

Longing for home long gone

IMRUL ISLAM

Summers at our Nanubari in Kulaura, Sylhet used to bring all the cousins together under one roof. As the house decays, and we have moved across oceans, the memories have stayed.



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PHOTOS: IMRUL ISLAM

On a dusky summer night in Sylhet, Mahfuz emerged from the darkness and stepped on a frog.

Dusk came rapidly that day. In the evening it had rained for an hour, forcing Nani's chickens under the mango tree. The rains had brought with them an expected phenomenon: load shedding; and as the house plunged into darkness, candles found themselves in every room while outside, shadows wrapped themselves around palms.

The darkness was absolute. Unhindered, impermeable: a blanket of unending obsidian. Mahfuz in a Reebok tracksuit—all the rage in the 90s—had taken Orchee on a bicycle ride. When they returned, the frogs were waiting. The traditional route started on the road opposite the main gate, continuing past *Motin Varieties Store* (where

Coke was Tk 10 and Fanta Tk 12), across the rail tracks (the cause of many a scraped knee) and down a little hill that continued on for two kilometres. At its end was a towering banyan tree which had to be crossed hurriedly while holding one's breath, and to be avoided at all cost after sunset. Not because of ghosts and such, but because Ammu had said so. Beyond this point were the graves, little shrines in old Hindu houses bordered by bamboo. Little note on bamboo: they rustle with or without wind, something Orchee could neither comprehend nor explain. Asking Mahfuz was a waste of breath, the man knew very little about anything.

The bicycle rides often ended here, but if time permitted, there was more to explore. One and a half kilometre away from the graves was *Marina* tea garden: the

crown jewel of an afternoon adventure. Often, Orchee and I (never together, except once, when two bicycles were available) would nag until Mahfuz or Mahbub complied. *Marina*, established in the old British days, was a small tea estate nestled in rural Kulaura where local picnics often found a home. The star attraction was a small waterfall, the kind that appear bigger to children than they actually are, making it a safe decision for all concerned. Note: I had actually taken a tumble down the waterfall (under the not-so-watchful eyes of Mahbub), resulting in bruises, a thoroughly wet shirt, and yet another scraped knee.

That was summer: bicycle rides on Nana's old cycle. Today was Orchee's turn and so I had stayed behind, waiting by the pond to spy on crabs.

As the first raindrops breached the still surface of the water, Shaju appeared, umbrella in hand. We stood together in silence for a while, watching crabs scurry back home, listening to the steady drip-drip of water on corrugated roof. My fishing line, nylon tied to bamboo, bobbed gently. I had forgotten about it.

As the winds picked up, Shaju turned to me. 'Buru, *cholo*.' For as long as I could remember, Shaju had called me *buru*: oldie. I was quite fond of the name (I was quite fond of Shaju). 'Two more minutes,' I muttered, turning my attention to the concave ripples melting into deep blue-green. Soon, the rain intensified and the fishing line bobbed faster; above us, the palms swayed like drunk heroes from sub-par Bollywood movies. With a sigh, I gave in.

The walk back from the pond to the house was short. Past the old cowshed and the remnants of a rose garden was a rusty tubewell leading to the courtyard. This was where Nani sat on her stool in the morning and swatted at flies. By the time we reached—I had been distracted by a duck running across my path—Ammu was at the door, her orna wrapped around her head, eyes squinting, lips pursed. 'You're going to catch a cold, Baba,' she admonished. 'The fish bite better in the rain,' I muttered.

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