

ONE

The burst of the coolies' busy shouts and a lazy rejoinder from the crows perched on the overhead beams of the platform merged into a strange welcome, as the Madras-Howrah Mail chugged into the station, bringing me home. From the window, I saw the familiar scene of the men in their fiery red kurtas and white dhotis, jumping into the compartments of the moving train. Howrah Station had not changed a bit. Like Appa. Change, for him, was compromise, and therefore, a weakness.

The late morning light bathed the Howrah Bridge, which straddled the river, paving the way for what I dreaded at the moment – meeting Appa at the end of yet another failed trip. The outstretched arms of the bridge dominating the skyline were like an assurance, a source of comfort, before I faced his sharp barbs.

Five days ago the bridge had heard the uneasy beating of my heart, as the taxi crawled over it towards the station where I boarded the long train to Madras to meet another prospective groom. The first one had rejected me.

Coming back with Amma after another unsuccessful outing, all I carried in my heart was a bitterness about the angry disapproval of my relatives.

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“You have to go to Madras with your mother next week to meet a boy,” Appa had ordered. He was like that – never spoke, and almost always ordered and hollered. And my only choice was to give in. A heart attack had given him the advantage of emotionally blackmailing me, snuffing out my rebellion. I could stand up to his unreasonableness, but I always succumbed when he sighed, “Who cares for an old man waiting for a second attack.”

From the backseat of the yellow taxi, I looked at the mildewed colonial buildings, then at the Hooghly down below. Suddenly, it started drizzling, making me feel depressed. The Ambassador taxi edged its way out of the traffic and ran towards South Calcutta.

Appa was on the verandah, chatting with Bhombol, our landlord's son. By the time the taxi stopped outside the house, the drizzle had turned into heavy rain. I stepped into a puddle and hurried past the gate into the house.

“*Ki re*, back from your Madras trip?” asked Bhombol, his smile creasing his pockmarked cheeks. “Ahh, *Manni*. *Shob thik thak?*”

For Bhombol and his brother Tukai, Appa was *Dada* and Amma was *Manni*. They had picked up a little bit of Tamil in our house and mixed it up with Bengali to make a nice hodgepodge. While every man senior to you was *Dada* in Calcutta, in Tamil *Manni* was a sister-in-law. The boys were often in our apartment for *adda* with us and relished the hot *dosas* with *sambhar* and chutney from Amma's kitchen. It

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was almost as if there was nothing Appa did not share with them.

“Yes, Bhombolda.” I forced a smile, lugging my Skybag into the drawing room. Amma followed with the black kit bag and a smile of relief.

Had Appa told Bhombol anything?

“They are like family,” Appa often said of Bhombol and Tukai.

Does he not have enough family at home that he must add them on as well?

“Let us put this Madras episode behind us,” said Appa lightheartedly, as he walked into the drawing room after hugging Bhombol goodbye.

I looked at him in surprise. This sounded very comforting, but made me suspicious as well. *Why has he softened up?* I tried to guess. There had to be some reason. My Madras trip had been a complete disaster. It was unlike him to let it pass without a few sardonic comments. Was he preparing the ground for another meeting with yet another *most eligible* young man? I shuddered at such a possibility, and pushed away the thought of taking the long train back to Madras.

But I could never forget that dark morning when Appa's heart gave a warning that shook our world. I had to accommodate his whims and dictatorial ways and bow to his pressure ever since. “Any of these days, this old heart will stop beating, but I will die an unhappy man, knowing my

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eldest daughter is unmarried, ah!” His words whined like an old record. But I decided to listen, suppressing the rebel in me. A prisoner of circumstances, I had to sit all decked-up for the visits of would-be grooms, and make trips to Madras to make myself available for scrutiny by the *young men in demand* and their parents and uncles and aunts. At times, their entire clan. I had to try to look attractive and *homely* at the same time, and smile foolishly. Some of the men, who came with the *suitable boy*, devoured me with their eyes. Most certainly, they had a hard-on ahead of my prospective husband.

The alarm bells had started ringing a month ago when Appa's blood pressure shot up and his postprandial sugar touched 413. Our family doctor had warned us that if this continued, it could lead to retina displacement, kidney dysfunction or even a heart attack.

And that morning, Appa complained of breathlessness and chest pain.

“Chinna, call Sujoy Chatterjee,” Amma shakily called out to my youngest brother. Chinna was sitting next to the large French window of our old, dilapidated house, trying to solve his math problems. He was seated comfortably behind a makeshift study desk – a long and sturdy plank that rested on the two arms of an antique wooden chair. This ancient piece of furniture was referred to as the *thatha* chair, because my grandfather had it custom-made to suit his comfort. He had paid Rs. 150 for it at a time when his salary was only Rs. 100 a month. More importantly, with that money, he had to

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sustain a family of eleven! It was the only piece of furniture that he owned.

Chinna now made full use of this heirloom. He and I would often fight for it, because, with the plank of wood, it made a very comfortable study table for us. When we had to read or learn, we sat on the sofa or chairs, and when we needed to write, we booked the *thatha* chair in advance. At least, Chinna and I did. My younger sister, Priya, read on the sofa, and somehow managed to write sitting on the floor. She never fought, never complained.

Sujoy Chatterjee, our neighbor and doctor, came immediately in his pyjamas and a faded T-shirt. He was an MBBS from the Calcutta Medical College and a good general practitioner. We went to him for fever, for fitness certificates needed for college admissions and to fake sickness for a day off school. He charged Rs. 25 for a certificate written on his letterhead. He had a pleasant face, was soft-spoken and had a calm demeanor. He never panicked handling a critical case. He took one look at Appa and immediately told us to rush him to hospital.

I deposited the money at the nursing home reception and ran upstairs to the sixth floor without waiting for the elevator. The distressed looks of the people waiting outside the intensive care unit scared me. Amma, looking uneasily quiet, sat stoically on the grey bench in the corridor with Chinna. She seemed to be in a trance, her eyes fixed on the framed photograph of goddess Kali on a wall, as she waited for the doctor to come out of the restricted chamber.

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After running up six floors, I was panting. My complaints and silent war against Father came back. I was miserable. But the sight of Amma waiting with an unusual calm made me uncomfortable. It was she who should have been crying. I did not want to go near her and upset her. So I climbed down again and sat in the reception, enveloped by a sudden rush of guilt.