



PHOTO: IMRUL ISLAM

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After page 3

Inside, it was dry. Mosquito coils were being placed under tables, the walls, once white now a garish green, made the house look like the inside of a mossy aquarium. I wiped my feet on the welcome mat, propelled my wet slippers across the floor (*Baba!*) and hurried to Nani's room to watch her pray.

She sat there on her favourite stool, head facing west feet barely touching the ground, eyes closed in concentration. When she looked up, I smirked and held her gaze. She fumbled with the surahs, soldiered on while I situated myself squarely within her line of sight. The next time she looked up, I had a plan of attack. *Improvised dance*. Legs akimbo, arms flapping everywhere, I treated her to my best impression of Mr. Bean. This time, it worked. She broke her prayer, looked up at me and seeing no remorse, half smiled and called for Ammu to come retrieve her son.

I ran.

For a long time, that was home, nestled snugly in the comfort of the known. This was before the barbed wires, the moving, the leaving: slowly at first, then all at once. There was little poetry involved, choices were made, options weighed. Nani was too old to take care of herself, we were too young to forego the privileges of America. The house that had given us the most wonderful summers couldn't move, so it stayed. The roots of trees grew deeper, the cobwebs took over. In Nani's bedroom, dust settled and thickened into grime. As time stuttered to a stop in Sylhet, it sped up in New York. New babies were born, new rituals replaced the old. Here, afternoon adventures weren't constrained by banyans, and there were bicycles aplenty. The rains were predictable, the electricity opulent. There were no mosquitos; the

waterfalls, too, were much bigger than the one in *Marina*. Nani had the healthcare she needed, we the life we had always thought we wanted. Here, the frogs stayed away.

Some nights, something seemed off. The rains didn't smell the same, and there were no ponds to watch crabs scurry around in. There were no palms, and no Shaju either. In sleepless New York, the walls seemed too white, the air insipid. Most evenings, Nani didn't have any flies to swat so she sat by the window and waited for dusk to fall.

The last time I went back, the house lay forgotten, half of its rooms boarded up. The shrubs were overgrown, the gate rusty. Before Choto Mama left, he had sold off most of the trees and so now, for the first time in decades, the courtyard was flooded with light. Too much light.

Early one morning, unable to sleep I went outside to look for the mango tree of my childhood. On it, a lifetime ago, Orchee, Mahbub, Mahfuz and I had etched

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our initials, confident we would one day come back and find it again. But seemingly, we had been too confident: it too had receded into history. Perhaps a storm had knocked it down, or worse, it had been chopped down and auctioned off. Our lives are not as cohesive as we want them to be, and the fragments, more often than not, can be sold for parts.

The inside of the house was dusty, years of neglect lining its garish green walls. The kitchen, however, was spotless—overseen by Papiya, Shaju's daughter, who was now in charge. She did what she could, but most nights, the neighborhood children jumped the fence to come steal coconuts. Ammu had come with me, and she now joined me in the living room. Two cups of tea steamed away on the table.

I had come to photograph the house one last time. There were talks of tearing it down, New York wanted to divvy up the land, then sell it to developers. There was business to be had, and money to be made. In the two days I had been here,

I hadn't gotten my camera out. Instead, I had spent Friday morning with Ammu coughing through Nani's cupboards searching for old family albums. Then we'd sat, *cha* in hand in the overly lit courtyard looking through faded faces and weather worn prints. Here, Choto Mama had hair, there, ten-year old Bula was dressed as a bride. In time, passport-sized photos of cousins appeared. Time sped up, now, Nani started looking older, the size of the annual family portrait dwindling as people left for America. With a turn of a page, the world was divided—newborn pictures either came in sepia or vibrant kodachrome, from Kollol's Studio in *Mini Shopping Complex* or *Rite Aid* in Astoria. The album ended with a photo of Nani and Nana from back in the day, a lens flare standing in for a halo over Nana—his worn briefcase held tightly for him by Bula. I looked at that photo for a while, moving my fingers across the uneven creases of time. Outside, it had started to rain.

Huddled against the wind, umbrella in hand, Ammu and I made our way to the pond. The coconut trees were still there, their arms swaying like drunk heroes from sub-par Bollywood films. Very little else had stood the test of time. There were no ducks scurrying around, no chickens taking refuge under trees. The tubewell, long unused, lay forgotten like much else around it. Here, after Bula's *holud*, we had gathered to laugh, here, on these steps, I had first conquered my fear of water. Somewhere in those murky depths, my *idi* might still be rolling around in mud. My flight out was in two days.

As the rains intensified, I handed Ammu the umbrella and stepped out to Shaju's usual hiding place for fishing rods. Sure enough, she had left one for me. Smiling, I launched it toward her favorite spot, and watched the nylon sink into the unknown. Taking off my slippers, I put my feet in the water, sending a lone crab scurrying to its hole. Out over the surface, little concaves of rain melted into deep blue-green. It seemed, for a moment, that nothing had changed, that back behind us, even now, mosquito coils were being lit, an impending load shedding was on its way, and Nani was getting ready for prayers. But everyone was gone, Nani was in New York, and time had made a mockery of the past.

We stood there for a while, the rain beating down on my back, sending tiny shivers up my spine. After a while, Ammu broke the silence:

"Baba, you'll catch a cold."

Laughing, I turned to her: "The fish bite better--"

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Sesame sauce noodles in Shanghai, China

Kazi Akib Bin Asad

"I got hit by the strongest sesame sauce aroma as I stepped through the doors of 14 Yandang Road, Huangpu, Shanghai. This restaurant, Wei Xiang Zhai, has been serving mouth-watering sesame sauce noodles and beef soup noodles for over 80 years. It's no surprise that the cramped place is frequented by octogenarians—customers and servers alike; I felt like an alien but was treated like royalty. A hot bowl of ma jiang mian filled my stomach quickly but captured my heart for a lifetime. And by the way, there's a nice Michelin certificate on the wall."

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