

Text A: Excerpt from the novel

The Namesake

By Jhumpa Lahiri

Note: *The Gangulis are first-generation immigrants from India to the United States. Ashoke Ganguli teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He, his wife Ashima, and their American-born teenage children Gogol and Sonia are returning to India for eight months.*

[...]

On the final leg of the trip there are only a few non-Indians left on the plane. Bengali conversation fills the cabin; his mother has already exchanged addresses with the family across the aisle. Before landing she slips into the bathroom and changes, miraculously in that minuscule space, into a fresh sari. A final meal is served, an herbed omelette
5 topped with a slice of grilled tomato. Gogol savors each mouthful, aware that for the next eight months nothing will taste quite the same. Through the window he sees palm trees and banana trees, a damp, drab sky. The wheels touch the ground, the aircraft is sprayed with disinfectant, and then they descend onto the tarmac of Dum Dum Airport, breathing in the sour, stomach-turning, early morning air. They stop to wave back at the
10 row of relatives waving madly from the observation deck, little cousins propped up on uncles' shoulders. As usual the Gangulis are relieved to learn that all their luggage has arrived, together and unmolested, and relieved further still when customs doesn't make a fuss. And then the frosted doors slide open and once again they are officially there, no longer in transit, swallowed by hugs and kisses and pinched cheeks and smiles. [...]
15 Ashima, now Monu, weeps with relief, and Ashoke, now Mithu, kisses his brothers on both cheeks, holds their heads in his hands. Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they do not feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on
20 Pemberton Road. "I'm scared, Goggles," Sonia whispers to her brother in English, seeking his hand and refusing to let go.

They are ushered into waiting taxis and down VIP Road, past a colossal landfill and into the heart of North Calcutta. Gogol is accustomed to the scenery, yet he still stares, at the short, dark men pulling rickshaws and the crumbling buildings side by side with
25 fretwork balconies, hammers and sickles painted on their facades. He stares at the commuters who cling precariously to trams and buses, threatening at any moment to spill onto the street, and at the families who boil rice and shampoo their hair on the sidewalk. At his mother's flat on Amherst Street, where his uncle's family lives now,

neighbors look from their windows and roofs as Gogol and his family emerge from the
 30 taxi. They stand out in their bright, expensive sneakers, American haircuts, backpacks
 slung over one shoulder. [...] Gogol and Sonia both get terribly ill. It is the air, the rice,
 the wind, their relatives casually remark; they were not made to survive in a poor
 country, they say. They have constipation followed by the opposite. Doctors come to the
 house in the evening with stethoscopes in black leather bags. They are given courses of
 35 Entroquinol, ajowan water that burns their throats. And once they've recovered it's time
 to go back: the day they were convinced would never come is just two weeks away.
 Kashmiri pencil cups are bought for Ashoke to give to his colleagues at the university.
 Gogol buys Indian comic books to give to his American friends. On the evening of their
 departure he watches his parents standing in front of framed pictures of his dead
 40 grandparents on the walls, heads bowed, weeping like children. And then the caravan of
 taxis and Ambassadors comes to whisk them one last time across the city. Their flight is
 at dawn and so they must leave in darkness, driving through streets so empty they are
 unrecognizable, a tram with its small single headlight the only other thing that moves. At
 the airport the row of people who had greeted them, have hosted and fed and fawned
 45 over them for all these months, those with whom he shares a name if not his life,
 assemble once more on the balcony, to wave good-bye. Gogol knows that his relatives
 will stand there until the plane has drifted away, until the flashing lights are no longer
 visible in the sky. He knows that his mother will sit silently, staring at the clouds, as they
 journey back to Boston. But for Gogol, relief quickly replaces any lingering sadness.
 50 With relief he peels back the foil covering his breakfast, extracts the silverware from its
 sealed plastic packaging, asks the British Airways stewardess for a glass of orange
 juice. With relief he puts on his headset to watch The Big Chill and listen to top-forty
 songs all the way home. [...]

(769 words)

Source: Lahiri, Jhumpa. The Namesake. London: Harper Perennial, 2004, 81-82; 86-87.

Annotations

Lines

1 leg stage of a journey

7 8 drab tarmac dull, gray airport runway

8 Dum Dum Airport old name of Calcutta's airport

19 20 22 Pemberton Road Goggles VIP Road the Gangulis' home in Massachusetts,
 USA Sonia's nickname for her brother major thoroughfare connecting the city of Calcutta
 with the International Airport

24 rickshaw two or three-wheeled passenger cart pulled by one person

24 fretwork ornamental woodwork

26 precarious dangerously lacking in security or stability

34 Enteroquinol drug for diarrhea and dysentery

34 ajowan herb given to people in India to cure an upset stomach

40 Ambassador Indian car, in production since 1958

44 to fawn over s.o. to flatter someone or attend to someone excessively

51/52 The Big Chill 1983 American film