

## Absent presences

Two weeks ago, I would never have imagined that I would be penning this piece. What happened in the space of these few days reminds me yet again about the fragile nature of life, its whimsicality, and our struggle to cope with it. A beloved maternal uncle, the baby of the family passed away at a city hospital. And he was just sixty. That morning, as we stood around his curtained bed and wept our goodbyes, his face looked young, unlined, his form trim and athletic. For a moment, it felt like he would open his eyes and smile that quirky, mischievous smile of his, chortling that he had indeed succeeded in fooling us. A couple of days later, my parents and I made the long road trip to our ancestral home in Jorhat, by the gently flowing Bhogdoi, for the prayers and rituals. It is a large house set in a sprawling, leafy garden, a towering row of coconut palms separating it from the river embankment. A house as old as my uncle, with a great many white-painted windows and a polished red floor. The grass grows wild on its grounds and the bougainvilla spreads like a benediction over the front porch. The plinth has sunk, there are a few damp patches on the walls, the wind moans among the rafters and there hangs a feeling of space unused and uninhabited. A sitting room, once gleaming with beeswax polish, tables decorated with lace doilies and vases of white roses, the needlepoint cushions plump on the wooden sofas has been turned into a kitchen, with racks of crockery and a marble counter. A door leading to the inner courtyard is now walled in. New rooms have been added by different family members, but they have a makeshift, incomplete look, as if the person had suddenly lost interest halfway when building them. It is so different from the bustling, spic and span home of my childhood, when the rooms were filled with uncles, aunt, grandparents, neighbours, visitors, a dog named Toby and itinerant beggars who sat on the back courtyard slurping tea from brass bowls, blessing, my generous grandmother. The home's former shape, its past is like a phantom limb that tingles even when it isn't there anymore.

Our trip to this beloved house, which is resurrected again and again in my writing, is perhaps made with some vague, unvoiced hope that this was a place we would somehow meet *Mama* again. But when our car stops at the gate, his Enfield bike is not parked on the driveway. The speed demon of his college days, he has left us behind for a destination we do not know of.

In his room, there is an enlarged photograph of him in his mid-twenties, gazing intently at the camera, dashing, even swashbuckling, with his mop of curly hair, intense, challenging eyes and a thick moustache drooping slightly on the sides. His older brother, my other *mama*, helps me transfer that photo on my phone but the white cloth wrapping the table on which it is displayed troubles me. Instead, I wander around the house, peering into small, framed sepia-tinted photographs of my uncles with side-parted hair, dressed in baggy trousers held up by suspenders, and then the bell-bottoms and floral shirts of the Sixties, and yes, even drain-pipe trousers. I can see him in a room, with my brother and I as the awestruck audience, carrying out an energetic rendition of the twist, his eyes closed in concentration, keeping to the beat of the music in his head. I can see him breezing in and out of the house, a muffler draped over his shoulders with just the right angle of rakishness to it, twirling the bike keys in his right hand fore-finger, his ankle length boots clicking smartly on the floor. And if there was one place you would look first, if you had to find him

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in a jiffy, it would be Gay Soda, the cool youth hang-out at Gar-Ali. He would have slept there if he could, my grandma would remark sardonically. But for all his biker boy alpha male persona, he was a softie who was incredibly close to his family. He adored his sisters and brother and was ready to any amount of trouble to make them happy. And boy, had the gift of making friends where ever he went! I remember all the colourful people who strolled into our home because *Mama* was their buddy – George Baker, hero of *Chameli Memsaab*, tucking into *Mahi's* camphor scented *narikol'or laru*, a Naga youth strumming the guitar and singing *O Christmas Tree*, one dreamy winter evening. You could count on him to lend you a spare tire even if you were merely a nodding acquaintance. He would take your elderly aunt to the doctor or search for your missing pet. Of course, there were people taking advantage of him but he was okay with that. When he got something done for others, there was a fullness in his heart that made it all worth it. That was why he was never cynical and also why it seemed he never really grew up, never became hardbitten the way the rest of us did. I think one must have done something specially good in one's past life to have had an uncle like him. He had a way of making us feel loved just by the loud cheery way he called out our names, and pretending to get defeated in armwrestling matches on table-tops. During our holidays in Jorhat, he would cut classes at J.B. College, so he could get as the tastiest fish, the tenderest lamb for our lunch. And he would marshal the whole family for movie shows at Eleye Cinema, getting the best seats, arranging for Fanta and fried peanuts, even explaining under his breath a scene or two my brother and I couldn't comprehend.

How does one grieve for someone so exuberantly alive? The rituals are over, the people have departed and I watch my ninety-year-old grandmother sit on the hall-way, her thick spectacles magnifying her eyes. She is a tiny bird – like figure sitting with her head cocked to one side, as if awaiting the quick tap of his boots. She refuses to be weak, to weep and crumble in the face of this tragedy. My ninety year-old grandmother instead chooses to talk about my sons, her great grandsons and family members scattered in other cities. In her wisdom, she clings to the living, to continuity, to hope. This is your house, she says again and again, you must keep coming here. Unlike other self-pitying old people I know, she never mentions death.

On my last evening at Jorhat, my older *mama* and I go far a walk. I am bewildered by the changes new buildings, heavy traffic, branded stores, tony restaurants. But Peoples Book Store, Doss & Co, Eleye Cinema bring back the past. As I stroll along the pavement, holding *Mama's* hand, feeling life to be so heart-rendingly transitory, wanting to hold on to those moments of bonding with him, even when grieving for what is lost, I know he would have liked it just like this, with us remembering him, his bike, his good cheer, his boundless enthusiasm, his energetic twist and feeling my heart fill up with fullness the way his did after every kind act.

On that last night, I get a hint that they who have gone on ahead are closer to us than we think. I sit in an inner room alone, lining my eyes with *kajal* in front of a very old mirror with an ornate teak frame. I suddenly realise it belonged to my late grandfather. A man of spartan tastes, the only exception he made was to comb his white hair in front of that mirror placed by his bed every morning. As I sit looking into the mirror, I can faintly hear the family's voices in a distant room. The wind moans under the rafters. With a tiny prickle of fear and also of longing, I wonder if I can see him in the mirror, the way it happens in books

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and films. Scolding myself for being so silly I get up from my chair, ready to leave. And then my eyes fall on it. Draped on the back of the chair is my *koka's eri* shawl. I stare at it-for long, silent seconds. I can never imagine *Koka* without this *eri* shawl. It is here where I would see it, for a purpose. I hold it in my hands, at first gingerly and then, clasping it close to me, I bury my face into it. I want it to smell of his tobacco, wood smoke and *tennessee saak* and because I want it so badly, I think I do. Holding the shawl in the dimly lit room, alone with the past, I am tempted to slip it in my suitcase and carry it back to my own home. But then I realise that I am already carrying a universe of memories within me and that *Koka* does not like to live far from his home. I drape the shawl back over the back of the chair, gently, reverently. I know, just know, that my *mama* is safe somewhere, with his father. There is no need for goodbyes.