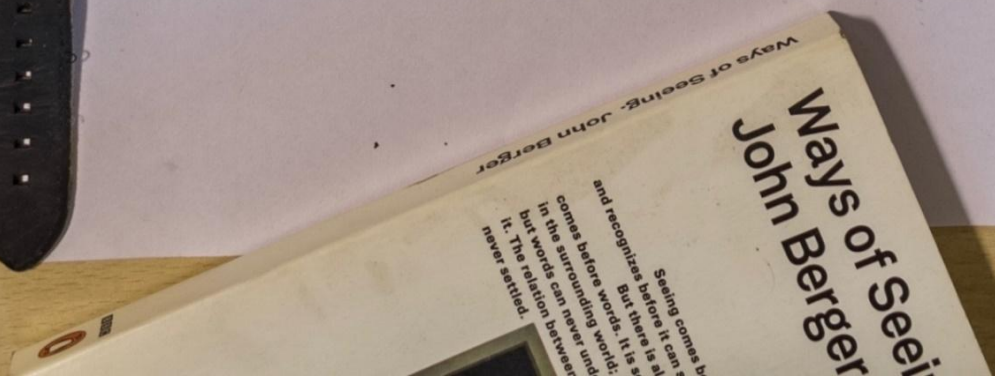



THE FREEWHEELER

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Department of English
Shiv Nadar University



Ways of Seeing
John Berger

Seeing comes before it can be named and recognized before it can be named. But there is a difference between seeing and recognizing. It is a difference that comes before words. It is a difference that comes before words but words can never understand it. The relation between seeing and words is never settled.

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FACULTY ADVISOR'S LETTER

Dr. Vikram Kapur

Another year has whizzed past. It is great to see *The Freewheeler* going from strength to strength with each issue. We started with a very basic concept where the magazine published the best short stories written by creative writing students which were illustrated by student artists. After a few years, memoirs made their appearance in the magazine and over time become as integral to it as short fiction. This year the offerings are equally divided between fiction and nonfiction. Last year, we added a Reviews section. This year's issue includes an interview with a well-respected poet. The credit for coming up with the idea for this interview goes to the issue's editor Sidharth Singh. In addition, the sixth issue of *The Freewheeler* looks very different from the issues that preceded it. This is the first time the cover is a picture rather than a piece of artwork. Furthermore, for the first time, pictures, instead of artwork, make up the predominant visual inside the magazine.

Each incarnation of *The Freewheeler* is the result of the collaborative efforts of a number of students, and the current issue is no different. When we began, *The Freewheeler* was an undergraduate magazine. Now masters students play as much of a role in its creation as undergraduates. Hence, the magazine is truly representative of the university as a whole. *The Freewheeler* began as a platform for students to flex their creative muscle and, in the process, discover the writer within themselves. Since then, it has grown into a respected publication. None of that would have been possible without the support of several people. My colleagues at the Department of English, who have been behind this endeavour from the start, and the Director of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr Ajay Dandekar, without whose unstinting support this magazine would not have been possible.

I thank you all.



EDITOR'S NOTE

Sidharth Singh

In the dizziness of deadlines and work *The Freewheeler* brought consistency and rhythm for which I am extremely grateful. The efficiency and coordination everyone showed has made this issue a joy to edit. I hope the readers will find these efforts reflected in these pages, and be able to enjoy reading them as much as we enjoyed putting them together.

Of course, I must thank Dr. Vikram Kapur who has guided the editing of *The Freewheeler* for six years now. His patience and dedication to this magazine was an example to follow. Under his guidance, we have managed to do new things for the magazine this year. Our issue features *The Freewheeler's* first interview. We have managed to borrow some time from the poet Michael Creighton. He was perhaps destined to be interviewed by Meghna Singh Bhadauria, who is an ardent admirer of his work. The interview has managed to illustrate what is at the heart of Creighton's book *New Delhi Love Songs*, and is a good profile of Creighton as a poet. Furthermore, our issue is the first to have a photograph for the cover picture. It is credited to Bhargav Barla. It was meant to reflect the impulse of the magazine mentioned earlier: amidst the clutter and chaos, the order of straight lines. Bhargav has done an excellent job. The magazine, of course, would not exist without its writers. I must thank them all for this year's short-stories, memoirs, and reviews. *The Freewheeler* only exists for the students of SNU to dedicate their writing to a larger platform. The writers this year have put their best work on display. Finally I must thank Madhav Mehrotra and Aarooshi Garg. Without their help, editing this magazine would have overwhelmed me long back.

Please enjoy your course through the pages of this magazine. I assure you a good journey.

Sidharth Singh
Editor-In -Chief



CONTRIBUTORS

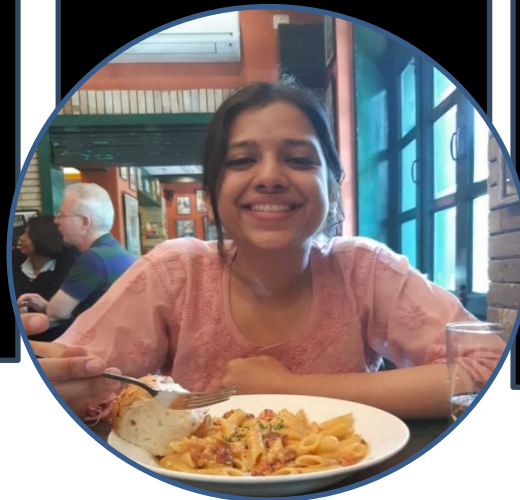


Akshita Todi
loves pasta.

**AKSHITA
TODI,
WRITER**

When not chasing deadlines and dealing with existential dread in the times of late-stage capitalism, Aarooshi can be seen accosting puppies and squirrels, binge watching sitcoms and writing poetry.

**AAROOSHI
GARG,
SUB - EDITOR**



Ashwin is an avid science fiction reader and musician. He also happens to be a final year mechanical engineer. Apart from playing the piano and discussing Cixin Liu's work with anyone who listens, he likes to try his hand at writing and world-building, and he really loves his food. *El Psy Kongroo*.

**ASHWIN KUMAR,
WRITER**

CONTRIBUTORS

Bhargav Barla specialises in photography and it is his passion to click images. He loves storytelling and wants to expand his knowledge and scope as an artist and photographer.

**BHARGAV BARLA,
PHOTOGRAPHER**



Namita Gupta is a final year student of MA English at Shiv Nadar University. Her life usually revolves around finding ways to remain in bed and finding the perfect cup of tea.

**NAMITA GUPTA,
WRITER**

People insist that Sidharth Singh's spirit animal is a dadaji. But he is convinced he is a young and promising whippersnapper instead.

**SIDHARTH
SINGH,
EDITOR -IN-
CHIEF**



CONTRIBUTORS



Soumya Rampal does not and probably never will have 20/20 hindsight. She is told that she makes up for it by making incredibly awesome choices every now and then.

**SOUMYA RAMPAL,
WRITER**

I drink a lot of chai and I drive around the city, but I never drink and drive.

**MEGHNA SINGH,
INTERVIEWER
AND
ILLUSTRATOR**



I indulge in haikus and 'writing narratives' which are moderately censored for readers. Scraps of paper hidden away and my un-submitted MS word files would be much too unapologetic and freewheeling...

**THINLEY CHODON,
WRITER**

CONTRIBUTORS

A blend of quirky-cynic and starry-eyed idealist, I am a proponent and practitioner of that peculiar brand of wry humour that trivializes issues of importance, whilst simultaneously drawing attention to their murkier, more distressing aspects.

**SIDDHARTH
SRINIVASAN,
WRITER**



The Joker once said “if you're good at something, never do it for free,” and Madhav agrees, while working for this magazine for free.

**MADHAV
MEHROTRA,
ASSISSTANT
EDITOR**



ITALY SECOND-HAND

Sidharth Singh

“Ripeti dopo di me. Uno.”

“Uno.”

“Due.”

“Due.”

“Tre.”

“Tre.”

Ma'am prompted us with her hands as she spoke; like a conductor to an orchestra. But to parrot someone as an adult is embarrassing so a few of us scratched our heads and, with an awkward soft-spoken mumble, trailed off in between. I was one of these people. Sitting at the back of the class, fiddling with pens and looking at the clock, I had no interest in the Italian language. But my father ran a business and dealt with Italy in various woods for furniture. He wanted me to learn Italian and work for the company. I was doing a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration at the time, and though I could stand in front of a classroom with graphs and statistics projected on a screen, deliver lengthy presentations on market research and finance management, somehow I failed at counting from one to ten in Italian.

But even Hindi and English abandoned me at the dinner table when I tried to tell my

father about this failing interest. He was a hulking figure, his belly pressed against the table's edge, and his upper-lip heavy with a thick handlebar moustache. He loved to eat, and I, under the tutelage of my mother, loved to cook. My mother was sweet outside of the kitchen but with an apron around her waist she was the most stringent guru.

“I want the tomatoes in thin slices,” she used to say threatening me with a slap. “Nahi toh tera gaal banega tomato jaisa.”

Her fiery temper made me a competent chef. My father took his eating seriously. If his phone rang while he ate, he answered only to unleash a torrent of insults at the caller. On most nights I swallowed all apprehension about Italian with my food. I knew he would never let me leave classes at the Centre because, sometimes, in the dinners of dal makhani, rajma, and curd, which I prepared myself, he would slip in the condiment of an Italian phrase.

“Are your classes going well,” he would ask in Italian. I would stare at him.

“Not well enough. Buck up. I want carbonara soon.”

If I ever got a hold of the language I was to serve him a ceremonial bowl of spaghetti carbonara. But whenever my Italian teacher stood me up in class and I had nothing to say, I knew the day would never come.

We continued parroting the numbers.

“Ventisette! Ventotto! Ventinove!”

Not all at the Centre were uninterested in Italian. Zahra was sitting at the front desk with her back straight, hand in the air, jhumkas shimmering as she shouted the numbers. We were not friends but everyone knew she loved Italian. She had often been sighted at the library, with Italian books spread out before her. If others could not answer in class, she leaned in and whispered in their stead. The Centre screened Italian films regularly and she was present for them all, the light flashing across her face, mouth agape as if to consume the sounds and images.

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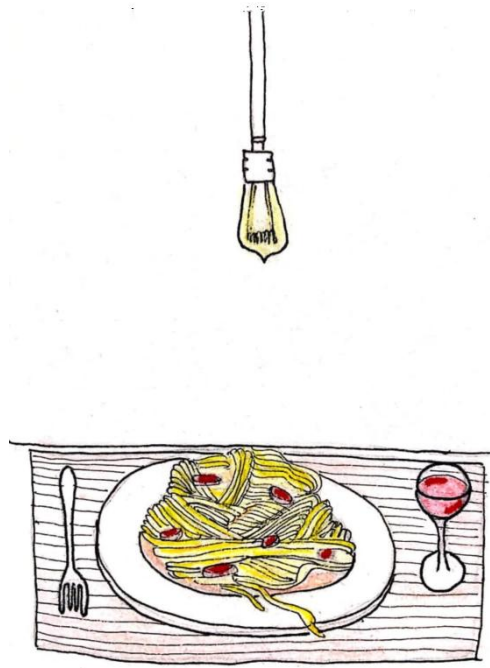


Illustration: Meghna Singh Bhadauria

Regardless, it was noon when we were dismissed and I hailed an auto-rickshaw to go home. I was thinking of Zahra with a tinge of jealousy when my phone rang. It was my college friend Prakhar. I clicked my tongue: I had forgotten all about his party; it was later that night. I could not decide if I wanted to go. Prakhar was a good friend but unbearable as a drunk.

“What’s up,” he asked.

“I was at the Centre.”

“Did they teach you ‘hello’ today?”

“Today we learned: go to hell.”

He laughed. “Don’t forget to bring booze tonight.”

“Right, right. I’ll see you there.”

I thought I would make up an excuse later if I decided against going. When I reached home I found my mama, mami, and their six-year-old daughter Archana in the living room. She was an energetic child. Perhaps

this was why I found myself trudging up the stairs to my room, with her bouncing up and down ahead of me, pleading to watch television. When my mother told me Archana would be staying with us for three days, I found myself at Prakhar’s party. Everyone was chatting, drink in hand, heads bobbing to music. I was surprised to see Zahra; she was talking with Prakhar. I approached them and she smiled at me.

“Buongiorno,” she said.

“Buongiorno.”

“Oh,” Prakhar said. “He’s the one from the Centre. The guy I was talking about.”

“Yeah I know. He’s in my class.”

“Great. Maybe you can teach him some Italian. He doesn’t know any.”

“Don’t mind him,” Zahra said as he stumbled off to speak with others. “It’s great to see you here. You know, I never really got the chance to speak with you. What got you into Italian?”

“My father runs a furniture business that deals with Italy. He wants me to learn Italian. What about you?”

“Oh I’ve always loved Italy. I’ve read too many translated books so I figured it’s time to learn the language.”

“That’s great. You’re learning quick too.”

“Thanks. Let’s sit down? I’ll get another drink.”

She got a beer and we sat on a sofa-bed which had been opened up for everyone.

“What about the Centre itself? Are you having fun?” she asked.

“It’s a great place but I’m not really enjoying the classes. Italian isn’t a passion of mine. I wouldn’t be learning if my father didn’t insist.”

“Oh come on,” she said waving her hand as if at a fly, an annoyance. “Italy has so much to offer: such great theatre, food, architecture, music.”

You wouldn't say that if you had a good experience of Italian culture."

"Have you been there?" I asked.

"I haven't."

"I went there with my father, once. But I didn't see any of those things. What if it's all just in your head? What if Italy turns out to be different? Would you still love it?"

"You know," she took a sip of her beer, "I think places are invented."

"What do you mean?"

"When I was a child I would visit my grandparents in Dehradun and going there meant walks in the hills with my nani and eating cookies with my nana. That's what Dehradun meant to me. Walks and cookies. Now my nana-nani aren't there and Dehradun doesn't feel the same. But not everyone shared my walks and cookies. They saw something else in Dehradun. Those memories are only in my head but that doesn't make them any less real. It only means my Dehradun is different from other Dehraduns. So why can't I have my own Italy? I love Italian plays. If I can put Dehradun in a cookie jar then a play is good enough for Rome."

I laughed.

"And sure there are things to be discovered in places," she continued. "The Colosseum, the Sistine Chapel; these are things to be discovered, taken in. But places have to be invented too, you know, to be made one's own. And I have a healthy imagination. Someday I'll visit Italy. But till then I have my own Italy here," she tapped her temple. "Reading the plays of Pirandello and Fo in my balcony, ordering pasta late at night, even the time spent at the Centre. Right now, these things are."

more Italian than Italy itself."

"Well that's very convenient," I said, and she laughed. "But what do I know? All I know about Italian culture is *The Godfather*."

Chuckling, she said, "I'll tell you what. Spend some time at the library with me. I'll help you revise and lend you some plays. Give Italy a chance."

"Give your Italy a chance," I corrected her. She smiled and I smiled back. "Okay."

We sat in the library, revising what had been taught in class. It was well into the afternoon and our table was next to a window. A beam of sunlight lit Zahra's face. There were soft, erratic thuds on the window as a wasp buzzed around outside. Several months had passed as we sat together at the library, whispering in Italian to each other. I accompanied Zahra to the films screened at the Centre, too. With her the language seemed less daunting. Even my father seemed less formidable. Most Italian questions asked of me with mouthfuls of aloo and saag were answered to his satisfaction. Even my mother broke into "mera Italy ka tukda," on seeing my test papers from the Centre come bearing good marks. And when the likes of my relatives came visiting, my father talked of my keen interest in Italian.

My mind had shifted from the lectures and presentations at college to the Centre. No longer was I among the otherwise interested sitting at the back of the class. I was with Zahra, up front, my hand raised in the air. While my Italian was ill-formed and broken, the numbers were child's play. It was all because of Zahra, sitting in front of me,

reading in the sunlight, wasp mindlessly thumping on the window. There can be no pretense: I had fallen in love with her. My determination to learn Italian was just an urgency to impress her. I am convinced that Italian words are incantations in disguise because somehow, along the way, she fell in love with me too. In hindsight it seems like our love for each other was only natural, and like all natural things it grew unbeknownst to us, like a sapling tended to everyday till a bud pops into a flower, and all change becomes apparent.

But even though we were best friends—despite her giggling when I mispronounced words—I was nervous as we sat at the library.

"My father wants me to cook carbonara tonight," I whispered.

While spaghetti carbonara is quite difficult to cook, the cause of my anxiety was what the occasion really meant: my graduation was approaching fast and I was to be initiated into wood trade. But above all, it was because Zahra and I had decided to tell our parents about each other while things were going well.

"We should get it over with fast," Zahra had said. "The problem will only fester if we don't. They should have the chance to adjust." The problem being religion. Spaghetti and Parmesan made for a delightful combination for my parents but a Hindu and Muslim were best kept apart. I was lost in thought as we got up to leave the library.

"Don't worry about what they'll say. Be done with it," Zahra said. We walked out of the Centre and she hailed a rickshaw. "I'll tell my parents tonight too."

“Are you sure?”

She hugged me and kissed me on the cheek.

“Quite,” she said, grinning and I grinned back like a fool. She got on to the rickshaw. “We’ll talk once it’s done. Bye.”

The rickshaw cycled away, bell ringing.

Later that night my father, mother, and I sat at the dinner table with a portion of carbonara on our plates. My father, smiling from ear to ear, put a hand on my shoulder.

“Let’s begin.”

They began eating and my mother beamed at me from across the table, giving me a thumbs-up. I looked at my father just in time to see a noodle being sucked into his still smiling mouth.

“Bellissimo! Appena bellissimo! Kya baat hai!”

“Grazie, papa.”

“Such a worthy cook,” my mother said, with a smile.

“Yes. He is doing well all round. When is your graduation, beta?”

“It’s in May.”

“Very well. Graduate, then it’s time to join the business.”

“Yes, papa.”

They continued smiling and resumed eating. I steeled myself.

“Listen, there is something you should know.”

They looked up, still smiling. But I saw

the slightest arch in my mother’s brow. She knew something unsavoury was to follow.

“It’s about the Centre,” I continued.

“Yes?”

“I met someone there. Her name is Zahra.”

The smiles still clung to their faces but had been knocked askew, like a tilted picture frame after a door is slammed shut.

“So what,” my mother said. “Is she the first girl you’ve met?”

“She is my girlfriend.”

My father laughed but my mother was angry. “Arrey don’t fume. It’s alright, beta,” he said. “These things happen at your age. You will grow out of it.”

“What do you mean,” I asked.

“You have young blood. Once you graduate and start working you will enter the real world. There is no space for such things in the real world.”

“I just wanted to let both of you know.”

“Thank you,” my mother snapped.

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence. Once it was over, I washed my hands and went upstairs to call Zahra.

“How did it go,” I asked.

“You first,” she replied.

“Not well,” I said. “Mom was angry but dad just laughed it off. I guess they’re hoping it won’t last. I’ll hear about it a lot but they won’t really interfere.”

“It’s worse with me. They want me to

leave you.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll just lie to them. Both of them were angry but I made them promise not to pull me from the Centre. I said it was nothing serious and I’ll break it off if they want.”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t worry about it too much. All this won’t matter when we’re having carbonara in Rome.”

In truth I was quite afraid for what was to come. But I refrained from speaking.

“Yeah,” I said, “things will be good.”

A few years later, with no one but Prakhar in attendance, Zahra and I got married in court. Our families abandoned us. Her parents disowned her when they realised she had gone against their will. They were well into discussions about marriage with another family when she told them the truth. My father, on the other hand, tried to tempt me out of the ordeal with the bribe of a secure future.

“Don’t jump into this ditch. You’ve been working well for the company. You are my son,” he pleaded. “I only want what’s best for you.”

Even my mother had stopped speaking with me. It was years before I heard from her again. But alas be it oak, mahogany, spruce, or ebony, furniture could not entice me to leave Zahra. My father would not have me in the company if I married a Muslim, so I packed my bags, walked out of my parents’s home, and into a one bedroom flat; into uncertainty. I

worked as a salesman for a small firm and Zahra worked as a content writer. Spending time together only at night, silent, in stuffy heat under a clacking fan, our relationship was maimed. We hardly saw each other, had little money and even lesser time to entertain thoughts of Italy. Italian was decaying in our minds because we had no use for it; there was no room for it in our cramped apartment. Zahra had stopped reading Italian plays too. All we did was work, eat, watch TV in silence, and sleep. We could no longer afford to think about Italy. Going there seemed like a childish idea.

But each night as I stared at the fan, with Zahra sleeping next to me, facing away, I thought about how I could improve things. Knowing that Italy was too expensive a pursuit, an idea took shape in my mind: if we could not go to Italy, I would bring it to our one bedroom flat. I would invent a cheaper Italy. I decided to cook us a dinner of spaghetti carbonara. Being on a minuscule budget, I replaced pancetta and guanciale with simple sausage. I filled our flat with candles and borrowed an old music system and candelabra from Prakhar. Zahra and I only had a coffee table, so I threw a sheet over it and put the candelabra on top. From the nearest liquor shop I bought cheap red wine. Once the creamy pasta was on the table and the candles lit I played Italian jazz on the music system and waited for Zahra to return from work.

I was going to attempt speaking in Italian for the entire night even though I had not truly mastered it. But it had to be done. Soon enough I heard footsteps outside. The door opened and Zahra stood in the frame, assessing what was happening. She walked towards the table, with a smile. I pulled out her chair.

“Welcome to Italy,” I said. “I make dinner.”

I unveiled the carbonara and she clutched my hand.

“Exquisite,” she said.

“It is?”

“Truly.”

“I try best.”

I heaped a good portion of the spaghetti onto her plate and poured the wine. She picked up the fork, prodded the food around, and laughed.

“Hmm, no pancetta.”

“I accuse environment.”

“Accuse environment? Do you mean circumstance?”

“Yes, yes. I accuse circumstance.”

We ate our dinner with the music playing and talked as the candle flames flickered around us. It was quite hot and we had to switch on the fan and lights soon enough. Zahra and I laughed together, and as she held my clammy palm all felt right again. We made love that night after ages and I woke up the next morning feeling like a richer man. Such a success was the venture that we dedicated all Friday nights to Italy: Italian Night. On Italian Night, of course, there was only Italian to be spoken. The food too was never ordered; I cooked it at home. I added lasagna, cannoli, ravioli, and others to the cuisine of our one-bedroom Italy. If the day at work was forgiving we had energy enough to waltz to Italian music too. Sometimes, if I spent a week persuading her, we watched *The Godfather* on her laptop. But we

enacted scenes from Zahra's favourite Italian plays more often. She would take her favourite lines from Pirandello's plays and scribble them in Italian because we only had them in English. Then we would jump onto our bed and shout out the dialogues, sometimes to our neighbours's dismay.

“You know nature is an instrument of the imagination to chase creation at a higher level!”

“Okay but where does all this get us?”

“Nowhere! It only means that one can be born as many things: a tree, a stone, water, a butterfly, a human.

But also a fictional character.”

“And so you and those around you are fictional? Only characters?”

“Yes, sir. But no less real.”

One night, while we were in bed, I heard Zahra sigh and turn toward me.

“Listen,” she said.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Promise to hear me out?”

“Okay?”

“Things are getting better now but I'm sick of content writing. I have an idea.”

“What is it?”

“Let's open an Italian restaurant.”

There was silence as I took this in. We were indeed improving: the fridge was full of food and the mind empty of anxiety. But why put it all at risk? As I thought about it, I remember

wondering what I was most excited about that week. All I could think of was spaghetti carbonara. Italian Night.

“I think we should do it.”

I had come to think of spaghetti carbonara as an old friend. The kitchen was bustling as usual and I was cooking carbonara, my face hot from the day spent in front of the stove, my old backache stinging. Regardless, in the boiling water, the raw spoke-like spaghetti had curled into noodles, and I had already beaten the egg yolks with salt, pepper, and grated Parmesan, into a creamy yellow concoction. I cooked the pasta with sausage and turned off the heat. Soon, I added the creamy sauce to the pasta and put it all into the crockery.

“Have it sent.”

An Italian man had placed the order. He was not the first Italian in our restaurant, and I knew what would happen. I folded my arms and waited. Soon a waiter came into the kitchen, smiling.

“The man would like to see you, sahib.”

I walked out the swinging doors and into the restaurant. It was full and there was a queue outside. Chet Baker's Romas was playing; a fine choice. I walked towards the Italian man, passing all the posters of Italian architecture, Pirandello, and of course, *The Godfather*. Zahra and I had hung those posters ourselves when we opened the restaurant. The Italian was sitting alone at a table for two, right next to a wall, a bright yellow filament bulb was hanging above him. His meal was untouched.

“You asked for the chef, Sir. How may

I assist?”

He looked up, smiled, and gestured to the empty seat. “If at all possible I would like a word.”

I sat down.

“I am a chef too,” he said, “from Roma. We are mad for carbonara. So when I saw this on the menu,” he gestured to the food, “*Zahra's Carbonara*, I was intrigued.

“No pancetta? No guanciale? I would be fired for doing this in Roma.”

I laughed.

“Do not get me wrong,” he continued. “This is a fine establishment. But why not serve it the real way?”

“Because it is *Zahra's Carbonara*, Sir. Zahra is the name of my wife. We were poor when we started the restaurant and could not afford pancetta or guanciale. Only sausage. Soon she would not have it any other way.”

“Ah,” he said. “A tragedy in my opinion. It is to be had with pork. But I understand. Perhaps that is where the restaurant's name comes from: Italy Second Hand?”

“Quite right, Sir,” I said, as he chuckled. “On some nights we serve it the traditional way as a special.”

“Hmm. Is your wife here?”

“No, sir. She died a few years ago.”

“My apologies. But tell me, have you ever been to Italy? To Roma?”

“Yes. I went with my wife many times. Now my daughter has settled in Sicily.”

“Bellissimo. Maybe you can visit my restaurant in Roma next time.”

“It would have been my pleasure, Sir. But when I go to Italy now I feel like I have left it behind. I don't think I can go there without my wife.

“Allow me, Sir.” I served him the carbonara. He twirled his fork in the noodles and brought them to his mouth. Looking up at the bulb, he chewed with a thoughtful countenance, and swallowed.

“Hmm,” he said smiling. “Remarkable. Tastes Italian to me.”

This story was first published by Jaggery: A DesiLit Arts and Literature Journal.

A MORNING WITH THE NARAYANAS

Siddharth Srinivasan

Before I narrate this story, I would like to warn you that the following rules apply while you're at the Narayan household.

- 1. You will be greeted with progressiveness and open minds, should you agree with their customs and beliefs exactly.*
 - 2. You will be respected if and possibly only if your work closely relates to one of the following fields- cricket, God, or law.*
 - 3. Please do not drink directly from any glasses while you are there, and make sure that you do not wear your footwear into the house.*
- Also, the elder Dr. Narayan is the head of the house, and no amount of feminism is going to change his mind.*

Dr. P.V. Narayan Iyer, Retired Attorney at Law, sat in his armchair, placed to strategically face the old Philips television in his small living room, the centre of his old, Brahmin-style house in the suburbs of Mylapore. His thick-framed glasses were slightly askew, resting precariously on the edge of his crooked nose, as he peered at the sports page of that day's *Hindu* newspaper. 'Eh!' he suddenly exclaimed to no one in particular, causing his grandson, who was lolling on the couch beside him to lazily open one eye. 'Hmm?' the latter said, continuing the vein of monosyllabic conversation his grandfather had so abruptly begun. 'Dhoni scores sixty-three of eighty-two balls in one match, and these fellows treat him like a hero. *Idhu ellam craze-u, paa,*' he said. Ramnath, for that was the boy's name, shot up from the couch. His lanky, nearly six-foot frame was suddenly alert as he mock-played a fast delivery for a

six. 'He is an amazing batsman. I don't know what you're saying,' he argued indignantly. Dr. Narayan, for that is the form of address he had spent fifteen minutes educating the postman about, sighed, and rolled his eyes at the fledgling. 'Ey! Were you alive to see Gavaskar? Kapil Dev? C.K. Naidu? Those were players. Style, class, technique! *Mundrikottai vaisu irundhundu, olaravendiyudhu,*' he begun, resettling himself in his armchair, straightening its back slightly. 'But *thaatha*, they all played test matches! This is a one-dayer. So, obviously, the style will be different, no!' 'No. You don't know anything about cricket. When you go for coaching like I went, then, you can talk. Twenty five rounds in St. Mary's Ground every morning as warm-up only. Have you ever done that?' he said, shaking his hand disapprovingly at the boy. 'Fat lot of good it did you, Appa! Diabetes and heart-disease at fifty eight,' Kamala laughed, as she walked into the room. 'Ey!' Dr. Narayan grunted in protest, 'If you all worked as hard as me, then you'd know. No time for exercise. What do you do, eh? Have you ever been in a court of law? No. *Shundakai!*'

'Cheri, pa. Whatever you need to tell yourself. *Porein, naa,*' she said, as she proceeded to do exactly that. 'Ey! Vaat *porien?! Poyitu varien!* What all you people say!' Dr. Narayan snapped testily after her, surveying her receding frame with cold reproof. It is a well-established rule in most Brahmin families that one would only leave the house with the solemn promise of return and omitting to make said

promise spelt inevitable doom. Despite the dollop of salt she had liberally sprinkled over all the customs preached to her, Kamala knew to not mess with fate, popping her head back in at the old double-door to repeat after her father, before heading out. Dr. Narayan went back to mumbling into the newspaper. Just then, Ananya's tall, slim figure appeared at the bannister, as she announced to the house in general, 'The Ashes match is on Star Sports 3.' The living room once again stirred into action. Ramnath casually reached for the television control, as his grandfather rummaged

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Were you alive to see Gavaskar? Kapil Dev? C.K. Naidu? Those were players. Style, class, technique!

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in the depths of his dhoti to pull out the set-top-box remote. Dumping the paper in a mess on the bamboo chair beside him, he frantically jabbed at the red button on the remote, before irritably announcing that the television never works. Assuring him that no such thing was the case, Ramnath switched on the television and then, the set-top-box, navigating to the correct channel. Three breath-taking outswingers by James Anderson left the pair with their mouths hanging half-open, staring at the screen, enthralled by, as Dr. Narayan eloquently put it, 'The beauty and precision of the formidable English bowling line-up'. Ananya smiled slightly, as she ticked off the third item on her list. The list was written in spidery handwriting and black ink, and simply had five points- Close the kitchen door, Wait for Amma to leave, Distract Rami and Thaatha with the Ashes, Make sure Appa is annoyed and working, and five, Bonanza. Four was almost too easy. Two months earlier, the younger Dr. Narayan had succumbed to both his son's pleading and his wife's nagging, and had bought a music player, which, characteristic of his classic brand of stupidity, he had installed in the room next to his on the first floor. Turning it on, Ananya waited until Eminem begun swearing, before a muffled oath emanated from her father's room, and a short angry man, with a bushy moustache and a face a shade less red than the cricket ball Jimmy Anderson was swinging so well downstairs, bumped into the corridor. 'Vat are you doing, maa?' *Indha time le vaare.* 'Tch, tch, tch, tch,' he said, disapprovingly wagging a finger at her. 'And vaat *kanda kanda* language also!' Appa, you go to the study and work, no, then! Always complaining- that too on a Saturday,' Ananya whined. Dr. Narayan couldn't argue with that logic, not that he could argue with anyone about anything at all. .



He hadn't inherited his father's flair for debate or confrontation, and meekly submitted to his daughter's retort, making his way to his home-study, slamming the heavy oak door shut behind him as his sole sign of protest. Ananya smirked slightly as she crossed the fourth item off her list. Turning on her heel, she scrambled downstairs, tiptoed across the living room, where Dr. Narayan and Rami were muffling oaths at Stuart Broad, who had just given the burly Matthew Hayden, Australia's opening batsman, a juicy full-toss, which the latter had breezily put away for a "biggie", as Mark Waugh was excitedly calling it from the commentary box. She had just made it into the dining room, when Selvi's hoarse voice caught her unawares. '*Varaadhai. Eeramaa iruku.*' Ananya whipped around to find the housemaid glaring at her rebukingly, mop in hand, gesturing to the very dirty footprints she had just left on the wet floor. Selvi had been working at the Narayan household for eighteen years, and hadn't aged a bit during the whole time, probably because she had always

looked ancient. Almost bent double, with piercing black eyes, a bindi that covered most of her lined forehead, and an almost toothless mouth, red with tobacco, Selvi was easily the most formidable figure in the household, save for the young Mrs. Narayan, a fact Ananya knew only too well. Had it been Ramnath or her mother, or even her bumbling father, they would have gotten hold of the wrong end of the stick, but not Ananya. She had too great a deal of experience of walking on wet floors to know that no amount of wide-eyed innocence would get her any sympathy from the old housemaid. Instead, she took a step further, plonked herself at the center of the room, and proclaimed, 'Selvi, I'm anyway in the middle now. You'll anyway have to clean the same amount, whether I go back to the drawing room or not.' Selvi's lip curled venomously, as she surveyed the fourteen year old she had watched grow up over the years. She had never particularly bonded with Ananya, probably because the latter had taken it upon herself to create messes in the house, often

getting Ramnath blamed for it, even though she, Selvi, almost always knew the identity of the culprit. Even at the tender age of seven, she had displayed devious intellectual prowess that her poor brother, till this date, had failed to both achieve himself or predict of her. As Selvi and Ananya locked eyes, each was recounting a separate incident of chaos that the latter had orchestrated. Selvi's ponderings were fixed on how Ananya had lined her father's office chair with *dosai-maavu*, getting away with the heinous vandalism by cleverly egging Ramnath into pinching the rest of the *maavu*, so that they'd get *kaiyyu-adaï* for breakfast the next day instead. Ananya was thinking of a far more violent incident, when she had painted the living room walls as an eight year old and rolled her four year old brother around in the paints, before cleaning herself up in time to play the innocent girl the elders still believed she was. Smirking self-indulgently at her ruminations, Ananya shot one last glance at the scowling figure of senility, convinced herself of victory, upon which she confidently marched to the kitchen door. She slipped in noiselessly, shutting the door behind her. And there they were- *molugu-bondos*, steaming on a plate near the frying pan. And holding the pan, a little woman, wearing a plain blue sari, unassuming earrings, a small red bindi and a nose-ring, smelling distinctly of sandalwood, casually dropping to-be-fried *bondos* into the simmering oil- *Paati*. One couldn't help but admire the sheer creative genius of the woman, a skill whose utility could hardly be overestimated. Eyeing the *bondos* greedily, Ananya executed the final part of her plan. She walked straight up to her grandmother, and without any hesitation, wrapped her arms around the cooking woman, almost engulfing her tiny frame, before burying her hair in her grandmother's jasmine-ridden hair. This was the only part of her plan where she didn't have to put on a show.

What with the jasmine and the sandalwood, and the extreme huggability Paati's wrinkly and pint-sized frame brought to the table, Ananya could have happily stayed there for hours. But, of course, being the consummate professional she is, she didn't. The moment Paati had finished her last batch of *bondos*, she said, '*Paati, pooja panna vandam!*' Of course, the question was rhetorical, but it was enough to ascertain the elder's next move. '*Aamaa. I'll go clean everything and tie all the garlands. Will you bring the food in ten minutes for neyvedhyam?*' 'Okay, paati', Ananya said sweetly, turning away to hide her glee. *Neyvedhyam* was what she had been counting on, for it was *Shivaraatri*, and offering food to the Gods, that they wouldn't touch ('Bless them', Ananya had once thought) was an integral part of the *pooja*. As soon as Paati had shuffled out of the kitchen, Ananya got to work. The *bondos* were works of art, achieving the perfect balance between crispiness and succulence, melting in her mouth. Paati's chutney was not to fall behind, the pudina being ground so well in the mixie that it was almost even, save for the *kadugu* that Paati had thoughtfully added to it afterward. Even the green chillies seemed to give the *bondos* just the right amount of spice, unlike the *tea-kadaï bondos* which would routinely sear the tongues of many an unsuspecting tourist, who wanted an 'authentic taste of Tamil Nadu'. Five minutes and ten *bondos* later, Ananya quietly gargled, pouring the water in from four inches above her lips, to avoid having to wash the *tumbler*. Wiping her slightly oily hands on her *kameez*, she walked back into the dining room, which had dried under the watch of the squeaking ceiling fan and entered the living room again. 'Both of you, come for *kalpooran!*' she said, to her grandfather and Rami. 'Paati has made *bondos* for lunch!' And with that remark, she looked

straight at her younger brother with almost pity in her eyes, whose own eyes could hardly contain his excitement. She almost hated that it was so easy to trick her brother. 'The fledgling will never learn', she once had concluded, after Ramnath had shimmied up the mango tree all morning, throwing down mangoes to her, only to find that she had finished most of the mangoes by the time he had come down. 'Rami, will you bring in the food for *neyvedhyam?* I'll go help Paati clean the *pooja* room and light the lamps and the *ooduvatti*', she said, before marching off to do exactly that. Meanwhile, the eager teenager jumped up and hurried to the kitchen, where Ananya had left him eight *bondos*, three of which he made quick work of, as he carried the food to the *pooja* room, plonking them down at the feet of the ornate-framed picture of Lord Ganapathi. Meanwhile, with the lamps lit, and the *ooduvatti* smoking slightly, the *pooja* was almost ready to begin, but not without the *prasaadam*. Dr. Narayan stood over the proceedings, surveying his lunch-to-be with considerable pleasure, as he waited for the *bondos* to arrive at the scene. And then, Ramnath walked in, carrying a plate of five *bondos*, much to Paati's consternation, and Dr. Narayan's intense disappointment, for he had promised himself three, the moment he heard of their existence. What ensued was the skillfully engineered chaos Ananya had brought about, for Rami confessed to eating *bondos*, Paati berated him for eating so many, and accusations and denials flew across the room, setting off Dr. Narayan's gastric problems, or so he said. The young Mr. Narayan joined the fray too, contributing very little to either side of the argument, but repeating his testimony of not being involved in a loud shrill voice. And at the middle of it all, her poor brother, looking dazedly befuddled, as he, wide-eyed, watched the proceedings of the investigation,

too surprised to contribute much in way of content, but often interjecting with feeble no's and but's.

Despite all of her pranks and devilish heists, the young matriarch was a pacifist ruler, benevolently putting out fires she started. And this was no different. With a few tut-tuts at Rami, a kiss on Paati's cheek, an acknowledgment of Dr. Narayan's apparently groaning stomach, and a glare of rebuke at her father, she lit the *kalpooram*, which effectively ended all discussions on the topic. For *kalpooram* in a Brahmin household was above everything else. '*Shankari, shankari, devi manokari, chandrakalakari ambikaye,*' Paati sang, instinctively. Dr. Narayan's gastric complications suddenly were put on hold, as he folded his arms over his paunch, and muttered the words to the *shlokam*. The younger Narayan men closed their eyes and bowed their pattai-covered foreheads in respect, while Ananya moved the *kalpooram* in circles, clearing the air around the Gods. But at the back of her brilliantly twisted mind, she knew what she was praying for- for Paati to make another batch of *bondos* for the household.



YELLOW

Soumya Rampal

Hillside Road in the Indian Agricultural Research Institute leads to a library with a clock tower that is heard for miles every hour. A turn leads to a quiet lane of houses facing the woods. Behind them, there are little patches of land which the residents have turned into kitchen gardens full of herbs and seasonal flowers.

My mother, like most of the professors in this little enclave, spends her early mornings in her garden. Sometimes, my father joins her when she needs help rearranging the heavy flower pots full of football lilies or, weeding the vegetable patch. In the mornings, while I make tea I can see both of them in the vegetable patch, picking stones and weeds and inspecting the leaves for little white parasites as they talk about their plans for the day and their worries. Occasionally, Mrs. Garg and her husband walk over to say hello or admire the roses. Every other Tuesday, Mrs. Dutt and her sister come over for tea in the mornings with a fresh vat of gossip from around the block. This is when my mother melts away from the gathering and goes for her favourite child - the mango tree, leaving my father to the hyperbolic rants of our neighbours. Some days, my sister and I join them, and my father jokes about his colleagues and my mother talks about her students. There are days when my father pokes around the lemon shrub and my mother digs around the mango tree, not talking to each other at all. Of late, the days when they talked were few and far between.

In early November 2012, on a bright

blue Saturday, I joined my grandmother as she hobbled around the garden dragging her favourite chair, trying to find the sunniest spot to settle in. The autumn was beginning to give way to winter and the sun was just warm enough to bask in all day long without burning up. My parents had planted their favourite flowers this autumn. My father's marigolds were outgrowing mother's chrysanthemums but come winter, we'd have little fiery, golden flower heads nodding along in the breeze.

"Dusky!" I heard my grandma call my name and I knew I had only moments before she shouted again. Eighty years old and hard of hearing, she expected things to be done and people to appear within moments for asking for them. "Coming, *biji!*" I screamed at the top of my voice, hoping it was loud enough for her. "Get me the mangoes! By Guru Nanak, this *kudi...*"

I scrambled out of my bed and towards the kitchen where the raw mangoes were kept in a large, green basket covered with newspaper. I hoisted the basket to my waist, grabbed a kitchen knife and made my way out to the garden as fast I could.

"What took you so long? Call the little one. MIN."

"She's right there by the lemon shrub, *biji,*" I interrupted her before she shouted another time and got Mrs. Dutt interested in our affairs. *Biji* is a lightning rod for drama.

"Oh, drag the cot right here -" she

pointed next to her- "both of you. Help me sort through these mangoes. By Nanak, that tree is possessed. Whoever heard of a mango tree bearing fruit in the winter? I guess I can't complain because they're sweeter than any I've had. Oh, the Grewals were so jealous last year, you'd think..." I zoned out as I busied myself with the raw mangoes. I turned them over in my hand, rapped the outside with my knuckles to check if they were hollow inside. My mother swears the parrots and the koel birds are her biggest enemies, ruining almost all the fruit on highest branches of the tree. "...as if it isn't enough that I've to hear about my son living away from his wife from my neighbours. *Kaka* works too har-"

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She didn't blink, and her eyes still shone but her lips started quivering and I heard a sharp breath. I stood there dumbfounded as my mother, who I had seen fight policemen and take on catcallers without hesitation broke right in front of me.

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What?" I snapped back to reality. "Papa is leaving? Where is he going? Why didn't they tell me anything about this?" I shot question after question at my nearly deaf grandma, as she rambled on without noticing that I had stopped inspecting the mangoes. I did not find it absurd that they had not chosen to sit my sister and me down to inform us but there had not been so much as a passing mention. Maybe my sister knew something about it, she always spends her evenings with my mum, pruning the roses. I went over to the lemon shrub where my sister poked a bright yellow one too high to reach with a stick.

"Hey, Mini, is papa leaving? What's *biji* on about?" I asked her, feeling my stomach drop. "Yeah, he's going away somewhere. I dunno where, but this is hardly unexpected." She was strangely nonchalant about this. It stung me that she knew about this long enough to make peace with it before I'd even heard of it.

"I mean, they've been arguing lately, this makes perfect sense. That's why he's leaving. It's so embarrassing for me to live here, Dusky. You've no idea what my friends say. Just yesterday - OUCH!". She whipped her hand back and I saw a flash of blood. "Freaking thorns!" She shook her other hand and swore at the tree.

"You know, you don't know as much as you think you do," I gave her my best smug smile as she made a face while sucking her thumb.

"Look, they haven't ever been able to resolve their problems well. You know it's the same fights over and over, and I think one of them just had enough this time. So much so that he's leaving her -" she jerked her head in my grandmother's direction - "here. It's almost always because of her and he's always jumping in to fight on her



behalf. Maybe even he's tired of it now," she explained in a matter-of-factly voice. "Damn, I should put a band-aid on this, you know, while I still can." She inspected the wound.

"Stop swearing, you're thirteen. If Mum finds out, you'll be fertilizer," I warned her as she walked back. "She's got better things to worry about than the stupid tree or me swearing," she waved her bloody thumb in the air, without looking back.

I went back to the cot and returned to sorting through the mangoes. I did not want to believe that my younger sister had somehow understood what had taken my parents sixteen years to confront. This was not my fight but by virtue of that belief, I had isolated myself completely while my family fought and fell apart on the battleground of our home. My parents did not want to worry my fifteen-year-old self with their arguments. Mini had made peace with what was about to happen or was pretending to do so, and quite honestly, I didn't know which was worse. I was aware of the difference between my parents but despite the

rumours and the squabbles, I couldn't think of two people who could've made a better team. Mum always thinks first, her mind runs at a million miles an hour, prioritizing, delegating, multitasking. I wasn't particularly fond of her but my mother is a force to be reckoned with. As much as a pedantic realist my mother is, Papa is the dreamer without whom she may never have got off the ground. And as much as I knew in my heart that my parents made a great pair, I also knew that they were both too proud for their own good.

As I watched *biji* dice one green mango after another, I could've sworn that every time the blade fell, I felt it slice through my mind, destroying one hopeful scenario after another. "Get the spices, *kudiye*. And don't forget the salt. These must be pickled and rested well before the summer. We don't want this to rot, do we?" my grandmother explained.

Next summer, Papa wouldn't be here. I looked out of the kitchen window as

I ground up the cumin and the red chillies. The vegetable patch lay barren. The earth was dry and cracked and old, brown leaves from Garg's rose bushes lay strewn across it. I remembered a morning a few months ago when my mother said that she wanted to grow potatoes this year and Papa wanted *okra*. They asked me and I had told them that I didn't care too much for their plants. I wondered if - had I been less ignorant - I could've made a difference. I wondered if, at that point, I would've wanted to do so.

Over the next few days, I noticed the subtle hints of distance. The hushed whispers when my parents thought that my sister and I were asleep, averting their gazes when I tried to approach the topic of our family. Gloom hung over the house like a cloud and all of us knew that it was the calm before the storm that kept us going. The trouble was that the longer it stayed calm, the fiercer the squall would be. I tried every trick in the book, cornering them, individually and together but they wouldn't talk. They had closed themselves off just like I had. I wondered if just like me, they felt like they were living in a house full of strangers.

The doorbell rang and before my grandmother could scream at me for being idle, I called out, "I'M GETTING IT!"

I opened the door, hoping for mum and I was greeted by a version of her I had not yet seen. She stood outside, stiffer than usual, her face ashen and her fist curled up, unable to step inside the house or make any sort of movement.

"Mum, what's wrong? Mum?" I stepped aside, hoping she'd snap out of her trance.

"Mum, it's okay. I know about Papa. It's alright. It's just a transfer. Maybe

you need time to figure things out. We'll be fine," I tugged at her arm and reassured her. My sister had come to the door by then hoping for a goodie or two.

"*Anna!* It's been so long! Namaste! Did you get anything for me?" My sister ran out the door pushing past my mother and me as my maternal grandmother got out of the car. I was so stunned by my mother's statue-esque greeting that I had not bothered to look past her. Happily chattering about mangoes and lemons, Mini led *amma* inside.

I tugged at my mother's arm once more. "Mum, please just come in. It's only for two years. I promise we'll all be ok."

"I need to talk to you, Dusky," my mother interrupted me. Her voice was as cold as steel and her eyes shiny. I had seen this look before when she interviewed her students, only then it was less intense.

"Cancer," She whispered.

"What? No. It's just his job, Mu-"

"Metastatic cancer."

"What are you talking about?" A storm started building up inside me. It made its way from my gut to my throat. Slowly, I managed to say a few words, "Come inside. Talk here."

I wrapped my arm around my mother and led her into my room and made her sit on my bed. My sister and *amma* were outside. I could still hear only my sister talking about the chrysanthemums and marigolds. I close the door and turned to face my mother.

She didn't blink, and her eyes still shone but her lips started quivering

and I heard a sharp breath. I stood, there dumbfounded as my mother, who I had seen fight policemen and take on catcallers without hesitation broke right in front of me. For several minutes, I stood rooted to my spot as she curled up on my bed, sobbing, her face red and tear stained. I saw her lose every piece of emotional armour for those moments of vulnerability in front of her daughter who she had not bothered with any of her worries much less the state of her marriage. Her eyes welled up with tears that rose and fell within seconds locked into mine and I felt my throat close up again.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

"I-It's *baba*. I g-got a call. I-I was taking a class," she stammered. My brain started piecing this together and as I tried to make sense of what was now happening around me, I started to lose feeling in my body.

My mother took a deep breath. "He had a heart attack and was admitted to a hospital. They did all sorts of tests and found out that he has metastatic lung cancer". She paused. "Stage four." My mind went numb as I struggled to process the last four words. I stumbled forward and sat beside her. Patting her head as her body shook with sobs. Her husband would leave soon. Papa would go away for a job. *Baba*, her Papa, was going to die. My grandfather was going to die. Her own mother was old and suffering. I hadn't heard *amma* say a word either.

My mother sat broken and all alone. In a flash, all feeling returned to my body and grief slapped me across the face. I let loose all the fear, sadness and doubt that I had held within me and it poured from my eyes in tears. Mum and I sobbed and wailed in pain. For what seemed like hours we purged ourselves of all the pain anger and loneliness that we held inside and all the more that was to come. Even after we were done, we held each other. Rocking back and forth and sniffing, occasionally breaking down



again. My head blazed with blinding pain and a vortex of emptiness, and anticipation for its departure. I readied myself, as did my mother, to feel hurt for ourselves and the rest of the family. As we got up and wiped our tears, I heard a soft knock on the door.

“Sophie? I heard about your father”, Papa walked into my room. Mum closed her eyes and inhaled, composing herself.

“Yes, there's very little -”

“Please don't go yet. Please!” I interrupted my mother's steady voice and flew towards my father and hugged him. It had been a while since I had. I didn't care how proud they were. I had seen one of them fall to pieces and I couldn't bear to think of Papa going through

the same ordeal. He looked at me in the eye as I felt tears well up again at the thought of him not being with us foreshadowing the thought of *baba* leaving forever.

“Dusky, I'm not leaving yet. But I need to talk to mum”, my father smiled at me reassuringly.

I left the room, the pit in my stomach now becoming smaller and joined Mini and *amma* in the garden. I hugged both my grandmothers and as one of them reminded me to shake the pickle jars now resting in the sun (“You dawdle, *chawalan na maar!*”). My parents joined us. They talked in hushed whispers but when my mother and I looked at each other we nodded in understanding and smiled. I

looked over at the flower pots under the mango that were planted every single winter. A few months later, the little green stems and branches always grew strong to support enough beauty to make two people get along again.

MEMORIES DIPPED IN CHASHNI

Aarooshi Garg

It has been a while since he left, and I suppose the silver lining is that it rained the day he did. Nanu, or Comrade BD as he loved to be called, was birthed into the world amidst torrential thunder, with his superstitious mother wailing about all the bad omens. The designated midwife was out cold from all the *bhaang*, the emergency midwife wouldn't stop singing some obscure Bhojpuri songs, the bats entered the room and provided audience while his father accidentally set the curtains on fire. He was born an anarchist, and his conservative mother, God bless her soul, was massively unprepared. The day he died, sadly, there were no bats or midwives or fumbling fathers - just a quiet room with an unfinished cup of his morning cha. He had made his bed, the neat man that he was, with his favourite shirt hanging by the hook, to never be worn again. My only source of these kernels of information is Nani, and I know better than to speculate on the nature of his death. I didn't cry too much because the last time we spoke, he told me he wanted to be celebrated, not mourned. *Pushpa, I hate tears re*, he would quip.

That a wealthy zamindar with farmers under his thumb would have a son who spent his life fighting for the property rights of peasants is a beautiful miracle that I'm proud of. He gave me my name, the borderline-obnoxious and ridiculous spelling of it, and most importantly - my nickname, *Rooh*. Rooh, for his belief in the resilience of the human soul. I sometimes wonder if he called me Rooh to assure me that I would always recover. I can safely say that he gave me my first sense of

identity; a small blip on the cartesian map of this world that I could stake a claim to. I carry it on my skin every day, like one of those personalized badges of honour he would make me. Just like the jalebis.

The thing is - Nanu loved jalebis. Well, I actually don't know *how* much he loved them - because we never really found out. He definitely liked eating them - because he'd talk about their small shape, and their general crunchiness. That's what made a good jalebi, here in Lucknow. We don't really eat the Delhi variety of jalebis - the giant, gooey ones. We have small, crunchy ones - ones which are not as sweet.

I bought jalebis last week. I bought them because there was really no one who would buy jalebis anymore. Only two fifty grams - but there was nobody left even to buy that much.

*

I'd come to Lucknow on the premise of signing some papers. I actually came because I missed jalebis, and I missed Lucknow. For a city I wanted nothing of for the longest time, I have grown ridiculously attached to it. I had grown to love it, in my own way. I associated lots of things with Lucknow. I associated Nanu a lot with it, obviously. I grew up here. I grew up here in a time when one of the only things to do for entertainment was to buy ice cream. The city hasn't changed much, over time - the traffic has started clogging up. It didn't use to do that, everything was just thirty minutes away from home in Lucknow. When

Nanu was dying - and I keep talking about him like he is long gone. I went for mid-sem break, and a week before that, the cancer took him. Well, anyway - when Nanu was dying, I was very hungry in the evening, and very tense. Ma was with me, and it was looking like I wasn't going to be able to go to Lucknow for the mid-sem. Which had made me miserable, and I get very miserable when I am hungry. I started crying, on and off, thinking about everything in Lucknow, and thinking about Nanu.

Mamma was rather shocked, to say the least. She asked me why I was silently crying away, like some godforsaken heroine in an awful movie.

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It was stupid of me to buy so many jalebis. Then again, I couldn't quite swallow the concept of buying lesser than two fifty grams. It seemed absurd.

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"I'm hungry," I wailed. "I want jalebis. Who's going to buy us jalebis now?"

Most of this came out in a more blubbered fashion. Ma was shocked, obviously. Later, when the news came and I met her at the hospital, we both broke down into tears, like some godforsaken heroines in awful movies.

"You were right," she sobbed to me.

"Who's going to buy jalebis now?"

It's curious how a person can be summarised in that much.

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I am not sure as to how I would break down these feelings stemming from his ceremonious exit. My anger was like a confused 10-year-old who carried the weight of the world on her shoulders. It was alive, and it begged for attention.

But now the lividity has moved on to a better understanding of grief, loss and reconciliation. Truth is, that no self-help book will teach us to become more than our traumas. No amount of kind words from relatives we see only for weddings/funerals/other catastrophes will help us cope better. Grief is personal to the point where we can hardly share it and hope that the fundamental law of division would apply.

I poured out the jalebis in a bowl. I know exactly which bowl. My Nani has a system, you see. Every single piece of cutlery has a purpose. There's a designated *dahi* spoon, and a designated *dal* spoon.

I, personally, had made a vow to buy spoons of the same size to avoid systems of any kind. My grandparents were all about systems. Air

conditioners weren't turned on before their time. Everything happened on schedule. If not schedule, everything happened according to how it is supposed to happen. In between systems were stories - for some reason, everyone had time for stories. And Nanu had been the first person to tell me that buying books was never a waste of money. Ever.

I have a lot of food-related memories of Nanu. Along with the jalebis and imartis, I remember making *zarda* with him. I remember him buying us ice cream in the guise of getting us something good to eat but enjoying it much more than we ourselves did. I remember him hating chocolate. I remember the way he would praise the concept of boxed sundaes, since everyone got their share. And the way he would tell us of food he had eaten as a child.

I remember Nanu making *kheer*. I remember the giant *kadhai*, the *kalchul*, the *angan* in which he worked. I remember him letting Pranav and I taste it, and I remember thinking that all the men in our family could cook so well.

Papa also cooks, you see. He cooks better than Nanu, and he *loves* experimenting. He can cook better than all of us, and he remembers Dadima's recipes of *shahi tukda* so well. The fact that my father could cook had never given me a complex as to what a woman should and should not do. I had always seen my father cooking as much as I saw my mother cook, and I had always seen him help around as much as my mother did. Gender roles did instil themselves in my mind eventually, but not in a cast iron way. It was a lot easier for me to assert my identity as a feminist later in life.

Even Nanu helped, in that way. He was a man who was a lot more traditional, but somewhere it niggled at me that for a man who came from another generation, he certainly had rather modern thoughts. He was a fierce communist, and my fondest memories of him are the nights we spent discussing Marx, Stalin, Orwell and Mao with the cha he made. Lately I have been attempting to recreate his cha, and so far, my estimation is that it included lemon, ginger, cardamom, honey and a smidge of kesar – but I might be completely wrong, for I was never one for culinary pursuits. He stood by Ma and Mausi through all obstacles life would throw at them, and they are now formidable women, self-reliant to the limit of making people uncomfortable. He revelled in that, the uncanny ability of exposing people's biases and insecurities by making them uncomfortable, for “life is not a housewarming party and we are not its hosts, ergo, we have no obligation to pacify unruly guests”.

It had to take a man of strong character to raise daughters like that.

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It was stupid of me to buy so many jalebis. Then again, I couldn't quite swallow the concept of buying lesser than two fifty grams. It seemed absurd.

Then again, I was rather alone in this house. There was no one to share jalebis with.

I mentally made a note to make pudding with the remaining jalebis. I walked out to the garden to look at the *firangipani* flowers.

Nanu and I both loved flowers, and I loved firangipanis as much as he did. I would pick some in a bowl when they would bloom and put them in the dining room. He always said that the house was fragrant with their smell.

I don't know when I knew that Nanu loved the Lucknow house like nothing else. Nanu's attachment should have been visible when I noticed how much he cared for the garden and which flowers were to bloom during the winter. I should have seen how much he cared with the number of times he would have things renovated. My room, Ma's bathroom, his own room, everything. He put a swing set in the small lawn when Pranav and I were living there. He would undertake the excruciating Diwali cleaning, propping himself on wobbly chairs to sweep off cobwebs. He would wake up at 7 am, irrespective of the season, and prepare the breakfast while softly crooning “chala jaata hoon, kisi ki dhoon mein”. He loved the *chhat*, where he would host many evenings with friends and family. Nanu was firmly against selling or renting the home, which is a crumbling *haveli* in reality. The haveli was his life's project, and so were the animals and birds he lovingly reared and protected. I don't know what will become of our home now, with its

most ardent lover gone.

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If I was analysing this as a literature student, I would say that this story has got the major themes of family, time and death.

Which is strange, because I'm just trying to write about my Nanu, my best friend.

When Nanu died, I remember my aunt crying, I even remember my mother crying, briefly. It's not a very nice image to have in my head. There's something very distinctly uncomfortable about seeing your parents cry. For years, I had been the gatekeeper of my mother's pain when my father was away. When she was in pain, she would scream. That's also something a child should not see. But with the pain, I always got to see how Ma was able to handle it, how she could operate with crippling pain. I think my mother is the strongest person on the planet, and I have seen her sob her heart out.

Yet I always took solace in the fact that I had never seen my father cry. One has to take solace in small things, when one is a child – and it gave me a little comfort that there was one parent figure that was just that – a parent. I didn't have to see my father as a *person* for a long time.

I don't know whom I felt more sympathetic for, when Nanu died. For the children, who were meant to see their parents die at some time or another, or for the widow, who was lost in a changing world, with nothing more to hang on to? Or even for myself, and his six grandchildren, who were sad, sorry, but had not as strong a claim on tears, and an even lesser one on sympathy?

Parents always say that it is harder for them to see the death of children.

Children don't have arguments for this, but I think it is equally hard for children to see the death of their parents. I have to reconcile with doing this for my mother and father. I wonder how I will cope with the idea of them not being there, when it is hard enough for me to not have Nanu in the upstairs apartment anymore, waiting for everyone to say bye to him? I wonder what it would feel like, for the person and his conscience to stop existing? Well, it would be easy for the person in question, of course, but what about everyone left behind? Death is messy that way. It leaves people behind.

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I always wonder if Ma ever saw Nanu that way, if she ever thinks about all the aspects of his life that are now permanently lost. I thought about him as a twenty-something, or him as someone trying to smoke for the first time. I thought of all the things he could have thought of, after having lived for eighty years. I didn't know what they were, but it made me feel strange that he could have had an existence which no one else knew of.

Eventually, I suppose we all just become stories. My grandparents will be stories for my children, and my parents will be stories for theirs. No one will know that we existed beyond the story itself. That Nanu, who is now no more, was a breathing, living person. Someone who enjoyed sitting in the garden, and ice cream, who put up lights during Diwali, and bought cake during Christmas. No one will know how well he trained Vodka. No one will know the way he would speak, or the way he told stories - pausing, in the middle, and saying "kher," "baehaal," or "mashruf" with his fingers put together. No one will remember the way he would walk, slowly and steadily, or the way he

would watch TV with all the *masala* Bollywood movies. No one will know that he loved playing cards, and that Nani and I would regularly beat him and Pranav at *kotpees*. No one will know of his quirky cufflinks and ancient *khadaus*. I don't know what will be remembered by the time we're all gone. Perhaps, we will learn to find salvation in these narratives, when their protagonists are long gone.

TRISTESSE

Ashwin Kumar

Turning the final right towards the newly built National Exhibition Centre off Akbar Road, I checked the time: 6.13 p.m. I barely had any time left. Braking to a stop near the valet post, I stepped out and handed over my car keys, taking out the suit and my sheets from the backseat.

My boss had just given me a piece of his mind for not submitting the reports on time. I couldn't have cared less; I had been practicing for my performance day and night. He just had to ruin the day for me.

"Focus, Rajveer!" I berated myself. Cursing under my breath, I moved towards the door, looking for any sight of Dada or Nivi. Nervously, I looked at my watch- ten minutes to go.

The watch was Dada's, and I'd received it as a gift from him on my 18th birthday. I'd had to earn it, of course. The challenge was to have my first recital before I came of age, and I had succeeded. The real reward had been watching him watch me from the audience, smiling a smile so wide it stretched the limits of happiness. It had warmed me to my core, and I had ended up crying on stage. That day, I'd discovered the true power of music, and I owed it all to him.

My parents had next to zero interest in music, and it was him who had started teaching me Hindustani classical music at home, and only him, who'd encouraged me to join western music classes after seeing my fascination for the piano. All of it was a means to an end. He always said that the ultimate

goal was music itself. There had been a period when my parents were strictly against me learning music as they felt I wouldn't study enough. I'd cried and complained, and Dada had come to my rescue. He'd fought and fasted and finally compelled my parents to concede.

Dada was the source of my inspiration, and my pillar of support when it came to music. He had attended all of my recitals without fail, and I couldn't wait to see him today.

My phone rang in my right pocket, playing the ringtone I'd set specifically for Nivi. Ever reliable, my best friend and childhood crush (she doesn't know), she used to come to my house to learn from Dada. She had the most beautiful voice, and I absolutely adored her company, making the classes even more fun. As luck would have it, Nivi shifted to my school, my neighborhood, and even my music class. She soon became a regular at the Roy household, and Dada got along with her really well. We'd grown very close over the years, and she became my closest friend, always encouraging me to follow my passion for music. I'd asked her to pick up Dada and get him here comfortably. I didn't want him roaming the streets in autos at his age and in this heat. I realized Nivi must have been calling about that. I looked around helplessly. The valet had driven off with my car and I had no way to free my hands.

"Hello, Mr Rajveer," a voice called from the entrance. I looked up at a man dressed in a white suit, solid black

shirt and red tie giving me the ominous impulse to look away. It was too flamboyant for my eyes. Yet, I refrained from doing so. Social interactions are a necessary part of life, of course, but I never had the taste for them. The lack of a reply that followed relayed the message to him, as I stared blankly, my right pocket buzzing, my coat on the verge of slipping over my forearms and falling.

"Allow me," he said, and took the sheets from my right hand, and a muted thanks was all I could mutter as he accompanied me into the large hall through the revolving doors. The

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All of it was a means to an end, he always said; the ultimate goal was music itself.

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blast of cool air from the air conditioners was a welcome respite from the Delhi heat. I loosened my collar a bit, allowing the sweat on my neck to evaporate. The phone had stopped ringing. I wanted this man to be gone so I could call Nivi back.

As we walked out of the passageway, I looked up at the interior of the exhibition centre, and was immediately awestruck. Forty thousand square feet of open space looked back at me. People entered the central room from various sides, all dressed in formal garb. The entire area was filled with musical instruments kept on display, rare and antique pieces that must each have been worth over lakhs, if not crores. I glimpsed a Stradivarius violin standing on the very first pedestal, and a stark white concert grand piano right next to it. A huge glass dome covered the ceiling, letting the dying sunlight diffuse the room with a warm glow, adding a layer of emotion to the cool LED lighting near the ground.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” the man started, and I realized how rude I’d been to not ask first. ‘I am Vikram Singhanian, art and music connoisseur. I like music for a living’. Drats! I cursed myself for not having realized sooner. This person was the richest music producer in all of north India, and owned three recording labels, apart from having his own art museum. People were probably groveling somewhere to get an appointment with him right now. ‘You’re being modest, sir. I’ve heard a lot about you. In fact, I really admire your work. I apologize for not having conversed properly earlier’.

“It’s fine, *bachhe*,” he said. “The truth is –” he fiddled with an expensive looking pen “– I’m quite interested in you”.

“Tell me. How does it feel, having

gone from an Indian classical background to western?” he asked, ignoring my confusion. I could feel an intimidating aura flow from him.

“It’s just a means to an end, sir. The ultimate goal is music itself,” I said, beaming. It felt great, quoting my grandfather. Dada would be proud. “It’s just different ways of learning a language. The raga, *Yaman*, for example, is just the same as the Lydian mode in western music.”

“Interesting, very interesting,” he lifted a finger to his chin. “What are you playing today?” he asked.

“Tristesse. Chopin’s Etude No. 3, Op.10”. I wondered why he was talking to me.

“Strange name,” he remarked.

I’d often wondered the same thing. *Tristesse*. The name meant sadness, in French. Yet, the song started and ended on a light note. Few could guess what the composer intended to mean.

“Anyway, come see me after your performance. I might have an offer for you,” he said, stopping in front of a door. ‘I’ll take your leave here. Do well.’

As he walked off, the possible implications of what he had just said hit me. *Did he just make me a studio offer?* I couldn’t believe it, not really, but the heart is a place where fantasies take root quickly. I could feel my face stretching into a grin. An announcement for the commencement of the session brought me back to reality, and I realized I’d been standing there staring at nothing. Going through the door, I stepped into the performance hall’s backstage, where I was guided to the dressing room. Leaving all my belongings on the table, I went in to change my

clothes.

I could have a recording of my own.

I took off my shirt and jeans, stripping to my underwear. I couldn’t wait to tell Dada or Nivi.

They’ll be so happy when I tell them. I donned the fresh white shirt and black pants.

That means I’ll have more time for music, maybe I could get a permanent deal and...I’ll tell Nivi I like her. And I’ll tell Dada how much he means to me, and I’ll get him the scotch he likes so much.

I chuckled. Yes, it would be great. I put on my bowtie, the neck a little tight. *But my job? I’ll have to leave it. But I can’t do that! Both ma and pa...and how will I...would she like a jobless musician?*

As I put the coat on, it felt as if I was putting on the weight of my responsibilities. Music as a career was hard.

I tried to shut these emotions out. Right now, what mattered was the performance. *Sadness*, I thought, *I come to play you.*

I exited the changing room to see four missed calls from Nivi. I’d forgotten all about her call earlier. I cursed myself and tried to cheer myself up, before attempting to ring her back. Just as I was dialing in her number, she burst in through the door.

“Hey hey hey!” I backed up, thrown back by the sudden appearance. She stood there, not two feet in front of me, wearing blue jeans and a white top, her open hair falling over her shoulders, her glasses just balanced on the tip of her nose. Her cheeks were puffed and her face red, as if she’d run here.

“Why haven't you been picking up my calls, dumbass?” she shot an accusatory glance at the phone in my hand. She looked tense.

Such is the effect of the people you care for, that when you see them unhappy, your uneasiness, your troubles melt away. I smiled, a smile so true I couldn't have made myself accomplish it had I been alone here.

“I'm fine Nivi! I'm really glad you're here. I'm going on stage soon!” I grinned like a schoolboy. “Did you get Dadaji seated?” I asked, wanting to cheer her up, trying to divert my attention.

She bit her lip. I don't know how someone can look so adorable when they're worried. I felt my heart liquefy into a warm puddle. “What's the matter, Nivi?” She was standing just two feet away from me.

She looked up, then down again, then took a step forward and hugged me. I knew my face was beetroot red. I stood still like a statue, my heartbeat picking up pace by the moment.

“Wha-”

“Raj...” she began. I heard the quiver in her voice.

“Yes?”

“Dadaji, he's in the hospital, Raj”.

I still stood still, my heart still thundered, but my face lost all color. I looked for breath that just wouldn't come.

“What happened?” I barely managed a whisper.

Nivi looked up, her brown eyes an island in a miniature sea of tears.

“He had a stroke. He will be fine

though. I have been trying to get to you, but you weren't picking up. I was so worried about you,” she said, stepping back, conscious of the closeness now.

“Let's go,” I said blankly. A solitary tear slid down my face.

“No!” she exclaimed. “You have to perform!”

“What about it? I'll perform some other time”. I felt like I'd just fallen from cloud nine to hell.

“He'll be fine. I just wanted to let you know, not drag you off!” she pleaded me to go perform. Something in me writhed and twisted, tearing at my insides. I wanted to shout, I wanted to scream, but I was frozen shut.

“For Dadaji,” she said, softly.

It hurt.

“I'm sorry,” she sobbed.

I knew it wasn't her fault. I also knew that he would never want me to back out of a performance. The stage was God, and you treated your God with respect. I managed a weak smile.

“Yes, Nivi. Don't say sorry, it's not your fault. I'll play today. I owe it to him to perform”.

She smiled back at me. “Go get it, big boy,” she said.

Just then there was a knock on the door. We hurriedly wiped our tears.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Mr Rajveer, you're up in five minutes, please get to the stage,” the voice on the other side said.

“I'll be right there”.

I turned to Nivi. “I'm sorry for worrying you. Go grab a seat. We'll go to see him as soon as this is done, okay?” I tried my best to keep myself composed.

“Okay,” she said before turning to leave. She smiled at me again from the door. “Do your best”.

Five minutes later I was standing at the foot of the flight of stairs that would lead me to the stage, eyes closed, the piece now the music of my soul that lit

up the dark corners each time the progression hit a chord. Thoughts of my grandfather's health flitted through my mind, augmenting the emotions the song held.

“Please welcome Mr Rajveer Roy on stage, with a big round of applause!” the emcee announced, and I started walking up. With each step my thought becoming more and more distant, my mind focusing on the piece, the objectivity of the notes that I had to play, the timing of the pedals, and the coordination between my hands. My fidgeting hands calmed down to a halt as I emerged onto the stage, into the spotlight. I walked, back straight, head held high, towards the polished black concert grand set center-stage. I reached the stool, and adjusted its height so that my feet lay comfortably on the pedals, and my hands found the grooves between the keys that my fingers had started to call home.

C1, C6, C4, I played, my little ritual. I let the sounds of the base note travel through my body. It was time to start.

I took a deep breath. The crowd was silent. I saw Nivi sitting in the third row, beaming.

My fingers found the first notes of the song. It started off on a pleasant note, like spring was just around the corner. I flowed through the first few bars, the light notes setting the mood and pace for the song. I felt myself becoming more and more comfortable with the instrument. The song rose just a bit, teasing a crescendo, and went back down.

It's around this time during the performance that an artist first finds the courage to look up, connect with his audience. I turned my head towards the spot where Dada usually sat: the far left seat on the fifth row.

The spot was empty.

An emptiness began to grow inside my stomach, as the notes began to feel distant from me. The notes rose in intensity, and I felt a certain melancholy rising with them inside me.

Music defined who I was. For me, it was my mode of communication, a way to tell the world I existed, to put into form what my words could not. I lost the little bit of composure I had regained, and countless emotions gushed through my being. I needed my Dada. He had never missed any of my concerts, and it was incomprehensible to me that he was missing this one.

Why Dada? Why?

The song was in a state of confusion, trying to emerge from a whirlpool, struggling against the current that was dragging me along with it into the pit of despair. It jumped, trying to be happy, but the chords told the stories of several failures, and each attempt at rising up was met with a sad end, a minor.

I thought of the opportunity I could get, of Vikram Singhania. He stood near the gate, his white suit catching the light. I wanted to make my music my identity. Would it be worth the gamble of losing my job?

It isn't fair! I cried, to the only person whom I could share my emotions with—myself. My hands flew over the keys, hitting them with an intensity I had not known, the song building up tension inside me. Tears were being sucked out, and it was taking all my strength to not cry. I looked up again, at Nivi. She was the one I trusted the most, and I knew she would support me no matter what. Why did I doubt her, when I hadn't even given her a chance to prove her faith in me? She saw the confusion in my eyes; the fear, the tension. Her eyes reacted to mine,

and I saw myself in her. She knew. She understood me better than anyone else.

The song reached the crescendo, halfway through. My hands were moving of their own accord now, and I felt the song deciding my thoughts, guiding my mind to the conclusions that I had never faced. I knew I was playing wildly, barely making it to each note. The notes were discordant now, as if the composer knew what I was going through. Could I get ahead with music in my life? Would Dada be alright, would he be here to see my next performance? Would I ever be able to tell Nivi how I felt?

The tension reached its peak, and I slammed the last notes of the crescendo down, and my hands stayed.

Of course.

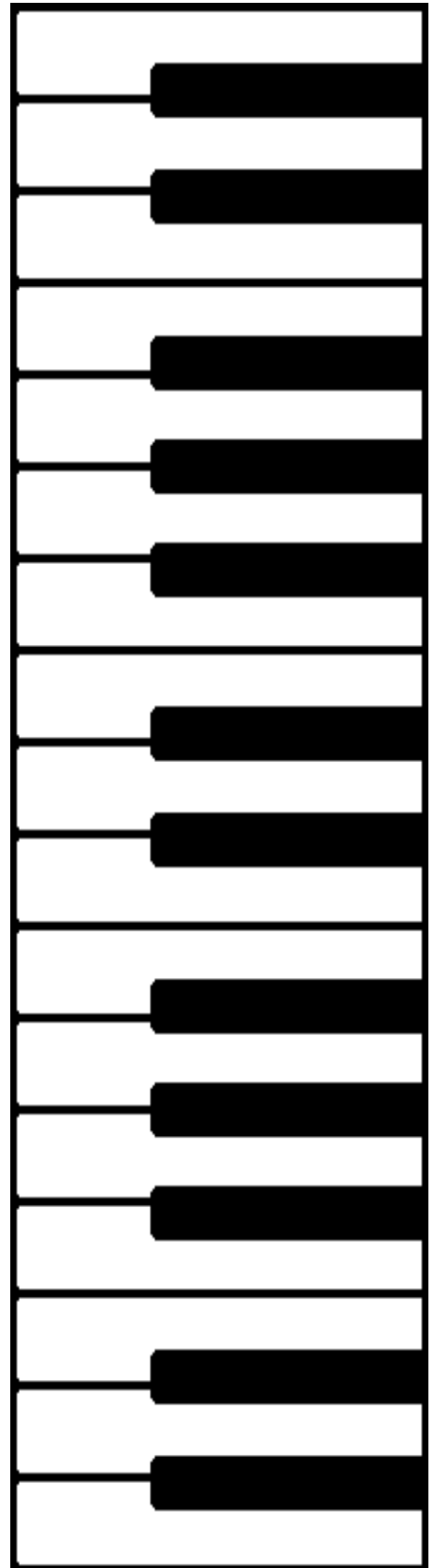
Why would all those things not happen?

Why would Dada not be well? Nivi had told me he would be.

I looked at the black and white keys, at how I had so often seen his reflection in those very keys, and how he'd spur me on as my fingers failed to reach the right notes. My hands moved into position and played the next line, softer than the lightest breeze. Chopin had guided me through the storm.

I realized why this song was called sadness, why it seemed so happy at first. You couldn't have sadness without happiness, and happiness would lose all meaning without the essence of sadness. The two were one, a wave that let you down when you were strong, and pulled you up when you were weak. The sadness I had felt just then was testimony to the happiness in my life.

The song settled into the old form



again, of a spring yet to come. Yet,
now, the audience knew that spring
was but a happy memory, and that
winter would have to be passed in the
warmth of that imaginary sun.
I looked at Nivi, my sun. I'd realized,
in that moment, that I owed it to
myself to be honest to her. No matter
what happened, she would still hold
the same place for me, and I knew I
had seen something similar in those
eyes.

I looked at Singhania, the door to
possibilities open behind him, and I
understood that what was coming
would be revealed only when it came.
I would face it with what capacity I
had.

Chopin took the song to another
slightly high note, this time not
melancholy, but accepting of the fact
that bad times and good times both
come. The song had now found its
conclusion, as had my soul.
Acceptance was how it all resolved,
and I had accepted certain things
about myself. Sadness, it seems, was a
misnomer. The truth was simply not
that easy to see.

My left and right hands slowed down,
and I ended the song in a perfect
cadence, satisfying the mind and soul,
and I knew that I had taken everyone
in this hall through my own emotions,
and I had finally made this piece my
own.

I stood up, turned to the audience and
bowed. When I straightened up, and
bowed, the whole auditorium, full of
three thousand people, whom I hadn't
paid attention to till now,
acknowledged me, their applause
telling me I had conveyed all that I
had within me.

Scanning the third row, I found the
pair of eyes I was looking for.

They had tears in them, and I realized,
to my happiness, that my eyes
mirrored hers.

YOU AND EYE

Thinley Chodon

What is your favourite facial feature?

Eyes.

I came across a picture of an old scrapbook that someone had posted on Facebook recently. It took me back to the time when us millennials did not have *Buzzfeed* quizzes or *Know your friend better* quizzes to keep a record of all the memories made with friends. The picture caught my attention because it featured this particular question. Its funny how pretentious and harmlessly self-obsessive the questions were in what were popularly called "Friendship books".

You have nice almond shaped eyes. And there's some bling bling in them. This was something that the nine year old me could not get over. I loved almonds. And I still love a little bling. So, there came a thread of oddly satisfying and highly intelligent analogies by my fellow nine year old friends and this is how my eyes became my most distinctive facial feature which seemed to draw everyone either toward or away from me once I moved to *Dilli*- the place which became my home sooner than I expected and offered true friendship to me in the form of Loss, Longevity and Growth.

Loss, my beautiful sister, you were someone I found in junior school. She and I hit it off instantly- not with a handshake but rather aggressively, with our fists hitting against one another's as a result of marching across the narrow lanes up to the grounds, which meant one too many involuntary fist bumps. We were the elected captains of the

marching-squad and Loss introduced herself with a giggle, a wink and a complaint. "We've got to learn to move together, you know? Or you move onward and I will follow."

This is how it started. I felt comfortable around her because it was the first time since I moved that someone spoke to me without asking me whether or not I was Chinese. We learned to watch each other and got to build our own rhythm, exchanging glances of victory on noticing that our fists retained their original colour instead of turning red. On Sports Day, she looked at me and joked about how, at first, she wondered whether I could see lesser than the others because of my small eyes and we laughed it off. Two pairs of eyes shut tight because that's what stomach clenching laughter does. It looked like the both of us had slits for eyes whenever we were together. The size of my eyes didn't matter then. By the time we entered the dark ages of puberty, nothing could separate us except the commute back home. Life was easy with her. I gained a friendship that I thought would last for a lifetime. A friendship that had seen me through my awkward interactions with parents to then calling her parents my own *Maataji* and *Baapu*. Loss showed me love when I needed it most, she showed me kindness when I was cruel to myself and became my confidante and my first best friend. And then, I fucked up. Though she never stopped trying to be around, I lost her. The loss was something that I had propelled.

During march-squad practices, she and I often saw each other eat from our tiffins in secrecy because we never

wanted to share the almonds that our mothers packed for us. Almonds, my mother mentioned, were great for memory. I still remember us fondly. I think she remembers me too because I did move onward and Loss followed, as she had promised when we were nine. This is where Longevity entered.

She was and *is* my best friend. Longevity, my dearest friend, you entered my life with eyes overflowing with tears.

“

You have nice almond shaped eyes. And there's some bling bling in them.

”

She was the new girl in middle school, who couldn't speak in Hindi to save her life. That was something that made me want to reach out to her because I had faced the same when I moved to our *Dilli*. Our introductions didn't lead to any conversation immediately. She was too busy finding ways to rush back home post school everyday. Now, I don't quite remember how exactly we hit it off but it definitely had something to do with tears. There was this strange sense of belonging that I felt when I saw her. My wandering eyes seemed to land on her seat every time she sat alone and I finally decided to talk to her. She cried quite often during her first month in school and could not seem to fit in with the crowd- the crowd that laughed at her because her eyes were like faucets that needed some plumbing. I wanted to be the nuts and bolts if not the plumber. What I learned when I first spoke with Longevity was how much her eyes had swollen up and how much she loved her old home. I made it a point to give her company because I began to understand the importance of loving a place and the ability to *make* it one's home. Lunch breaks and free periods were spent talking about a plethora of things that every teenaged Catholic school student would have liked to engage in- music, marks, love interests and the annual Christmas play. Something made me feel that this would remain for a lifetime, again; that this friendship would hold. We sang in the school choir together for all the years that we were in school and my name changed from Thinley to *Momo* when I was fifteen. Her calling me *Momo* wasn't something that came as a surprise to me because I knew I could trust her with myself like that and that the jokes didn't mean anything, except that it was my eyes that made her initiate the first few conversations about her love for Tibetan prayer flags, the food and the language. She became that someone who I spent the best years of my school life with. Growing

up, high school was dramatic, cathartic and a place that gave me more than I could've ever imagined. It gave me permanence in the form of her, it gave her the home that she had wanted and a friendship that made the both of us stronger everyday. Our mischievous exchange of looks soon gathered attention and these innocent peeks turned into "stolen glances" for our classmates. That's what happens when you know a person for too long and a bit too well. They *become* a couple for everyone around. In this respect, our friendship never ceased to be anything short of romantic piggy-back rides, intimate sleepovers and an understanding that just required a nod or an expression. By the time we reached our raging "seventeen year old high school seniors" phase, transience made an appearance in the form of finding "true love" in boys and girls, in our conversations about living together, our ambitions of being *India's next top model* or just managing a zoo. Flightiness never left us. There were so many options to be explored and so much newness to look forward to. Wide eyed, she moved cities and went away to college.

Longevity and I made sure that the plumbing was done whenever life put us into leaky situations- she taught me how to hold on. But, she also taught me that when the pressure got too much, release was important and that the faucets could always be fixed. We were the nuts and bolts. Her role never changed. She stayed.

I was ready to face unfamiliarity, knowing that I always had her. Amidst all the newness, I met Growth. Like Loss and Longevity, she didn't arrive as a package. Growth was someone who built herself for me persistently.

I remember us talking about smoking being a recreational activity. It was one of the first intellectually stimulating conversations that we had, whilst

swimming in clouds of smoke. As amateur smokers, we realised how the smoke from the tiny red sun turned into the third wheeling, jealous eye irritant. It made us open and shut our eyes forcefully one too many times.

Growth, my love, you saw me. And in the pintsize burning sun and bright passionate moon, you were my letter O.

It all began with the half smiles and college corridor whispers. It all turned into wide grins and long conversations over cigarettes, coffee and comfort. In the second year of my under graduation, we spoke about our shared interest in people with big smiles that reached their eyes to make them small or shut tight as though they were slits. This is what happened- from that year on; I found that the slits below my eyebrows had returned after a long while. It was the Doe-eyed woman compelling me to open up and dive into a new kind of friendship. This was the bond that brought back the trust, vulnerability and comfortable closeness. Growth peeked in at first and gradually, *saw* me through the wall that I had built over the years. She continued to surprise me with myself as I found myself looking for her presence in a room full of potential liaisons almost every time. She and I have embraced each other, moved and communicated with our eyes shut on nights when sleep refused to visit and guilt crept in. I remember the day when we made a trip to a cemetery in *Puraani Dilli*. Our searching eyes were unable to locate what was right next to us for a very long time. It took a lot of running around in circles but the attempt to find the destination was always sincere. We finally found what we had been looking for and at the cemetery; amidst the walking and exchanging the graveyard grins, I introduced her to Loss and Longevity. That is one day that I will remember vividly for the longest time because it

was then that I realised how we were both growing together and growing fond of each other in ways that I cannot explain still. She says she always wanted to grow with me and see me grow.

When you grin with your small eyes almost shut, I end up doing the same thing. I like your almond shaped eyes. For this, I thanked her. Our initial unfamiliarity matured into a newness with understanding and came to me in the act of growing. Growth never stops. She builds within me, with me and within herself. My friendship with her was always characterized by what she stood for- a movement towards learning and becoming.

I learnt friendship by letting go, holding on and giving in to unfamiliarity. I learnt that I would always connect every significant moment of my friendships with how all three of them saw me the first time and how that turned into a seeing through. Loss, Longevity and Growth.

Growth, you made me realise that our eyes did stand for the honesty, companionship and love that makes a friendship work. What had to leave had left, what was there to stay still remains and growth never stops. I am always going to be blindly in love with you.



*Illustration sourced
from Fine Art America.
Artist: Shijun Munns*

Review

LESS by Sean Greer

by Akshita Todi

“I am fear of the age. I am fear of the old, I am fear of the lonely.”

These words capture the core of Greer's characterization of his Prufrock-ean gay protagonist. Arthur Less is a 49 year-old, white, American writer who undertakes a haphazardly planned world tour to avoid the wedding of his younger ex-lover, Freddy.

Every element of the modes in which *Less* has been marketed – its quirky book cover with bright colours and a clueless-looking man falling from the sky, the review-snippets on the front which hail the novel's ability to elicit “tiny tears of joy” and adoration as an “endearingly funny” piece of writing, the blurb on the back-cover which paints the narrative as an *Eat-Pray-Love*-esque quest for identity marked by heartbreak and exploratory zeal, and lastly, the notion of the protagonist as “Less”, as self-deprecatingly humorous and unfortunate in love – pushes it within the quarters of the easily identifiable “chick-lit” genre. Any average reader of the popular romance or chick-lit may immediately perceive these markers and pick this novel for a light,

funny read. And the novel would deliver accordingly. It *is* in fact endearingly funny and quite capable of evoking tears and adoration from its readers.

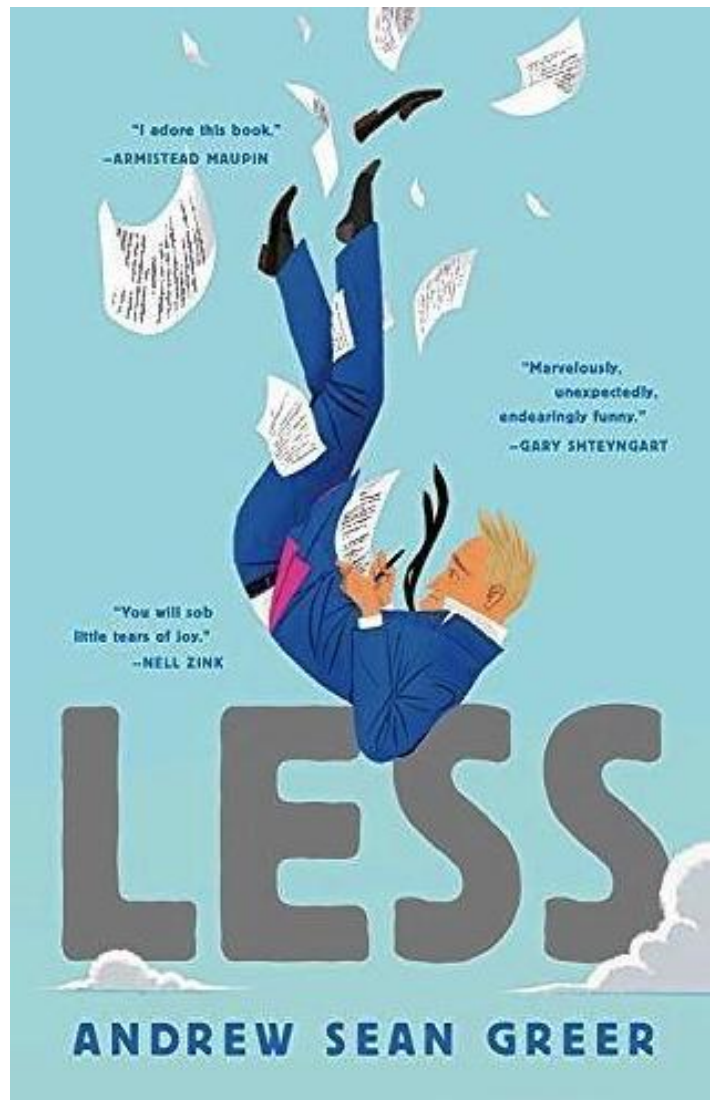
However, *Less* (as with many other chick-lit texts) does so much more. The novel builds on and adds to these set of genre-specific expectations. *Less* produces a vibrant discourse around the figure of the gay man. *Less* has sex with multiple partners over the course of the novel, feels curious about straight men's modes of homo-social bonding, feels 'homosexual' and resultantly 'Un-American' at times, fears being 'gay-boycotted' because his writings do not present a heroic gay character, fears that he is 'bad at being himself', obsesses over his shiny blue suit, works out sporadically with a pair of giant rubber bands, cries over losing Freddy and the prospect of growing old alone and feels like a fool surrounded by geniuses. At the centre of all of this is an anxiety about 'gayness'. *Less* highlights and complicates the



processes of writing about sexuality and raises important questions about the literary canon and its inclusion of only certain modes of writing as acceptably 'gay'. The narrative unpacks the figure of the gay writer and presents uncomfortable debates

around representation within literary material: who writes gay life? Whose version of gayness gains acceptability worldwide? What does the creation of a gay canon do to members of the LGBTQ community? What makes a text material: who writes gay life? Whose version of gayness gains acceptability worldwide? What does the creation of a gay canon do to members of the LGBTQ community? What makes a text gay? For that matter, what makes a text chick-lit (especially when the protagonist is not a 'chick')?

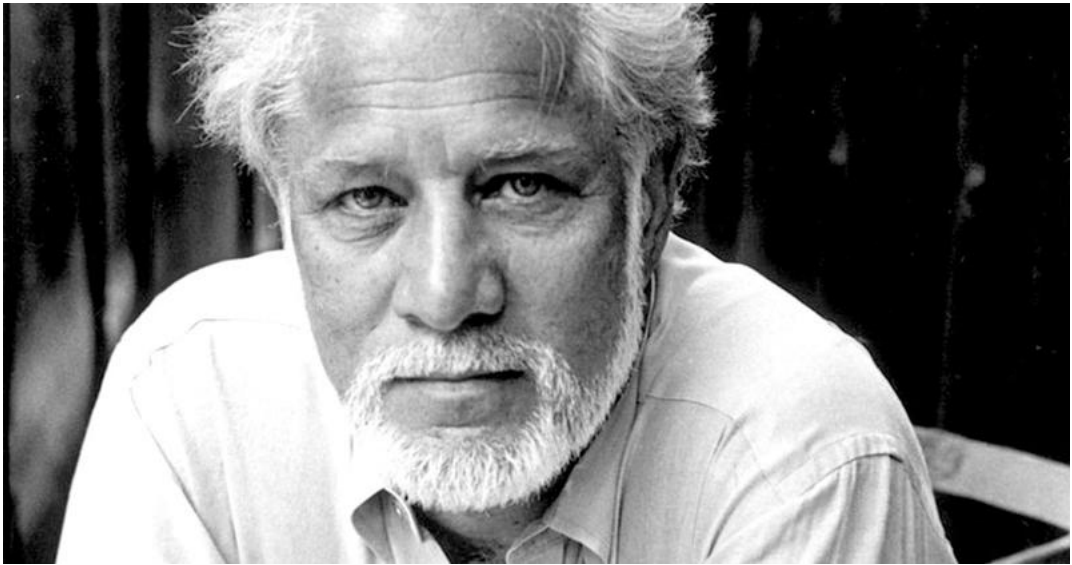
For these moments of insight and the delightfully peculiar images that the narrative presents repeatedly – “Freddy put on his glasses and in each aquarium a little blue fish swam” or “the coffee-maker in his room is a hungry little mollusk, snapping open its jaws to devour pods and subsequently secreting coffee into a mug” – I would urge you to read Greer's *Less*.



Review

WARLIGHT by Michael Ondaatje

by Namita Gupta



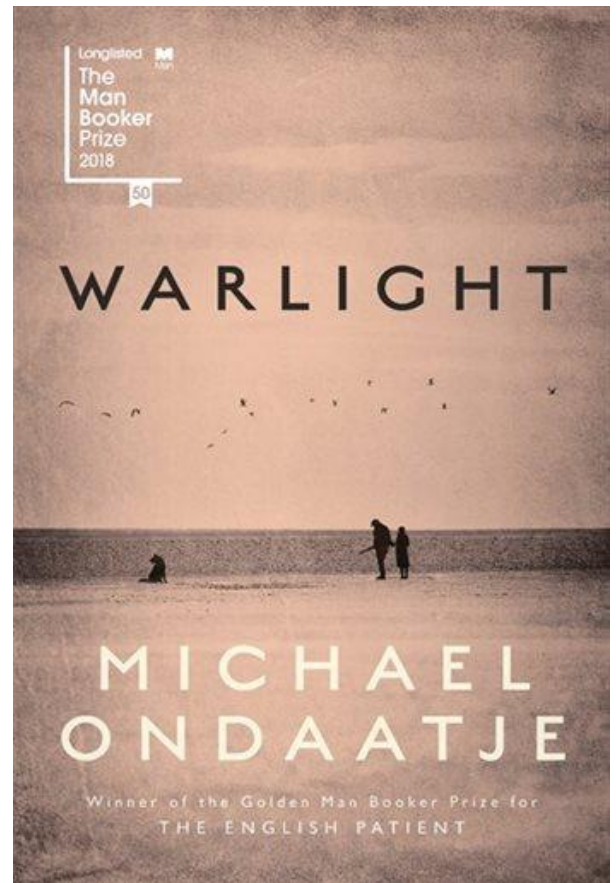
Released in 2018, the latest book by Booker-winning writer, Michael Ondaatje returns to post-war London in a bildungsroman of a young boy, Nathaniel, and his sister, Rachel, who are abandoned by their parents and put in the care of strange guardians with equally mysterious purposes. The story is told through the retrospective gaze of a man trying to piece together his life by understanding the motives of the people who shaped it, and most importantly, the mother who was nothing like the woman who gave birth to him. Ripped off the protective parental blanket, the young siblings are thrown into the world of people for whom the war still wages on, and

whose lives are lived still in the warlight of danger and passion. The story paces through three different timelines -- of abandoned adolescence and his entry into the world of dubious morality and legality, of mother's return and a strained reunion, and finally post his mother's murder as he begins to find himself -- and the skilled narrative of Ondaatje seamlessly moves between timelines to reveal as much as it obscures, as the fictional narrator merges what he recalls had been and invents what could have to record what really had been. The novel is divided in two sections, the first which records the life of the abandoned siblings, their desperate

holding on to some semblance of a family unit, even as their lives begin to move in different directions, and the second which attempts to make sense of it. Rachel, more attuned to the changing demographics of their house, scorns away her past to turn to theatre, while Nathaniel, overwhelmed by confusing memories and half-truths, devotes his life to making sense of what happened. He decides to find the truth, as part of some project of self-discovery, to find out about the mother who abandoned him, and in doing so, irrevocably damaged him in ways he didn't know. The novel ends like a puzzle almost put together, with a piece remaining missing or out of.

reach, but what it contains suggested by the larger picture.

Similar to Ondaatje's award-winning novel *The English Patient*, the novel is a rumination on processes of remembering and forgetting, as well as a comment on the national records of historicising through revisions and omissions. How do these revisionist historiographies affect the individuals whose lives are caught in these unforgiving games of chess? The novel takes its readers to these individual lives whose personal memories are dissonant with the official histories, and who can have no place, therefore, in the society which is sustained through these histories. Ondaatje's book also serves to puncture the smooth narrative of post-war peace by exploring the lives of the spies and informants who cannot return from war, and whose lives are necessarily erased in order to erase the unforgivable and less-than-moral acts of the governments against the civilians who are reduced to statistical collateral damage on a sheet. In its critique of the dubious morality of war, the author spares no one in showing the culpability of all parties involved. No one is innocent and the novel focuses on how actions of one ripple through, as Nathaniel's search moves from the past of others to discover his own culpability and the damage he did to others in his ignorance. Ultimately, the novel asks, how does one survive with the knowledge of impossibility of innocence and the burden of the past?



Review

RUNNING AWAY FROM ELEPHANTS

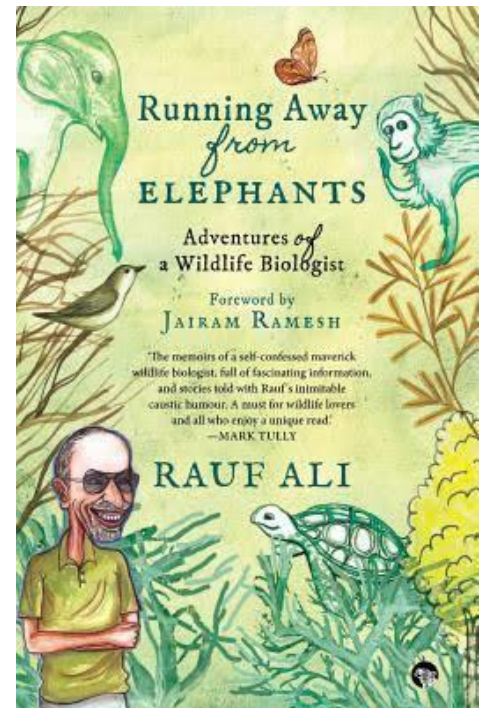
by Rauf Ali

by Sidharth Singh

A history of films and novels full of adventure and action, are to be blamed for our standardised imagination when it comes to lone men in the wild: the strong and sure survivor who knows exactly what to do and how it must be done. Rauf Ali, however, opens his memoir *Running Away from Elephants: Adventures of a Wildlife Biologist* with an anecdote about frightfully leaping away from an elephant, and after hiding in the bushes for hours, gingerly making his way home. At the time, he says, “I decided that this life—filled with nasty, brutish animals that frightened one in unexpected ways—was not for me”. The result is an endearing read about India’s first wildlife biologist who, veering away from the microwaved tropes prevalent in writing about nature, presents a relationship with the wild, concocted with fresh ingredients: humour, sensitivity, discomfort, and fascination. As one reads the book one sees Ali as a jester-scientist who is equally dumbfounded and amused by the circus of nature, as he is fascinated and driven to understand it.

Being the first Indian to complete a PhD in wildlife biology, Ali’s book chronicles the emergence of the discipline in India throughout the

1970’s and 80’s, which, lacking structure and system, was itself a wilderness at the time. Ali’s work could take him anywhere from Sengaltheri and Pondicherry in Tamil Nadu, to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the Western Ghats, to Bristol in England. In all these places Ali describes his humorous and accidental meetings with elephants, tigers, monkeys, students, politicians, spies, and even Nobel laureates at dinner tables, one of whom noticing him trying to decipher British table manners says, “Thank God there’s at least one human being sitting at this table”. However, though we laugh with Ali seemingly improvising his way through life, one gets the equal sense of the driven naturalist and conservationist whose knowledge and love of the natural world has pioneered wildlife biology in India. Ali set up India’s first Masters in Ecology Studies at Pondicherry University, revolutionised our understanding of invasive species through his work on the introduction of Chital in the Andaman region, and amassed great knowledge on the behaviour of migratory birds and monkeys. As a wildlife biologist



he recounts how dealing with the red-tape of bureaucracy and the political atmosphere of the Emergency often meant the failure of research projects in the former and accusations of being a spy in the latter. But the casual ease and cool with which Ali breezes past these problems, suggests that he was indeed specially suited to a life full of nasty, brutish animals.

One can detect the hint of a grin, when citing Claude-Levi Strauss's example he says, "Field work in reality...is being cold, wet, hungry, tired, or more usually, all four at the same time, most of the time". One can see the traces of mirth because being cold, wet, hungry, and tired never deterred him in the end.

In a time when urban dwellers struggle to empathise with nature or even envision it in the imagination, Rauf Ali's *Running Away from Elephants* is a good account of India's scientific, emotional, and political relationship with its wilderness. I urge you to read it to learn, for Ali conducted himself as a sharer of knowledge. But equally, it must be read to laugh, giggle, and roll one's eyes as Ali recounts his first encounter with racism: a langur outside a temple, despondently extending its arm to Indian visitors for two or three peanuts; and moments later screaming and screeching at foreigners who would drop their entire packets and run.



AN
INTERVIEW
WITH
MICHAEL CREIGHTON

CONDUCTED BY
MEGHNA SINGH BHADAURIA

SB: New Delhi is known to host people from all over the world, and it still remains an intimidating city, given the overwhelming flux of people and its mixture of sounds, smells and tastes. You've lived in New Delhi since 2005. How did your relationship with the city take shape and how has it changed over the years?

C: Ah, that's a good question, but it's a really big one. I could probably write a book about it, though I doubt anyone would want to read it. This summer at The Community Library Project, I read aloud a picture book about a lion who moves from his home on the savannah to Paris. It was originally written in French, but it's traveled all over the world, which seems appropriate, since it's about the immigrant experience. In English, it's called *A Lion in Paris*, but I read the Hindi translation, एक शेर पेरिस में. The lion finds Paris disorienting at first, and misses home. He wonders why nobody seems to really notice him—why isn't anybody afraid of his claws or his roar? After a time, he begins to see the city in a new light, makes some friends, finds a way to feel at home in this new place. I'm not a lion, and this isn't Paris, but the book did remind me that our relationship with any city is comprised not just of how we view the city, but of how the city views us. Over the years, I've become more and more convinced that, for all its failings, Delhi is a relatively cosmopolitan place. When I first started taking DTC buses years ago, I remember thinking, 'Maybe people will be surprised to see me here.' And I realized nobody was surprised, because all kinds of people take the bus, and if you take the bus to work everyday, it seems like a perfectly normal thing to do, anywhere in the world. Outside of the tourist zones, where people make their living selling to outsiders, just as people do in any city, mostly nobody worries too much about the fact that there are folks from all over the

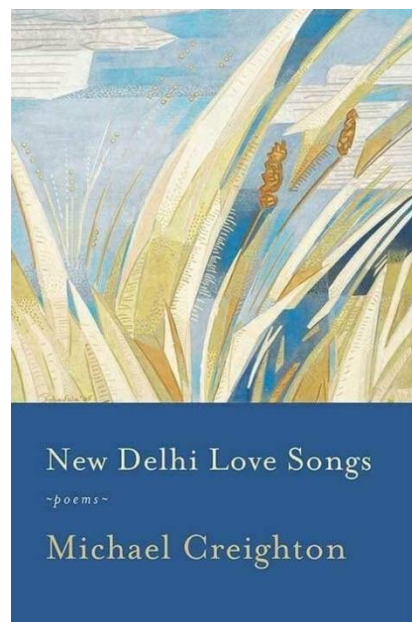
country and all over the world living here. I kind of like that; it reminds me I live in a city that draws in all kinds of interesting people from all kinds of interesting places. That's one thing that makes Delhi great.

SB: *New Delhi Love Songs* has several poems written in the Ghazal form. When did you first encounter Ghazals and what led to the form making its way into this book?

C: Honestly, I don't remember the first ghazal I encountered, it's been so long. It might have been something by Agha Shahid Ali or Adrienne Rich, or maybe it was by Jeet Thayil. The ghazal is a difficult form to work in, whether you decide to reimagine it in a radical sense, as many western writers have, or whether you try to follow the traditional rules as closely as you can, as I have tended to do. Ghazals demand a lot of banging, sanding and polishing, and sometimes even after all that work, you find you run out of good rhymes and have to call it quits. Working in English makes it harder; there are fewer rhymes, and the language is less flexible with its syntax than Hindi or Urdu.

But when you do manage to pull it off, nothing goes over better at a poetry reading in Delhi than a ghazal—you can just see the bells ringing in the audience. In a Delhi-centric collection, it seemed important to spend some time working in that form—people here appreciate ghazals in part because the city has such a long relationship with the form. Now that I think of it, the first ghazal I read may well have been something by Ghalib; my partner gave me a book of his translated poetry soon after we arrived in Delhi.

SB: The section titled “Garhwal” in *New Delhi Love Songs* moves us from New Delhi to the rolling hills of Uttarakhand. The section has several pieces, such as “A Woman Feeds Goats on a Hillside”, which deal with



people who are far away from their home. Given that the hills, in your own words, “are a long way from the city”, how do these poems fit in the larger vision of your poetry on Delhi?

C: I did want to make *New Delhi Love Songs* a Delhi-centric collection. Partly because I thought it would be read in a different way if I did that, and partly because I don't think Delhi has gotten the attention that it deserves, at least from poets writing in English. I think a city like this deserves more and better writing. If my book opens up a little space on the 'Poetry-Delhi' shelf of our literal and metaphoric libraries, then it's been successful.

But why Garhwal? Though I didn't include poems I wrote in or about the US, I chose to include the Garhwal poems—and some poems set in Kerala and on the way to Kerala—for a couple of reasons. First, I liked them! But I also decided there was room in a Delhi-centric collection for poems that leave the city, in part because Delhi is a city of migrants. If we believe the census (and most of the people we talk to on the street), millions of our neighbors are living, as you say, 'far away from their home.' And while Delhi is interested mostly in

itself, we are also interested in these other places and the roads and rails we travel to reach them.

SB: The book begins with the lines, “Smog and dust mix with the air in New Delhi” and goes on to suggest several reminders of the city’s “dust-bloated sun” and the “dead river” that flows through it. When we move to the hills, we are constantly reminded of how far we are from the dustclouds in the city. Your book seems to be conscious about the natural world and the problems facing it today. Do you hope your readers will share this consciousness after reading your poetry? Could you also say a few words describing your relationship with nature?

C: I'm glad you picked up on that. I did try to write a poem or two 'about pollution', but those failed—they were better essays than poems. But that said, we are living in one of the most polluted cities in the world, so it's hard to imagine a collection of poems about Delhi where images from that pollution don't play an important role—I mean, just for starters, smoke and dust changes the way we see the sun, moon and stars here, in beautiful and terrible ways. That's hard to ignore for anybody who aspires to write image-driven poems. And these kind of images do other work as well—smoke, ash, dust have always been good at evoking grief and death, for example, but those kind of symbolic allusions can seem forced if poets aren't careful—like bringing a dove into a poem about violence; it is likely to fail if you aren't writing in a place where doves are a real part of everyday life, because otherwise, the dove will conjure a cartoon 'symbol' not a bird that hints at something else. Here in Delhi, we're surrounded by bad air, we breathe it, the light we see by is changed by it. It's bound to come into our poetry.

However, even I don't write poems that aim to convince you we should clean up our air, that doesn't mean I am a fan of poisonous air. I think that big changes happen in part because people slowly realize things need to change. When pollution—or communal or gender violence—enter literature, that's a good thing, maybe it helps.

As for my relationship with nature, I guess 'it's complicated' would be the short answer. I like nature. I wish I had more time in it. I also interested in the ways in which the natural world and human world intersect in a place like Delhi—those intersections raises the larger idea of 'duality', that two or more things can be happening at the same time, that a city this big can hold many truths. That idea is part of what gets me through the day!

SB: Along with being a poet, you are also a middle school teacher and a library movement activist. Could you tell our readers about The Community Library Project and your affiliation with it?

C: I'm the curriculum coordinator at The Community Library Project, which runs two excellent free community libraries in collaboration with the Delhi NGO, Deepalaya, and the Gurgaon NGO, Agrasar. Our goal is not to build poor libraries for poor people, but to build excellent libraries for all people. Delhi today has three dozen public libraries and a handful of community libraries like ours. We think a city of this size needs a thousand or more libraries. We know we can't do this by ourselves, but our experience shows that low-cost, community libraries work and work well. In that way, we're a provocation. We are saying to Delhi: this works! Why can't we do better?



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Do not wait to strike till the
iron is hot; but make it hot by
striking.

- W.B. Yeats