



AMITA RAO

RE-CREATING HER

With surgeon-like precision, I pried, my questions like tweezers, trying to pull out the thorn stuck under my mother's skin.

"No, wait, wait—hang on! You worked in a jewelry store while you studied for your exam? How?"

"What do you mean how? I worked—that's how," Amma's exasperated voice traveled down the phone line between New York City and Atlanta.

Amma doesn't quite understand my fascination with the woman she used to be. As far as she's concerned, she, an Indian immigrant now living in the city of immigrants, had done what she had to do. The woman I knew growing up in that yellow house with the red roof in the heart of immigrant Queens, the one who did what was expected, worked, cooked, followed society's customs and who urged her daughter to follow them, was the one whose phone calls I ignored. The woman my mother had been before I came into existence, the one who stormed out of her farm-life in India and hitch-hiked to the big city against her family's wishes, that was the one who enthralled me, who I idolized. After twenty-eight years of marriage however, I would only catch glimpses of this woman when Amma would casually mention, "I remember Italy. It was beautiful . . . remember Kamala Aunty? She and I did a two-month tour of Europe when we were working in Kuwait." It was in her stories of a time, of a place that I can barely imagine that I could finally see how I was my mother's daughter, so I kept prodding.

When Amma took her United States citizenship exam in a nondescript Homeland Security office in New York City, I was a month into my own journey of discovery in the land of her birth, attempting to find answers to