritual enlightenment through compassion.*

*Your name is Jiva, Bapu says, as the screen door slams behind him. Don't forget.*



*Dear Maya,  
Life is an illusion.  
And as it turns out, so is death.  
What is real?  
What remains when we all fade away?  
Two things: Love. Forgiveness.  
Don't forget.*

