

## **The collision of two cities: Mumbai, and Manchester**

There are nights in Manchester during which consciousness itself feels punitive.

Sleep hovers somewhere beyond reach - imaginable certainly, attainable perhaps for other people, but withheld from me with a peculiar and deliberate cruelty. Outside my window, the city glistens beneath rain and sodium light, austere in the manner peculiar to English nights. Buses sigh at empty stops. Windows extinguish themselves one by one. Entire lives fold inward toward warmth, intimacy, belonging.

And I remain awake.

Utterly, ruinously awake.

There exists a particular species of loneliness reserved for those who discover, too late, that the people who once constituted the fixed centre of their emotional universe were never as immutable as they appeared in childhood. It is not merely grief. Grief has focus. Clarity. Subject.

Whereas this, this disorientates.

This is the slow erosion of certainty.

The gradual recognition that the architecture of one's inner life was constructed upon foundations capable of fracture.

And every night, when silence deepens sufficiently, memory arrives to complete the demolition.

It always begins the same way.

With Mumbai.

With heat imprisoned inside concrete long after sunset. With the relentless whir of a ceiling fan slicing through humid darkness. With the smell of fried onions, cardamom tea, damp clothes drying near windows that never fully closed against monsoon air. With autorickshaws sputtering through narrow lanes and pressure cookers hissing in neighbouring kitchens while laughter drifted upward from balconies slick with rain.

And at the centre of it all:

us.

Four people compressed into an intimate one-bedroom flat so small that privacy existed only as theory, yet so saturated with affection, that I believed, with the absolute arrogance unique to childhood, that love itself could make human beings invulnerable.

We were not merely close as a family.

We were entangled.

Interwoven so completely into one another's emotional existence that even temporary separation felt faintly catastrophic. If my parents stepped out for an evening, the flat itself seemed deprived of oxygen. My brother and I drifted restlessly from room to room awaiting the metallic rattle of keys at the door, waiting for voices to restore life to the walls.

That was home to me then:

not architecture,

but presence.

Each evening unfolded according to rituals so ordinary at the time that I scarcely recognised their significance. After dinner, all four of us would inevitably gather onto the same bed, limbs overlapping carelessly, conversations sprawling without destination or urgency. The television flickered pointlessly in the background while we occupied ourselves with the infinitely more compelling task of existing together.

How incandescent those evenings now appear in memory.

My brother provoking laughter with the instinctive precision of a born performer. My mother preserving dignity for perhaps three seconds before collapsing into helpless amusement herself. My father elongating stories theatrically simply because he delighted in the sound of our laughter answering him.

Sometimes we played cards until midnight beneath yellowing tube lights.

Sometimes we watched films while speaking over entire scenes.

Sometimes we discussed examinations, relatives, neighbours, politics, impossible futures; all the trivial debris of ordinary life which, under the alchemy of intimacy, acquired the texture of something sacred. But the rumble of my brother's stomach would abruptly bring those conversations to a halt, much to my dismay, prompting the hurried scuttle of family members toward the dinner table. Though one thing was for sure: our dinner was never merely dinner. My father cooked with the fervour of a man

attempting to translate love into something tangible, edible, undeniable. The kitchen belonged to him entirely. He made sambhar so fragrant it perfumed the flat before it reached the table - dark and deep with tamarind, softened by slow-cooked lentils, sharpened with curry leaves crackling in hot oil. His dal possessed a restorative gravity, the sort of food that seemed capable of repairing exhaustion at its source. And his puri bhaji remains, even now, the standard by which I ruin every other potato dish I encounter.

He cooked constantly. Enthusiastically. Almost competitively.

Dish after dish emerged from that tiny kitchen while he hovered nearby feigning indifference, waiting for our reactions with poorly disguised anticipation. Asking whether the sambhar required more salt despite already knowing it did not. Refilling plates before they were empty. Watching us eat with a satisfaction so pure it almost embarrassed him.

Even my mother admitted, laughingly and without resentment, that he was the superior cook.

Looking back now, I think he understood instinctively what I only comprehend in retrospect:

that feeding people is sometimes another way of asking them not to leave.

At the time, I mistook permanence for inevitability.

Children always do.

Nobody warns you that while you are inhabiting happiness, it is already passing into elegy.

My father, especially, existed in my imagination with the immovability of myth.

Even now, I cannot fully articulate the devastation of loving someone first as a child loves - completely, reverently, without psychological distance - and later discovering that their affection was contingent upon your obedience to the narrative they had authored for your life.

Because he did love me.

That is what renders everything afterward so unbearable.

He loved me with intensity. With investment. With genuine pride.

When I was in 10th standard and paralysed by the apocalyptic anxieties peculiar to academically ambitious adolescence, he stationed himself beside me night after night constructing study timetables with near-clinical seriousness. Sheets of paper scattered across the dining table. Ink stains on his fingers. Subjects divided meticulously into hours, chapters, achievable victories.

“You’ll do well,” he would say.

And because it was him speaking, I believed it absolutely.

There exists something profoundly formative about being regarded by one’s father as inherently capable of greatness. His faith in me became inseparable from my own developing sense of self. My ambitions thrilled him. My achievements animated him. Watching me move toward the future seemed to furnish his sacrifices with meaning.

I see that now with heartbreaking clarity.

Which is perhaps why the disintegration that followed felt less like conflict and more like structural collapse.

When I left for the United Kingdom, I carried his expectations with me almost tenderly. I believed my independence would gratify him because he had raised me toward it so deliberately. Education abroad. Professional success. Intellectual ambition. These had once seemed to him evidence of possibility.

Until possibility developed a will independent of his own.

England altered me: not suddenly, not rebelliously, but inevitably. Distance performs strange surgeries upon identity. Removed from the gravitational pull of family, I began encountering myself as a singular person rather than merely somebody’s daughter. I learned solitude. Financial independence. Choice. I acquired opinions sharpened by experience rather than inheritance.

And, perhaps most unforgivably, I ceased confusing obedience with love.

Then I fell in love myself.

Not strategically.

Not appropriately.

Not with the sort of man my father could assimilate comfortably into the mythology of our family.

I fell in love with a white man.

A man I chose entirely for myself.

And something in my father calcified after that.

Not immediately. Tragedies of this nature rarely announce themselves dramatically at first. They infiltrate quietly. Disapproval concealed within concern. Questions weighted with accusation masquerading as paternal anxiety. Silences expanding where warmth once existed effortlessly.

Until one day I realised, with a kind of psychological nausea, that the man I had trusted most profoundly in the world was incapable of loving the version of me that existed beyond his control.

That revelation altered something fundamental inside me.

Because daughters raised within immense love rarely anticipate discovering its conditions.

The more autonomous I became, the more intolerable I seemed to him. Every disagreement registered as defiance. Every boundary became disrespect. Every independent decision constituted evidence that England had corrupted me irrevocably.

As though selfhood itself were betrayal.

As though a daughter may be educated, ambitious, worldly - but only insofar as those qualities remain aesthetically pleasing extensions of paternal authority rather than genuine emancipations from it.

I think that was when I began understanding my father not merely as my father, but as a man - flawed, frightened, governed by pride and cultural inheritance in ways I had once been too devoted to perceive.

And that understanding devastated me more thoroughly than anger ever could.

Because I had not merely loved him.

I had idealised him.

The man who once sat beside me engineering my future with such tenderness eventually became the same man who called me a parasite for refusing to subordinate my adulthood to his emotional jurisdiction.

Parasite.

Even now the word reverberates through me with the cold permanence of iron striking stone.

Certain sentences do not merely wound relationships; they alter their entire atmospheric composition. Afterward, proximity itself becomes psychologically dangerous. Somewhere deep within my nervous system, love has become entangled with volatility.

And yet this remains the grotesque paradox of filial love:

I continue missing him with an ache so primitive it humiliates me.

Not his cruelty.

Not his rage.

I miss his gentleness before pride poisoned it.

I miss monsoon-heavy road trips while old Bollywood songs crackled through damaged speakers. I miss wedding seasons: silk sarees cascading across bedsheets like spilled colour, jasmine threaded meticulously into my mother's hair, jewellery boxes yawning open beside tangled bangles and safety pins. I miss restaurant dinners during which all four of us stole food from one another's plates despite having ordered separately.

Most of all, I miss the overwhelming certainty that we belonged irrevocably to one another.

Now those memories possess the texture of mythology.

Too luminous to touch directly.

Too painful to relinquish.

And perhaps that is the cruelest aspect of all this: the knowledge that no reconciliation, however sincere, could resurrect the innocence that once existed between us. Some illusions, once shattered, become part of your vision permanently.

Still, somewhere inside me survives the child who measured happiness by the sound of all four family members laughing in the same room.

And sometimes, during these endless Manchester nights, I find myself aching for one impossibly ordinary moment:

A film playing too loudly in our tiny Mumbai flat.

Rain striking the grilled windows.

My mother laughing softly.

My brother beside me.

And my father - not the man disillusionment revealed, but the man who existed before power and love became confused within him - pausing the film halfway through and lifting his hand in that familiar gesture, thumb and forefinger pressed lightly together, asking only:

“Coffee?”

And instantly the entire room would brighten.

Not because it was coffee.

Because it was ritual.

Because it meant another half hour together before sleep. Another fragile suspension of time. My mother heading toward the kitchen pretending to complain while already smiling. The smell of milk and sugar and coffee powder blooming slowly through the flat. Steel spoons clinking softly against mugs. My brother and I suddenly more awake than we had been moments earlier.

Such a small thing.

So painfully small.

Sometimes I become so submerged in these memories that returning to the present feels almost violent. Manchester reappears slowly. Rain against glass. The dim amber light in my flat. The terrible distance between who I was and who I have become.

For several moments I remain suspended there, somewhere between memory and waking, listening unconsciously for sounds that no longer exist: cupboard doors opening in our tiny kitchen, water beginning to boil, my mother's bangles striking softly against steel mugs, my father humming tunelessly to himself while waiting for the milk to rise.

And then another sound enters the room.

Footsteps.

Slow. Familiar. Present.

I do not turn immediately. Some irrational part of me wishes to remain inside the memory for a few seconds longer, to inhabit once more that vanished certainty before reality resumes its ordinary shape.

Then, gently, from somewhere behind me:

“Coffee?”

I turn instinctively.

My boyfriend is standing in the doorway, thumb and forefinger pressed together in exactly the same gesture.

And for one suspended moment, time folds inward upon itself.

Mumbai and Manchester.

Past and present.

Loss and continuation.

The child I once was and the woman I have become.

All of it coexisting briefly within the same breath.

He smiles without fully understanding why I suddenly cannot speak.

And I realise then that love survives in ways far subtler than permanence.

Not intact.

Not innocent.

But translated.

Carried forward through gestures, rituals, inflections of tenderness so small they might easily go unnoticed by anyone not starving for them.

The instinct to ask someone to stay awake beside you for another half hour while rain presses softly against the windows.

The instinct to nourish.

To linger.

To love through repetition.

And suddenly it seems possible that the tragedy of growing older is not merely that we lose people, but that we spend years believing love vanished with them when in fact it had already begun reappearing elsewhere, in altered form, waiting patiently for us to recognise it.

Perhaps that is all inheritance finally is:

not the preservation of what was,

but its quiet reincarnation inside what comes next.