

KIRUN KAPUR

Meat and Marry

A nun and a swami walk into a bar. O.K., not a bar, exactly—unless you count the salad bar—but, she is a nun and in the cafeteria of International House she walks in on her life, part joy, part joke. The room bustles—Asians, Africans, Scandinavians—a UN with plastic knives. It's 1965. She's spent several years in a convent, so even white Americans look stunningly foreign. A guide is talking, rearranging the pleats of a peacock silk sari. My mother tries to focus on her voice—high, tipping suddenly, like a flute played on a roller coaster: *no pork at this table, here no beef, Kosher, chopsticks, here no meat*. She can't identify the food. Nine kinds of turban are within reach. People course by—black, blonde, red, yellow—they carry flimsy trays, but speak so earnestly. Out of this Technicolor glory, the world's every possible character—my father. Out of the whole universe of words, he'll speak just one, in English. He is the same hue as her first, brown leather Bible; his eyes flash like the buckles on a young nun's shoe. She'll learn he isn't a swami, he speaks five languages, quotes Frost as easily as Ghalib. She turns in a confused circle. He doesn't touch her, just inclines his head politely toward his own plate. His voice is low, like a rocking boat, Eat.