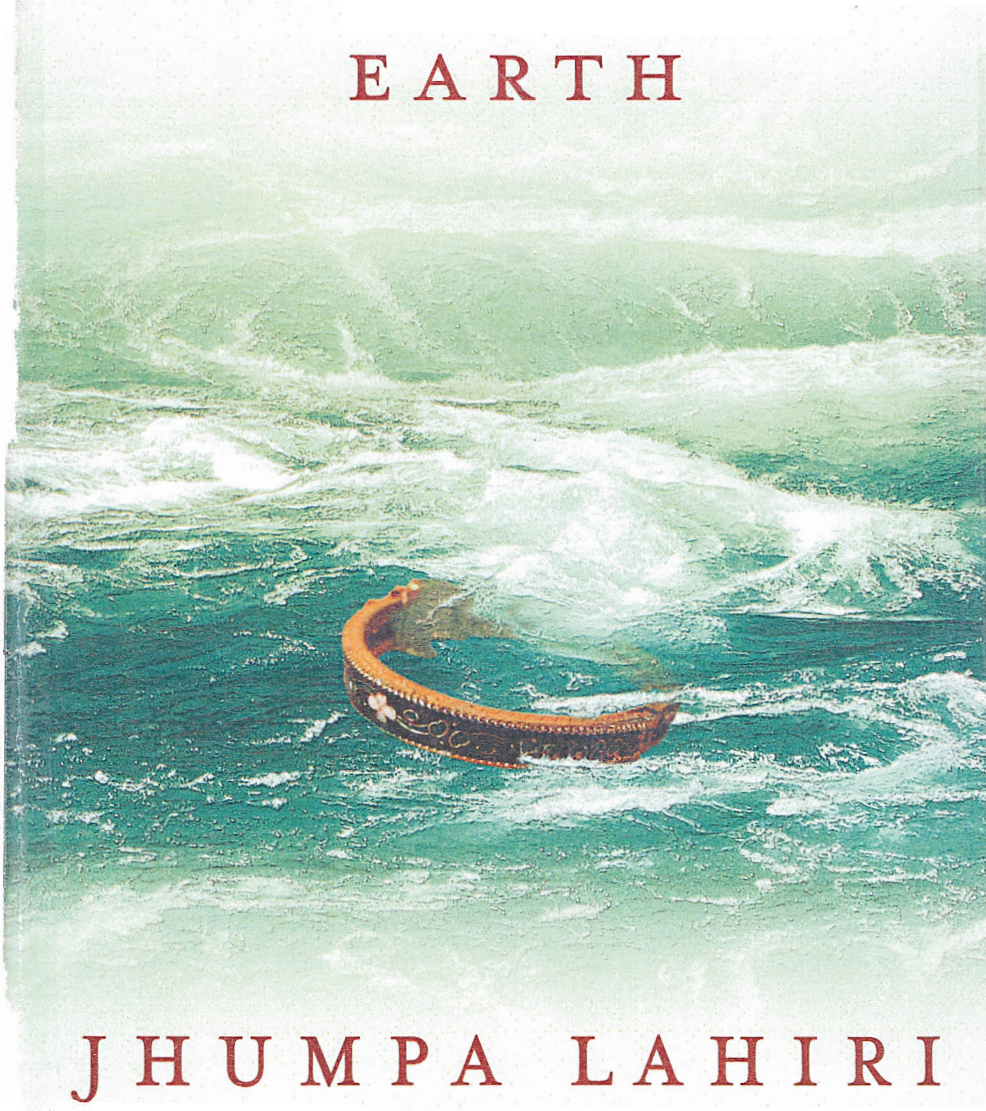


An excerpt from:

UNACCUSTOMED
EARTH



PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF
THE NAMESAKE

Only Goodness

It was Sudha who'd introduced Rahul to alcohol, one weekend he came to visit her at Penn—to his first drink from a keg and then, the next morning in the dining hall, his first cup of coffee. He'd pronounced both beverages revolting, preferring Schnapps to the beer and emptying a dozen packets of sugar in his coffee cup. That had been his junior year of high school. When she was home the following summer he asked her to buy him some six-packs, planning to have a party one weekend when their parents were going to be in Connecticut overnight. He'd shot up to six feet, braces off his teeth, whiskers sprouting around his mouth, dark pimples occasionally studding his cheekbones, her little brother in name only. She went to a local liquor store, helping Rahul divvy up the cans between his room and hers so that their parents wouldn't discover them.

After her parents were asleep she brought some cans into Rahul's room. He snuck downstairs, bringing back a cup of ice cubes to chill down the warm Budweiser. They shared one cupful, then another, listening to the Stones and the Doors on Rahul's record player, smoking cigarettes next to the open window and exhaling through the screen. It was as if Sudha were in

high school again, doing things she once hadn't had the wits or guts for. She felt a new bond with her brother, a sense, after years of regarding him as just a kid, that they were finally friends.

Sudha had waited until college to disobey her parents. Before then she had lived according to their expectations, her persona scholarly, her social life limited to other demure girls in her class, if only to ensure that one day she would be set free. Out of sight in Philadelphia she studied diligently, double-majoring in economics and math, but on weekends she learned to let loose, going to parties and allowing boys into her bed. She began drinking, something her parents did not do. They were prudish about alcohol to the point of seeming Puritanical, frowning upon the members of their Bengali circle—the men, that was to say—who liked to sip whiskey at gatherings. In her freshman year there had been nights when she got so drunk that she was sick on the streets of campus, splattering the sidewalk and stumbling back to her dorm with friends. But she learned what her limits were. The idea of excess, of being out of control, did not appeal to Sudha. Competence: this was the trait that fundamentally defined her.

After Rahul graduated from high school their parents celebrated, having in their opinion now successfully raised two children in America. Rahul was going to Cornell, and Sudha was still in Philadelphia, getting a master's in international relations. Their parents threw a party, inviting nearly two hundred people, and bought Rahul a car, justifying it as a necessity for his life in Ithaca. They bragged about the school, more impressed by it than they'd been with Penn. "Our job is done," her father declared at the end of the party, posing for pictures with Rahul and Sudha at either side. For years they had been compared to other Bengali children, told about gold medals brought back from science fairs, colleges that offered full scholarships. Sometimes Sudha's father would clip newspaper arti-

cles about unusually gifted adolescents—the boy who finished a PhD at twenty, the girl who went to Stanford at twelve—and tape them to the refrigerator. When Sudha was fourteen her father had written to Harvard Medical School, requested an application, and placed it on her desk.

Sudha's example had taught her parents that there was nothing to fear about sending a child to college. Rahul took it in stride as well, not overly anxious as Sudha had been the summer before she'd gone away. He was almost indifferent to the changes ahead, his attitude reminding her that he'd always been the smarter one. Sudha had struggled to keep her place on the honor roll, to become salutatorian of her high school class. But Rahul never lifted a finger, never cracked a book unless it appealed to him, precocious enough to have skipped third grade.

At the end of the summer, Sudha went to Wayland to help him pack, but when she got there she saw that there was nothing left for her to do. He had already stuffed his bags, filled some milk crates with records, grabbed sheets and towels from the linen closet, wrapped the cord around his electric typewriter. He told her she didn't need to go all the way to Ithaca, but she insisted, riding beside him as he drove his new car, their parents following behind. The campus was on a hill-top surrounded by farms and lakes and waterfalls, nothing like Penn. She helped unload his things, carrying boxes across the quadrangle along with the other families of incoming freshmen. When it was time to say good-bye their mother wept, and Sudha cried a little, too, at the thought of abandoning her little brother, still not eighteen, in that remote, majestic place. But Rahul did not behave as if he were being either abandoned or liberated. He pocketed the money their father counted out and gave him as they parted, and he turned back toward his dormitory before Sudha and her parents had pulled away.

The next time she saw him was Christmas. At dinner he had nothing specific to say about his classes, or his professors, or the new friends he'd made. His hair had grown long enough to conceal his neck and to tuck behind his ears. He wore a checked flannel shirt, and around his wrist, a knotted woven bracelet. He did not eat the enormous amounts Sudha still did when she sat at her mother's table. He seemed bored, watching but not helping when Sudha and her mother decorated the tree with the ornaments she and Rahul had made when they were little. Sudha remembered always seeming to come down with the flu over Christmas break, collapsing once she was free of the pressure of exams, and thought that Rahul might do so, too. But later that evening, finding her upstairs where she was wrapping gifts in her room, he seemed to have perked up. "Hey. Where did you hide it?" he asked.

"Hide what?"

"Don't tell me you came home empty-handed."

"Oh," she said, realizing what he meant. "It didn't occur to me. I just thought, since you're in college—" It was true, it hadn't occurred to her this time to stick a six-pack into her bag. She preferred wine now, a glass with dinner when she went out with friends in Philadelphia, but she did not expect it when she came home to Wayland.

"I'm still not old enough to buy anything here." He glanced around the room as if it might contain what he sought, looking at her closet and her chest of drawers, at the bed that was covered with wrapping paper and a box from Filene's containing a nightgown for her mother.

"Trip to the liquor store?" he suggested, sitting on top of the bed, crushing some wrapping paper she'd unrolled. His hand sifted through the gift tags, the tape, picking up each item and then dropping it again.