

A day of loss

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There are some things that are easy to talk about and some things that are not. When you are sixty-five, like me, you do go on about your IITian son who works in a big corporation in a country far away, so far that it is morning here when it is night there. The one who listens to you feels envy and admiration in differing proportions. What you don't tell him is that the trans-Pacific calls are tapering off, that your son is lost to you, swallowed up by the gigantic corporation. I wonder if he will come if something serious happens to his mother or me. We pushed him to excel through all the years he was with us – when he wanted to sleep late, play ball in the park, hang out with his friends. He had six tuitions. So that we could crow over his success, and wave at him at the airport, losing him to a country richer, more powerful, where you could be anybody. Even Steve Jobs. Last night there was a storm and on my morning walk around Dighaliphukhuri I saw an old tree fallen on one side, the insides of its trunk exposed, lying along the length of the road in a state of mute appeal. Already men with electric saws were lopping off the branches. By the time the day ends, only its sad stump will remain. A tree older than me, gone in one fell swoop, the birds streaming away to living trees. What will this loss mean to the people driving by? A momentary distraction, a small stab of nostalgia...

Small losses prepare you for the larger, more existential ones. Children lose their milk teeth, and then their innocence. They shoot up, and lose their former sizes. They lose balls, shuttlecocks, comics, friendships. Sometimes they lose the motivation to be the race horses parents want them to be. Somebody is losing something every single day... their hair, their looks, their teeth, their keys, their socks, their phones, their wallets, their books, their homes, their self-respect. Men and women, often old, leave their homes and wander dazedly around lanes and busy streets because they have lost their memory.

Lovers lose their hearts and sometimes their sanity. People lose their money in dubious schemes and politicians lose votes. You lose a husband, a wife, your mobility, your hearing, your mental acuity. Drip by drip that God or a blind, immanent will take it all from you so that you are always afraid, always touching your forehead when you pass by a temple. Life is all about enduring or anticipating loss, whether it is keys or homes or jobs or opportunities or hope. It colours our lives, a grey shade for me, until I hear my boy's voice on that trans-Pacific call.

But there are losses that aren't bad at all. A writer loses himself in the creation of his magnum opus. An artist loses himself in creating the vision that glows within him. I once saw Hariprasad Chaurasia at a concert. He and the flute became one. I have never lost myself over anything. I have lost 30 years drafting notes, signing files, saying Yes Sir to my bosses. If only it could have been different. Then my life would have been more than walking around Dighalipukhuri and buying vegetables at Uzan Bazar. It would have been more than putting on my dentures in the morning and being careful not to catch a chill. It could have been more than wondering about people in newspaper photographs who are lost and rewards are offered for them. My life could have been rich with meaning and passion but I am just a tired old man thinking of useless things.

Now there are threats of bigger losses. We will perhaps lose our great river to China. I can imagine a sandy waste, where the river used to flow, and people would set up shanty towns on its arid river bed. The hills around us have been blasted away and poisonous fumes of a thousand cars sting our eyes and creep into our lungs. We have lost the silence of the old town and its birds and fireflies. The mobile towers have killed the bees. A girl leaving her

home may return with her honour lost.

National Geographic – that's the channel for me. Gazelles streaking across a grassland, a lion leaping to slash the throat of the wildebeest with its claws, koalas mating. I thought I would feel comforted by Nature's enduring drama, its raw beauty. And then, they are talking of climate change. Goodbye to the polar bears as the glaciers melt. Goodbye to coral reefs as they get bleached by warming waters. Goodbye to coastal cities as oceans rise.

Once every six months my wife goes to a hospital. Wearing a hospital gown, with the upper part bare, her breasts are compressed between two surfaces to spread out the breast tissue.

Then an X-ray captures black and white images of the breasts that are displayed on a computer screen and examined by a doctor for signs of cancer. The results are always negative but Renuka believes she will lose one breast or both to cancer. "It's not that I have any use for them." She tells me quietly, "But how will you manage?" Every six months she is at the hospital, fearing the worst. Fearing about leaving me bereft.

After lunch and a nap..., I venture out of the house again. I walk along Chandmari. Teenagers are eating momos off paper plates at roadside stalls. Vendors are selling fruits, vegetables and fish. Cars are snarled in a traffic jam. Then I see it ...scraps of paper flying about, then swirls of sand. The wind rushes down the street. There are shouts. People scatter. Lightning zigzags in the sky. I take shelter at a pharmacy. Renuka will be worried. The old fool... she will mutter. Another April storm. There is a smattering of rain, then the clatter of things falling. There are six other people jammed into the pharmacy, leaning on the counter. Then something happens. Two youths carry a man into the pharmacy. He is dressed in a faded cream shirt and baggy trousers. His gnome like face is rigid with terror. Blood oozes from his left foot into his Hawai chappal.

"A sheet of tin fell on him. His small toe is gone."

"Gone?" I ask. "Where?"

"We don't know." I think of a wrinkled toe curled like a worm. Lost in the storm

The youths gently seat him on the step. He stares at us silently, his foot bleeding.

Strangers get to work. Somebody calls an auto. I get into it, cradling the man's head on my lap. Another youth gets in with me.

We drive in the pelting lane towards the nearest hospital. We carry him in, place him on the gurney. An orderly holds him as the doctor stitches his four-toed foot and bandages it. We pay for the procedure.

The man has tears in his eyes. He folds his hands in gratitude. He gives us his address. It is a hovel, but his wife runs out with fear, love, pity on her face. I have never known anyone who lost his toe in the twinkling of an eye, in an April storm. But we were there, strangers who did not even know his name, doing all we could to ease his loss. All at once, I had a warm feeling in my heart. I hurried home to Renuka.

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