

That Was



**THAT
WAS**

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for Rosa, Lola, Tara

That was an innocent country:

There dying would only be a trek to sleep
Or waking through tall mirrors of a dream:
In spite of which all were afraid to die.

– Dom Moraes

Prologue

My memory, like an ant, stops at each hurdle and drifts down a less difficult path. Unsurprisingly, I don't recall much of my childhood, except for a vague memory—a dream within a dream—of lying beneath an apple tree, sunlight trickling through the stencilled leaves, the grass so lush I could taste its wetness, the breeze crisp-cool on my face, and around us, our very own flowers of paradise.

Someone held my hand. Was it my brother? I don't recall. I don't remember my father, either. I have a faded memory of my mother—like a well worn black-and-white photograph; were her eyes, like mine, a deep grey?

My strongest memory is of the older, congested area in Bombay. It had a time-worn smell: of mouldy buildings, of shop walls soiled over the years, of roadside markets that smelled of recent migration, of chlorinated water, of pungent cooking and sharp kerosene, and amidst this patchwork of smells, the fragrance of flowers and incense that rose from the mosque and the temple, the sound of a hundred radios spilling

Bollywood music, and in between the chanting from the temple, the cry from the minaret. The mullah's call reminded me of a faraway place. The wind was different there, sharp and cold. A willow tree sighed in the breeze and birds drifted on taut wings.

I now lived with my uncle and his wife. He was not my real uncle, though, he was my father's childhood friend. They had lived in the same village, but I didn't know its name or where it was. Every time I asked him about my father, his eyes froze and, with pursed lips, he bent his head as though in prayer. 'You are our dear daughter,' is all he uttered.

The gold locket I wore on a chain around my neck, the shape of a teardrop, had belonged to my mother, my aunt had told me. Besides me, it was the only other thing that had belonged to her, and each time I touched it, which was often, I felt as though I were touching my mother.

My uncle is a Kashmiri. He is a handsome man: tall and lean, with peach-coloured skin and grey eyes. His parents died in an accident, and he moved to Bombay when he was just sixteen. This was all that he had told me. My aunt is short and stout. She is from the south, her skin the colour of dusk. Her long, black hair had greyed here and there, and her eyes were always uneasy. No one ever accused her of any wrongdoing, but her thoughts did. She imagined that others could read them, that they could hear her think, and this made her anxious.

My uncle and aunt were different from one another, both in demeanour and temperament: my uncle was undaunted,

my aunt worried too much. She was pious and believed in rituals; my uncle didn't have faith in God. Their combined loneliness, their shadow, followed them everywhere. They had each other, they had me, and it was not enough.

My aunt celebrated many Hindu festivals.

Pongal, the harvest festival, was her favourite. It is a form of thanksgiving to the Sun God for providing energy for the crops and lasts four days. On the first day—Bhogi Pongal—my aunt meticulously cleaned the house and discarded old items: pots and pans, old clothes, tools, furniture, and so on. 'Throwing out old things will make you start afresh,' she told me once. The word Pongal comes from the Tamil word ponga, which means overflowing. On the second day—Thai Pongal—my aunt boiled milk and rice in a clay pot, allowed it to brim over. 'It symbolises abundance and prosperity,' she said. We woke at dawn, oiled our bodies, bathed, wore new clothes, and prayed to the Sun God. On Mattu Pongal, my aunt took me to the temple nearby to feed the holy cow, to thank it for providing abundant milk. On Kaanum Pongal, my aunt placed a ball of leftover rice on a fresh turmeric leaf and prayed for the family's happiness and wellbeing. 'It is a sign of new beginnings,' she said. She gave me gifts. Invariably, a cashmere shawl that I couldn't really wear as it was too hot. My uncle didn't like rituals, so he stayed out of the house as much as he could during Pongal.

My uncle traded in cashmere yarn and cloth and often travelled to Tokyo to meet his business partner, Shigeru Hara.

He knew how to read and write Japanese and persevered with teaching me. Much to my aunt's displeasure, we spoke to one another in Japanese around the house. Sumimasen, gomennasai, arigatō, tadaima, kiotsukete, and ittekimasu were words we used every day. I said itadakimasu before a meal and oishii when the food was good. This, however, always delighted my aunt, a smile rising on her well-rounded cheeks.

I said ittekimasu each morning as I left for school with my uncle. After school, I walked to my uncle's office—it wasn't too far—and later in the evening, we took the train back home. His office had a large hall for the staff, a small office for him, and an enclosed balcony with a whole wall lined with books. On the adjacent wall were maps of India, Japan, and the rest of the world. It was here, on the balcony, that my uncle told me stories about the invasions into India by the Mughals, British, French, Dutch, and Portuguese. He spoke of other countries and the wars between them. He called these stories my history lessons. He told me about the atom bombs: the Fat Man, the Thin Man, and the Little Boy that had been dropped on Hiroshima. When I asked him if many people had died there, he simply said, 'Yes, thousands went away.' He never used the words die, dead, or death. Instead, he would say departed, gone, or went away.

His most cherished stories were of wool. He told me that Changthangi goats were only found high in the mountains, 4,000, 5,000 meters up. A long time ago, a Sufi saint, Mir Ali Hamadani, came to the Himalayas. Many goatherders lived in the surrounding areas, and he saw that their goat's fleeces

were soft, much softer than any wool he had seen before. So, when he returned, he did so with many Persian craftsmen. They made socks from the soft wool of these goats. 'Pashm means wool in Persian,' my uncle had said. The Sufi called the wool pashmina. He presented a pair of these fine socks to Zain-ul-Abidin, the king of Kashmir, and the king was so fascinated with them that he started making them in his own kingdom.

After him, Akbar, the Mughal Emperor, set up factories to produce pashmina shawls; they were embroidered with Persian motifs. Akbar's son, Jahangir, wrote in his book that pashmina was his favourite cloth. Later, the Mughals established trade routes to sell the fine woollen cloth. They reached Europe and became fashionable. The French monarch, Napoleon Bonaparte, bought a pashmina shawl for his wife, Joséphine. She was so happy with it that she decided to buy a hundred more, making it desirable throughout Europe. It was the Europeans who called pashmina cashmere because it came from Kashmir. My uncle told me that in those times, pashmina was shipped to America, England, Europe, China, and Japan. The English were so impressed with this fine wool that they tried to replicate it themselves but never succeeded. It was only later that cloth similar to pashmina was developed in Scotland; they named it Paisley after the city it was made in.

Another of my uncle's stories was about chiru, the Tibetan antelope. 'The chiru is home to the botfly,' he told me. In warm weather, these flies burrowed deep into the antelope's skin to lay their eggs. Around this time, the chiru began to

shed its winter coat and, to rid itself of the botfly, rubbed against bushes and shrubs—traditionally, this is where the weavers collected the wool. This wool was called shahtoosh, and it was so fine that one and a half yards of the fabric could be passed through a single finger-ring.

My uncle playfully called me his little chiru.

