

**Mithu Sanyal**

translated by Alta L. Price



Shortlisted for the German Book Prize

**V&Q  
BOOKS**

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Mithu Sanyal is a cultural scientist, journalist, critic and author of two academic books: *Vulva*, which was translated into five languages, and *Rape*, which was translated into three languages. This is her first novel.

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# IDENTITTI

A novel

Mithu Sanyal

*Translated from the German  
by Alta L. Price*

**V&Q  
BOOKS**

V&Q Books, Berlin 2022

An imprint of Verlag Voland & Quist GmbH

First published in the German language as *Identitti* by  
Mithu Sanyal

© 2021 Carl Hanser Verlag GmbH & Co KG, Munich

This English translation was first published in North  
America by Astra Publishing House of 19 West 21st Street,  
#1201, New York, New York 10010.

English translation © Alta L. Price

Copy editing: Kate Ellis

Author photo © Carolin Windel / Stern

Cover photo: Getti Images

Cover design: Pingundpong\*Gestaltungsbüro

Typesetting: Fred Uhde

Printing and binding: PBTisk, Příbram, Czech Republic

ISBN: 978-3-86391-339-7

eISBN: 978-3-86391-357-1

[www.vq-books.eu](http://www.vq-books.eu)

**FOR DURGA - AND MATTI**

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PART 1:

# **FAKE BLUES**



# THE DEVIL AND ME

## IDENTITTI

### A BLOG BY MIXED-RACE WONDER WOMAN

About me:

The last time I spoke to the devil he was naked, visibly aroused, and female. So much for social certainties, right? If you can't even count on the devil being male, you might as well shed all forms of identity like you would a worn-out T-shirt - which is precisely what I'd like to do, if only I had one to slip into, let alone out of. That's exactly what all this was about, just like every other encounter with my devil, who's actually a devi - an Indian goddess with too many arms, wearing a necklace made of her enemies' severed heads. Yes, I'm talking about Kali. 'Demons, the lot of 'em,' she said, in the same dismissive tone my cousin Priti would use to say, 'Men, the lot of 'em,' and then she shook her necklace until her slain foes' teeth chattered. Sure enough, Kali's demon heads all looked suspiciously like men's heads.

But she'd already moved on to other things. 'Let's have a squirting match, whoever shoots farthest wins.'

I nodded at her hairy vulva, taken aback. 'How do you plan to ...?'

'Hah! Jizzing isn't just for cis men,' Kali shouted, beaming so triumphantly that for a moment I didn't even notice she'd just said cis. 'And why would it be?

We had three genders eons before your god was even born.'

'But you're my goddess,' I reminded her.

'I thought I was your devil ...'

'What's the difference?'

Race & sex. Whenever Kali and I talked, it was always about race & sex. Meaning - for lack of a more accurate term, or any term whatsoever that won't send us down a rabbit hole - it was about my relationship to Germany and India, my two neither-mother-nor-fatherlands (remember, I'm Mixed-Race Wonder Whatever), and ... sex. This blog is mostly transcripts of our conversations. If you read on, I'll eventually tell you why I'm always talking to a goddess. My name is Nivedita Anand. You can call me IDENTITTI.

# **STRANGE FRUIT**

The day hell's jaws opened and spewed out a slew of howling furies started out like any other day, if any other day normally starts with a rocket launch. *It's not a rocket, it's a satellite*, Nivedita read, at least that's how she interpreted her cousin's WhatsApp message. Priti had actually written *tisNArocket, issaSATELLITE!!!* plus an emoji that looked like a bunch of asparagus. Nivedita gaped up at German Public Radio's twenty-story concrete tower. It was perched precariously atop a spindly plinth that looked like a fiery plume, which seemed to be propelling the building skyward. She texted back: *obvs a rocket!*

At the building's peak, where the Saturn V rocket housed the Apollo spacecraft, flying buttresses formed an iron arrow in the glaring grey sky. Nivedita felt simultaneously sublime and insignificant in the face of this concrete spaceship whose entrance was crowned by a blue inscription: *The News*.

*Imagine yr a terrorist who's killed several people*, Priti's next WhatsApp message advised, in an even more arbitrary array of letters, *or that yr a terrorist who already faked killing piles o' peeps - this'll be a cinch*. Seconds later, *1 small step for you, 1 ginormous leap for humankind ROFL LMAO*.

The glass doors silently slid open before Nivedita, and she entered the hallowed halls of national radio headquarters. It smelled of candle wax and pleather, a blend of HMRC and CIA, if news broadcasters could smell like James Bond films looked. She'd only caught a glimpse of the receptionist's suit through the glass doors, so when she strode over and he looked up, she was shocked to see he was no older than she. But that black uniform signalled that he belonged to a different generation and danced to a

different drum – a rather more conformist one than she – unless he were to slip off his staid jacket or she were to shed her radical-chic-meets-I-mean-business outfit. Clueless as she was of the codes, Nivedita had done her long black hair up into a braided crown that morning and, strand by strand, it had been struggling free in silent yet staunch protest all day.

‘I’m here to be interviewed about my blog,’ she said, enunciating the phrase she’d practiced the entire train ride there.

‘Where?’ the receptionist replied cryptically.

‘Uhh ... here?’

‘No, I mean, which department?’ he asked, giving her a fatherly glance. For a second Nivedita couldn’t even remember her own name. She felt like a snagged zip, suddenly stuck, but then the midnightblue phone on the receptionist’s desk rang, coming to her rescue.

‘Nivedita Anand,’ she said, just as he hung up and announced, ‘They’re on their way.’

Then she did what she always did when she wasn’t feeling up to the task – she went to the toilet. Not because she needed privacy, but so she could look in the mirror and make sure she was still there. The toilet’s frosted glass door bore an inscription, ‘*Frau* (from Old High German *Frouwa*, ‘lady’ or ‘mistress’): adult female. Definition varies according to geo. loc., hist. era, as well as societal and cultural norms.’ Her phone buzzed.

‘You in?’ asked Priti.

‘Yeah,’ whispered Nivedita.

‘Why you answering then?’

Conversations with Priti were always on Priti’s terms. At some point she’d invariably remember she had more important things to do than chat with Nivedita, even if she was the one who’d called. Actually, especially if she was the

one who'd called. That's why Nivedita didn't bother explaining herself or anything else, and instead said, 'You should see this bathroom, the door alone is a veritable intro course in German.'

'That's the spirit!' Priti cheered, 'Feel superior to the toilet! Then you'll ... Wait! Something's come up, Niv.' When Priti was in the right mood she'd call Nivedita *Niv*, like the Irish name Niamh, pronounced 'Neave'. Priti was from Birmingham and had come up with this nickname not because anybody there had a clue how to pronounce Irish names, but because it highlighted that she was different. *As if anyone would doubt Priti was capital-D Different, capital-O Other!* As long as Priti sprinkled her with the stardust of her approval, Niv felt capital-N Noteworthy rather than Not Worthy. But Priti's moods were mercurial, and when she was feeling less generous she'd call Nivedita *Nivea*, like the *white* skin lotion whose racist advertising regularly sparked scandal.

'Shit!'

'Priti?'

'Gotta go - I'll call you back.'

Nivedita tapped the red receiver icon and looked deep into her own eyes. They didn't betray a thing. She desperately wished she could see herself how others saw her, but she just couldn't - for God's sake, she couldn't even see how she saw herself. But she *could* smudge her eyeliner to cast a more intellectual shadow around her eyes, so she did just that.

On the other side of the frosted glass door, a petite woman and large dog were waiting for her.

'Welcome to RadioNew, I'm Verena. May I call you Identitti?' Verena had perfect dimples when she smiled, and Nivedita imagined what it would be like to have sex with her. Then she imagined what it would be like to have

sex with her dog, but quickly lost interest, and went back to the first option. Much like the toilet, the stairway reminded her of college - brutalism meets parking garage - and for a second she felt like Freida Pinto in *Slumdog Millionaire*, until she glimpsed her reflection in a window and noticed her eyeliner was less smoky-eye and more I-cried-in-the-bathroom.

When they got to the recording studio, Verena handed her a laughably large headset. The dog plopped down in a corner, all the while keeping his mournful brown eyes aimed at her, as if trying to convey his compassion for the whole human race.

'That's Mona,' Verena said by way of introduction, and Nivedita mentally corrected her grammar: *she/her compassion*.

'Hiya, Mona,' she said, whereupon the dog shot right up, came over, and stoically let Nivedita pet her.

A lit display in the middle of the recording console gave counterintuitive signals: green light = wait, red light = on air. Verena pulled the microphone closer and dove right in.

"Where are you from?" is a loaded question nowadays. Is it a form of racism, or just curiosity? What are we still allowed to say? What should we never, *ever* say? What does it all mean, and what does all this say about us? Today's guest is blogger Nivedita Anand, one of *Missy* magazine's 'Mustknow POCs.' Nivedita, before answering all our questions, could you explain the term POC, without using the words *people* or *of* or *colour*?

Nivedita stared at Verena as if she'd said, 'Can you breathe without inhaling?' or, 'Can you and your mother hang out without you flipping out about something totally trivial?' or, 'Can you think of India without feeling a vertiginous void opening up inside you?' Then she heard



her own voice saying, ‘POCs are the folx who always get asked, “Where you from?”’

‘And where are you from, Nivedita?’

Nivedita was beginning to suspect Verena and her dimples were messing with her. She knew the question was a joke – goading makes for good radio. But she couldn’t exactly prod back, so her answer came out sounding defensive, ‘I’m from the Internet. I live online.’

Which seemed to be the precise answer Verena was waiting for. ‘Indeed, under the name Identitti. Nivedita blogs about identity politics and ...’

‘Tits,’ Nivedita added. *Two can play at this game.*

‘Let’s go with *boobs*. Would you say it’s more boobs, or more identity politics?’ Verena beamed. Her sheer gusto dissolved Nivedita’s defences.

‘Not just boobs. I also blog about – can I say *vulvas* on the radio?’

‘Let’s stick to boobs.’

‘OK.’ For just a second, Nivedita wondered what Verena’s boobs looked like, but then quickly directed her brain back to – her own. ‘It all started when I posted a selfie of my boobs. I’d written on them in eyeliner, “In ancient Ireland, the Celts proved their loyalty by sucking the king’s nipples.”’

‘Really?!’ Verena’s dimples flashed as if to signal this was a two-thumbs-up titbit.

‘No idea. My cousin Priti heard it on a game show, and I just adored the notion of nipple-sucking as a form of social exchange. But then some smart-arse posted a comment about how “that story could only be found in the saga of ...”’ – Nivedita peeked stealthily at the inside of her forearm, where she’d jotted down key names and dates – “Fergus mac Léti, in the eighth century, and even there it was meant as a joke, but obviously” I “have no sense of

humour because my degree was in gender studies.” So I replied, “I’m not into gender studies, I’m into postcolonial studies,” to which smarty-pants replied, “The only other mention comes from Saint Patrick, who supposedly refused to suck the pagan Irish king’s nipples, but relying on the word of Saint Patrick when it comes to heathens is about as wise as relying on Donald Trump when it comes to Muslims, but surely you know all that, what with all your postcolonial gender studies!” Before I could even answer, Facebook had blocked my account because it showed nipples, but by then the image had been shared so far and wide that I just knew I had to keep going. By the way, I call my posts a *blog* because it sounds so retro, like CDs, or GTOs, or opposite-sex marriage, but my website is actually just an archive of my threads, rants, posts, stories, and comments because people seem to want to read them chronologically, like a *herstory*. Because we humans are more than just a bunch of random comments on identity politics, you know?’

Nivedita felt her nipples perking up under her T-shirt, as if to boast: You’ve got us to thank for that - you’re welcome.

‘That’s just outstanding,’ Verena concurred. ‘Is that how you came up with the name Identitti?’

‘Nah. First my blog was called *Fifty Shades of Beige*, because of my skin tone - y’know, beige.’

‘Why not brown?’

‘Saying *brown* is racist.’

‘Really?’ Verena’s dimples vanished, dismayed.

‘I dunno. But that’s really what all this is about: the fact that we don’t have the language to talk about people like me. After all, until quite recently we were strictly *verboten* - forbidden. Like fruit.’

‘Forbidden?’

‘Forbidden,’ Nivedita reiterated. In all honesty, the college paper she had written on the various ‘anti-miscegenation laws’ – actually, on all the laws forbidding ‘miscegenation’ – was the real genesis of her Internet persona. Intriguing as nipples are, they’d never have sparked such a lasting, steady stream of verbal indignation. Anyway, it had all begun with sex, actually: legal sex, illegal sex, and sex that was so utterly unthinkable that it caused the heads of the lawmakers to explode. ‘Nazis weren’t the only ones who tried to prevent so-called interbreeding. In the United States, *whites* and *non-whites* couldn’t marry until ...’ Nivedita peeked at her forearm again, ‘nineteen sixty-seven, and in South Africa they couldn’t until nineteen eighty-five. And here in Germany, when my mother was pregnant with me, her doctor warned her that *Mischlinge* are more prone to depression. But when I told that to Simon, my ...’ she hardly hesitated, ‘boyfriend, he just said, “It’s always all about you and your Identitti,” and somehow Identitti just kind of stuck.’

‘You write under two alternating pen-names, Identitti and Mixed-Race Wonder Woman. One of your superpowers is that you can speak with the gods – or at least one of them, Kali, the Hindu Goddess of Destruction. Most of your blog entries are conversations with her. Why?’

Verena might as well have asked Nivedita to take a deep-dive into her own soul, find the golden egg containing life’s ultimate truths, and resurface with it intact. But even if such a thing were possible, it wouldn’t have changed Nivedita’s speechlessness at this very moment – after all, no such egg exists. At best, there might be a shell, and some kind of liquid, which might later turn into some kind of being with feathers, but there’s no guarantee. And feathers are indeed one of Kali’s attributes, but then again Kali has so many attributes that Nivedita had long since

given up trying to keep track. Verena looked at her expectantly – how long had it been already? So Nivedita quickly jumped in, ‘I have to process all this with somebody. Most people have no clue how to talk about this stuff. Me neither. So I need someone to explain it all to me.’ But Verena wasn’t all that interested in Kali, she was just using her as a stepping-stone to get to her real question: ‘Now, allow me to pivot from one Goddess to another: from Kali to Saraswati. Not Saraswati the Indian Goddess of Knowledge, but Saraswati the Professor at Düsseldorf’s Heinrich Heine University, with whom you took intercultural studies and postcolonial theory.’

Nivedita’s heart pounded in her chest.

‘Saraswati, exactly.’ *Charismati Saraswati*, as Priti always called the teacher they both studied with, although Priti’s irony was just an act, since not even she could deny Saraswati’s disarming charm and sheer intelligence.

‘Why just Saraswati? Doesn’t she have a last name?’

Nivedita shrugged, causing the headset to begin slowly but surely sliding off, leaving just one earphone in place. ‘Beyoncé doesn’t need a last name, either,’ she replied, trying to straighten the headset without too much interference, ‘nor does the Queen of England.’

‘But both of them *have* last names.’

‘Right, Knowles and ... Hapsburg?’

‘Windsor,’ Verena corrected her.

‘Sure, whatevs. Saraswati definitely *has* a last name, too, but she doesn’t need one, because *she’s Saraswati*, and everyone knows which one you’re talking about.’

‘That’s right!’

Nivedita watched, riveted, as Verena silently slid out a sheet of paper, held it up, and read aloud, ‘In 1999 Saraswati published her first book, *Decolonise Your Soul*, which became an instant bestseller and later led to her

endowed professorship in Düsseldorf. But she wasn't just read at schools. Saraswati went POP - so very pop that her second book was titled *PopPostColonialism*. And as with any star, major debate sprang up around her, especially on social media.'

Nivedita shrugged again, this time holding her headset tight. 'Nowadays nobody's a serious intellectual until they've sat in the eye of a shitstorm.' And anyone who's met Saraswati couldn't help but take her seriously. As Nivedita's *partner* (for lack of a better term) Simon always said: Priti has an innate compass with POWER as its true north, so of course the needle of that inner compass single-mindedly pointed straight at Saraswati. And Nivedita - whose soul was in desperate need of saving - was pulled in just as single-mindedly by the promising title of Saraswati's book *Decolonise Your Soul*. That's exactly what Nivedita had been trying to do when she began studying with Saraswati three years ago.

'But a large part of the phenomenon known as Saraswati isn't just your everyday Internet cantankerousness - at her own university, she's regularly accused of being racist. There's even a lawsuit regarding her treatment of *white* students,' countered Verena.

'The people who accuse Saraswati of being racist ...' Nivedita toyed with the idea of saying *can go suck their own tits*, but then decided to go with 'just don't get her. Above all, they don't get what *being white* means to her.' In less than twenty-four hours, Nivedita would wish she'd sucked her own tits instead of saying those words on live radio.

'And that's precisely what her hotly debated essay "White Guilt: Why nobody wants to be *white* any more," is about,' Verena said, reading from yet another sheet she'd silently slid from the desk. 'Last month it was published

simultaneously by the *Times Literary Supplement* as well as the French and German editions of *Lettre Internationale*. The *TLS* called it 'An essential text for an era in which the phrase "old white men" has become an insult.' Is it true that *nobody* wants to be *white* any more?'

'Well, I sure don't,' Nivedita emphatically replied, her sheer enthusiasm covering up her bare-faced lie. She herself had spent half her life wanting nothing more than to be white, and the other half wishing she were darker than she actually was. Anything but the hybrid half-and-half she naturally was, which eluded all existing categories. The colour was so fluid and hard to pin down that even Pantone had named the shade after a liquid: Cognac.

'Why not?'

Where to start? 'That's 'cause of the term's history. Up until the seventeenth century, there was no concept of *white* aside from descriptions of clouds, or, like ...' and in the heat of the moment nothing came to Nivedita's mind but 'sheep. Then came the Transatlantic slave trade, and of course the Europeans had to justify that whole thing somehow, since nobody can just go somewhere and abduct people and hawk them off somewhere else. So the way they explained it, their justification, was that the *white* race was superior. But in order to do that, they first had to invent this *white* race.' Nivedita hadn't just read 'White Guilt' - like all of Saraswati's screeds, she'd devoured it as if it were dogma. 'Before, Europeans hadn't thought of themselves as *white*, they identified themselves by the part of Europe they came from, or the language they spoke. Where was I again ...?'

'*White* supremacy.'

'Right,' except of course Verena used the German term, *Weisse Überlegenheit*, even though Nivedita and her fellow students in Düsseldorf all used the English term in

Saraswati's seminar. Postcolonial studies basically viewed white supremacy as the original sin, ground zero of the earthquake whose aftershocks were still reverberating worldwide. 'Because of that history, the notion of *whiteness* is inextricably linked to *white* dominance. *White* never had any other meaning. Consequently, *white* people couldn't really view their own *whiteness* through any lens but that of *white* power. For them, there's no such thing as a special *white* culture or *white* music, because everything is *white* to them. It's like living in an endless *whiteout*. Black people are discriminated against as they always have been - there's no question - but at the same time we've come to associate Blackness with notions like revolution, subversion, and Black power. In contrast, we have no progressive associations with the notion of *whiteness*. And that's how Saraswati arrives at the conclusion that *whiteness* is a concept that limits the rights of everyone, *whites* included.' For just a moment, Nivedita felt her professor's presence so keenly that she could almost feel Saraswati's dupatta draped over her own shoulders, and her clavicles rose as she subconsciously assumed Saraswati's permanent primaballerina pose, shoulders wide, head held high. She remembered Saraswati once said, 'Your neck aches in the back, mine aches in the front.' So Nivedita raised her chin, lowered her eyelids, and sized Verena up: 'What about you? Do you perceive your *whiteness* as a limitation?'

Verena cast a naked, vulnerable glance her way, and Nivedita thought, *Ah-ha, so that's how Saraswati does it.*



On her way back to Cologne's main train station, Nivedita wondered whether she'd just imagined that moment. Afterward, Verena had steered the conversation back to the eternal *Where-are-you-from?* question, and Nivedita slipped comfortably into her little comedy routine: 'I once transcribed all the conversations over the course of a month where people had asked me that. 'Where you from?' Essen. 'No, I mean where're you *from* from?' Essen-Frillendorf. 'No, really, where are you *from* from from?' Uhhh, my momma's belly? "No, I mean, why are you brown?" ...' but the undeniable climax of the interview had clearly occurred when Nivedita broke the rules, turned the tables, and volleyed Verena's question right back at her.

As soon as she got off the bus, the humid air enveloped her as if the forecasted storm would never come, and she tried calling Simon. She'd once read somewhere that busses were like Faraday cages, so she always pictured the mobile phone signal bouncing back and forth inside the steel chassis until its trajectory resembled a kind of scribbled pencil drawing and all the passengers vanished behind a grey curtain of static. Like both of her last tries, this one too went straight to Simon's voicemail: 'Your call is important to me. Please leave a message after the tone, and I'll call you back as soon as possible.' Just that he never really did call back ASAP.

Nivedita went to the Museum Ludwig for its public Wi-Fi – she loved public Wi-Fi, such a democratic notion – and posted a soft and cuddly kitty pic she'd found online during the drive to the studio on her Instagram account and blog.

**IDENTITTI**

Every time you think a racist thought,  
God kills a kitten.  
But don't worry,  
it's not a German kitten!

She'd initially wanted to paste a cutout of Maradona's hand above the kitty's fluffy head, as the hand of God, but then she realised copyright issues made Simon's hand a safer choice. But, as would soon become clear, Simon also held the IPR to God.

'Why didn't you pick up?' Nivedita complained as her train pulled into Düsseldorf.

'I just did,' Simon shot back, with a tone that always got under her skin. Everything he said after that was drowned out by the conductor, who proceeded to announce all the connecting trains to every conceivable destination. The doors whooshed open loudly, the noise out on the platform was even louder, and by the time she could finally hear Simon again all he said was 'My phone was turned down,' as if his mobile were somehow superior to her current surroundings.

'But we'd agreed to meet in Cologne three hours ago!'

'I was preparing for my meeting with Campact and lost track of time.'

A wave of emotion spread over Nivedita - she was jealous of Simon's smug self-sufficiency. She translated his retort as *I studied law and am destined to save human rights, which is more important than your little goal of saving your own soul*, or, more concisely, *I'm more important to you than you are to me*.

'But I was on national radio!' she howled back.

'Oh,' he said.

Nivedita sensed her hurt feelings suddenly turning into fullon irritation. What?'

Silence.

'WHAT?!?'

A young man whose luggage was piled onto a shopping trolley glanced inquisitively in her direction, but apparently it's fine to rant and rave as long as you're holding a hand to your ear.

'I'm sensing that you're in need of attention,' Simon says flatly.

'Great, then WHY DON'T YOU GIVE IT TO ME!?'

'Where'd you get the idea that people will be extra nice to you if you yell at them?'

'Little Si just can't handle your success,' was Priti's take later on. Then again, that was her take on pretty much any relationship problem. But it really irked Nivedita that people were always telling her who she was supposed to be, what she was supposed to think, and why she just looooves eating rice, to the point that she was almost never able to catch onto others' underlying motivation for saying such things.

*Please, please just ask me how it went,* she thought, through the phone, as loud as she could without saying a word. But Simon was too busy being Simon to catch on. Another call popped up. Nivedita ignored both it and the body-temperature drizzling rain clinging to every inch of her face that wasn't already clinging to the phone. She strolled out onto Bertha von Suttner Platz, and unlocked her bike. Simon was silent on the other end of the line. A timid clap of thunder piped up from behind the clouds, then also fell silent.

'Did you see my latest post?' she finally asked, trying to keep the non-existent conversation going. And that, believe it or not, was what made everything oh-so-much worse.

It was the time of day when you turn on the light and it just makes everything darker. Nivedita strode through the front door of her shared apartment, called out 'I'm baaack,' and the empty space swallowed up her voice just like the insulated walls of the radio studio, except that this time there was no cheerful Verena or melancholic Mona waiting for her. A quick peek into the kitchen confirmed that her first housemate wasn't home. Another peek behind the door with the mandala confirmed that her second housemate was also out. Opening the fridge, Nivedita pushed aside soggy cardboard takeaway containers and yet more utterly unidentifiably labelled jars of who-knows-what until she found a leftover bit of cheese and spread it on the lone remaining cracker, only to notice she wasn't hungry. Her phone vibrated on the kitchen table. She tried to ignore it, to show Simon she wasn't just sitting there waiting for his call. But because she also counted on him to hang up before leaving a message and then never try calling ever again, after an embarrassingly brief moment of restraint she dashed over to get it. The voice on the other end sounded contrite enough alright, but it wasn't Simon.

'Nivi?' Priti said through a snivel.

'What's going on?' Nivedita asked, suddenly scared.

Priti interjected, 'Nivi?'

'I'm here. What happened?'

'Nivi?' Priti said for the third time, whereupon Nivedita decided to just yell if she asked a fourth time. Sandwiching the phone between ear and shoulder, she grabbed her bag and a glass of water, and elbowed her way into her own room. 'Yup, uhuh, yeah, this is Nivedita. Now that we've cleared that up ...'

Priti interrupted her again, but this time uttered the four words that had long since become the formulaic intro to every crisis convo they'd ever had. 'There was this boy ...'

Although *boy* wasn't exactly accurate, since Saraswati's brother was closer to retirement than he was to puberty. 'Old but gold.'

'Saraswati's *what?*' Nivedita shouted, nearly dousing the T-shirt she'd tossed onto the bed that morning after trying it on.

'Her *brother*, aren't you listening?'

'Saraswati's *brother?*'

'Indeed.'

'*Saraswati's* brother?'

'In-deed,' Priti repeated, almost forgetting to snivel this time.

'*Gold ...?*'

'You know - *in the sack!*'

'No, I *don't* know, 'cause I didn't even know Saraswati had a brother! And I certainly don't know how he is in bed!'

'Right, the only pants *you* want to get into are Saraswati's,' sniffled Priti.

'You're hilarious. But - *Saraswati's brother!?!*'

In time, Nivedita would assemble bits and pieces from Priti's disjointed anecdotes to reconstruct the entire epic, but even then she had to admit it might only partially correspond to reality. Priti was into young women, older men, trans people of any and every age - the more controversial, the sexier - and of course *Saraswati's brother* was über-controversial. To sleep with someone like that, with *him*, with *her brother*, was tantamount to sleeping with Saraswati while simultaneously shaking your bare arse, full-moon-twerk-style, right in her face, because - again, according to Priti - Saraswati and her brother hadn't spoken to one another in the last *thirty years*. In fact, they were so thoroughly estranged that Saraswati hadn't even told him that she'd *changed her name ...*

And ...

*'... her colour.'*

Just when Nivedita thought she'd hit rock bottom, and that the day couldn't possibly get any worse ... boy was she wrong.

'She changed her *WHAT?*'

'Uh, yeah, her skin colour.'

It seemed like an eternity before Nivedita found her laptop under the pile of T-shirts. As the pale blue light leaked from the screen onto her blanket, typos kept finding their way into her password (*milk* as in - yeah, you get it), but she finally nailed it. Ignoring the endless pings blowing up multiple apps on her computer, she opened a new browser tab and searched *Saraswati* and *white*, narrowing the search to the last twenty-four hours. OK. Oh Kali. OK. EIGHTY-FOUR THOUSAND results, each one like a punch hitting a different sore spot, striking every inch of her body.

Her stomach: *Scandal Surrounds Star Prof. of Postcolonial Studies* (Huff Post, three hours ago).

Her temples: *Prof. Curried Favour under False Pretences* (SPIEGEL Online, an hour ago).

Her solar plexus: *D.U.'s Faux Guru: Düsseldorf, We Have a Problem* (*Die Tageszeitung*, 44 minutes ago).

One thousand and one questions arose in Nivedita's perplexed mind, but she had too little breath left to pose even one of them, even to herself. Instead, she heard her own voice, hanging lightly in the air, as if she'd huffed helium: 'I don't believe it.'

'There are pictures, too,' Priti informed her in a voice dampened by tears, as if sinking into a mud pit.

'What?'

'Well, pics of Saraswati from ... from before her metamorphosis.'

But Nivedita had already found them. She randomly clicked on the first one and immediately regretted it. Saraswati looked like Madonna in her *Blond Ambition* period: the tips of her conical bustier thrust so aggressively through her jacket - a jacket you can be sure was still being marketed as a 'men's jacket' back then - that



passersby ran the risk of poking their eyes out, or impaling their quickly beating hearts; the only difference was that her gel-spiked coif was ash blond, not platinum. In the next image, a ginormous backpack was propped up against her *white* legs, which were in turn propped up against the Air India counter of a German airport ('They photoshopped that, I'd never have been able to afford Air India back then,' she later explained, 'I flew Emirates.'). The next one showed her as a seventeen-year-old in a typical southern German living room, complete with piano and sectional sofa, alongside her equally many-years-younger-looking brother ('You slept with HIM?'), who even in that snapshot seemed to be trying to command her respect. But Saraswati - or rather the young woman who would one day become Saraswati - was staring straight at the camera lens, her lips pursed like she was about to blow a kiss, as if she'd just said *Foucault*.