

## To Cleave

Contronyms are odd creatures. Words that hold their own opposites hostage. As in ‘left’, which can mean remaining or departed; as in ‘fast’, which can mean moving quickly or fixed firmly in place; as in ‘sanction’, which can mean approval or penalisation. One of my favorite contronyms is ‘cleave’. It means to cling, but also, to split apart. It is the only word that ever truly described what it was to grow up in that house - a place that smelled of fried turmeric, old paper, and jasmine talcum powder. A place that cleaved to me, even as I was cleaved from it.

The house in Dhaka was not grand in any traditional sense. Beige painted and gradually tinged faintly with the tea-brown of aging. It was a clement architecture of the most unique sounds; the nervous rattle of window panes before a storm, the discrete faint buzz of the ceiling fans, and the stubborn metallic sigh of the gate that no amount of black-seed oil could silence might have been some of those unique features. It was a house of peculiar logic too, where mango chutney shared a cabinet with blood pressure medicine, and dinner was served long after the streetlights flickered on.

My world was so small there that it fit entirely within the orbit of my nani. I remember our daily ritual as something sacred. After school, we would stop by the same cart, where the popsicles were already sweating in the heat. I would choose the electric orange one, she the vivid green. They were always just on the edge of melting by the time we reached our gate - a race against the sun that we always lost. It wasn't about the ice cream at all really. What I truly miss is the dry, papery warmth of her hand in mine, the brush of her cotton sari against my shoulder, the sound of her voice asking, *আরে আপি, আরেকটা থাবা? <sup>1</sup>Api<sup>1</sup>, want another one?*, in a tone that already knew the answer.

She knew everyone. The aunties at the market, both the nice and the annoying ones, were her bosom friends. The vendors always knew her by name and her usual order. She moved through the milieu with a radiant, immaculate grace, a universal solvent blending seamlessly into the lives of others. I wonder now if those strangers ever paused to consider the sixty-seven years of quiet

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<sup>1</sup>sister, in Bangla

triumphs and heartbreaks that shaped her, the entire universe of her life that existed before she was just my nani.

I remember how she taught me how to make some of the most exotic dishes that make up my personality. One afternoon, when the rain was hammering a frantic cadence on the roof, she decided it was time I learned to make সর্ষে ইলিশ *Shorshe Ilish*<sup>2</sup>. She showed me how to score the fish so that the mustard marinade would seep into its bones, her knuckles, tender and sure, guiding my small, uncertain fingers. The air soon grew thick with the pungent scent of mustard oil and turmeric. The gentle aroma would cling to my clothes and hair for hours, a perfume I wore with pride. She told me about the first time she made it for my nana, how she'd been so nervous she'd mixed up the salt and sugar. "*He ate every bite,*" she chuckled, stirring the pot. "*He said it was the most creative dish he'd ever had. A man who will eat your mistakes and call them inventions, Api, is the man you keep.*"

And in the blueish glow of Bangla soap opera, she would tell stories of her girlhood in a Karachi that no longer existed<sup>3</sup>. How her grandmother lived with her too, and the bond they shared. She told me about the days of studying physics, sharing a single physics textbook with five other girls. She told me how she once wanted to be a physicist, but how love, or life, or both, delicately and quite inevitably folded it away. Yet she studied medicine, trailblazing in a time when that ambition still smelled faintly daring.

She was, I suppose, the first person *I ever wanted to become*.

And in the next room, surrounded by the smell of attar<sup>4</sup> and sharpened pencils, my nana<sup>5</sup> held court. Hunched over a saucer of nimki<sup>6</sup>, he would explain the Peloponnesian War. Was it a feud between neighbouring uncles? He knew. The Battle of Troy, the Partition of Bengal, the plate tectonics - all were demystified by the elegant sweeps of his fingers drawing diagrams in the air.

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<sup>2</sup> a Bengali dish, native to the Bengal region of the Indian subcontinent, made from a type of herring cooked in mustard gravy

<sup>3</sup> Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971, causing Karachi, a Pakistani city, to become a foreign city

<sup>4</sup> scent, in Arabic

<sup>5</sup> maternal grandfather in Bangla, in Bangladeshi dialect

<sup>6</sup> a popular, diamond-shaped, Bengali tea-time snack

One monsoon evening, when the power died, plunging the house into a soft, shadowy silence, he lit a kerosene lamp. The flames cast giant, wavering silhouettes of us on the wall, and strangely enough, he didn't reach for a book.

In the flickering light, his voice softened into a story, and together, we drifted back to my first Boishakhi mela<sup>7</sup>. I was five, with my crown of shapla<sup>8</sup> flowers bigger than my head. Frightened by the crowd, I'd buried myself in the folds of his dhuti<sup>9</sup>. So he lifted me onto his shoulders, my throne, and I held his ears for balance, my little fingers sticky from the roshogolla<sup>10</sup> we'd shared. He showed me the snake charmer's basket, the dancers with their sticks. But I only had eyes for the paper boats. We launched a little folded red one into a rushing gutter, and I watched, eyes wide with a pure, silent wonder, until it vanished around the corner. Although it was a subtle nostalgia to me at that moment, *Am I still that little girl, I wonder now, still needing to hold onto his ears for balance?*

He'd arrive home with these boxes of nimki after the mosque, sitting beside nani to sample the salty, crisp diamonds while her soap operas unfolded. Although his eyes would sometimes drift toward the news channel, she never acknowledged it. He never asked. Perhaps he knew, as he smiled at the screen, then at her and then back again, as a popular Lata Mangeshkar<sup>11</sup> song would play in the backdrop of the protagonists' melodrama.

Then came our afternoons. Our late afternoons were for cha<sup>12</sup>. Mine was mostly milk, sweet and pale. His was dark and potent, served in a white porcelain cup with a chip on its rim that I always worried would cut his lip. We talked for hours that felt like minutes, our conversations suffusing through Mughal mnemonics and into quantum theory. He believed, I believe, that all knowledge should arrive gently, and he was its most patient gatekeeper.

I look out from a different window now. I count the apartments outside and imagine the lives inside them. Do they have grandfathers who trace maps on humid afternoons? Do they have

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<sup>7</sup>vibrant fair celebrating the Bengali New Year

<sup>8</sup>water lily

<sup>9</sup> long cloth wrapped around the waist, traditional to many parts of South Asia, like Bengal

<sup>10</sup>a popular, sweet dessert from South Asia, made of soft, spongy ball-shaped cottage cheese cooked in sugar syrup

<sup>11</sup>a renowned Indian playback singer and music composer

<sup>12</sup>tea, in Bangla

grandmothers who sing to the stove? Do their homes smell of pickled mango, wet laundry, and nail polish remover at the same time? Do they also carry the faint, sharp glint of nostalgia, knowing that profound, quiet love of being truly known is not remarkable, not interesting, but of just *simply* and *utterly* seen?

I wonder if they, too, feel the ache that comes from the prophecy that you can't have the same *forever*.

Because, ultimately, time, that old trickster, played the trick on me before I believed life could. Even now, when I study late into the night, I sometimes feel nani peeking into my room with a plate of guava slices. *আপি, কিছু খাও না! Api, eat something!* she says, even when I already have. The feeling is so vivid; it aches. But I know, even if I returned, the popsicle cart would be gone. The floors would be crisscrossed with the delicate scars of a stranger's life. The air in my old room would have long forgotten the sound of that child's breath. Its demeanour inhospitable, its tone now condescending.

I once believed that to grow was to leave. To evolve was to step away from everything that had formed you. I was wrong. I did not leave it behind; I absorbed it. It lives in the way I cook rice, in the way my accent betrays me on certain words, in the reflexive flinch I have when I smell frangipani - the scent that filled the house the night she died.

I left then. But the house *cleaved*. It split me from my past, but it also clings to me, a part of my very marrow.

Perhaps one day I will build a home of my own. It will not be a replica. It will be quieter, stranger, stitched together from the frank and beautiful memories of those rooms. In a corner, there will be my nana's worn-out maps. The kitchen will smell of mustard oil and fried puffed rice, with sudden, welcome pinches of panch phoron<sup>13</sup> and nutmeg. Her old stainless steel spoon will hang by the

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<sup>13</sup> a traditional whole-spice blend from Bengali cuisine, meaning "five spices"

stove, presiding over an entourage of stained ladles. There will be a drawer always full of nimki, and a radio playing Lata Mangeshkar next to a bookshelf.

It won't be regal. It won't be perfect. And I won't think of it often.

Because I'll be too busy trying to get dinner ready before it burns. The Ilish will burn. The oil will spit and sizzle onto the counter. I'll sigh. I'll curse, open a window. In the midst of the mundane chaos, I'll absently hum a tune I didn't even know I remembered - the same one nani hummed when she thought no one was listening.

The house won't look like theirs. But seldom, when the light falls just right on the kitchen tiles, I'll stop. I'll feel a sudden, irrational certainty - *an uncertainty* - that I have been here before. Not here, but *there*.

And then I'll keep going.

Because there's rice to be put on the stove.

And someone's coming back home. With a box of nimki in his hand.