

Het volgende fragment is het begin van een verhaal geschreven door Jhumpa Lahiri.

The Treatment of Bibi Haldar

For the greater number of her twenty-nine years, Bibi Haldar suffered from an ailment that baffled family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets, and fools. In efforts to cure her, concerned members of our town brought her holy water from seven holy rivers. When we heard her screams and throes in the night, when her wrists were bound with ropes and stinging poultices pressed upon her, we named her in our prayers. Wise men had massaged eucalyptus balm into her temples, steamed her skin with herbal infusions. At the suggestion of a blind Christian, she was once taken by train to kiss the tombs of saints and martyrs. Amulets warding against the evil eye girded her arms and neck. Auspicious stones adorned her fingers.



Treatments offered by doctors only made matters worse. Allopaths, homeopaths, ayurvedics — over time, all branches of the medical arts had been consulted. Their advice was endless. After X-rays, probes, auscultations, and injections, some merely advised Bibi to gain weight, others to lose it. If one forbade her to sleep beyond dawn, another insisted she remain in bed till noon.

This one told her to perform headstands, that one to chant Vedic verses at specified intervals throughout the day. "Take her to Calcutta for hypnosis," was a suggestion still others would offer. Shuttled from one specialist to the next, the girl had been prescribed to shun garlic, consume disproportionate quantities of bitters, meditate, drink green coconut water, and swallow raw duck's eggs beaten in milk. In short, Bibi's life was an encounter with one fruitless antidote after another.

The nature of her illness, which struck without warning, confined her world to the unpainted four-story building in which her only local family, an elder cousin and his wife, rented an apartment on the second floor. Liable to fall unconscious and enter, at any moment, into a shameless delirium, Bibi could be trusted neither to cross a street nor board a tram without supervision. Her daily occupation consisted of sitting in the storage room on the roof of our building, a space in which one could not comfortably stand, featuring an adjoining latrine, a curtained entrance, one window without a grill, and shelves made from the panels of old doors. There,

cross-legged on a square of jute, she recorded inventory for the cosmetics shop which her cousin owned and managed at the mouth of our courtyard. For her services Bibi received no income, but was given meals, provisions, and sufficient meters of cotton at every October holiday. At night she slept on a folding camp cot in the cousin's place downstairs.

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