

Looking for a window

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I lay quietly on my bed, eyes towards the ceiling, thoughts disoriented. Yiruma's "River flows in you" hummed silently beside me. That seemed to be the only noise in my life now. The city was quiet nowadays. No hubbub of busy people. No bustling streets. It's been almost a month. I have been locked in this apartment – the place I once called my haven. Sniffing, I wiped my nose on my sleeve and dragged myself to the mirror. "God! What's wrong with me?", I wondered. Eyes puffy and bloodshot, nose as red as a tomato, hair dishevelled, clothes – well they did stink. I looked long and hard at the creature that stared back.

"Anuparna Thakur, get a grip. You are not this weak!", I scolded myself, wiping tears off my face.

Just when I was motivating myself to be productive, Yiruma suddenly stopped playing his piano and Timon and Pumba started singing "*Hakuna Matata, it means no worries*". I walked slowly up to my bed and checked the caller ID.

Ma calling...

And with that, all my self-motivation went for a toss and I was howling again. This time in front of *Ma*.

"I can't take it anymore *Ma*! I want to go back home. Why did you let me come? Why didn't you stop me?"

I stopped to take a breath, and I found *Ma* staring at me, perplexed. I wiped my eyes; it stung a little from the constant rubbing. 'Great now you have bruised yourself.', my brain mocked me.

"You wanted freedom. Why are you crying about it now?"

"Yes! A year back when there was no danger of a godforsaken virus!"

"*Roommate rakhte bolechilam tokhon e!* You could have easily shared your apartment with someone," *Ma* went on. "But no! This girl wants her own space, her privacy!"

"*Ma*, your only daughter is depressed! The apple of your eye has turned into a human tomato and you can't give your accusations a rest!"

"What else can I say? Onu, I did not raise you to cry over locked downs and COVID-19s. I raised you to be a fighter. Is that what you want to hear?"

“Yes, thank you! Motivation much. *Dhut!* You are of no help Mother!”

“Okay leave that aside. Do you have anything to eat?”

“Yes”

“Did you eat anything”

“No”

“What! Why? Did you even take a bath?”

“No”

And with that Mother India forgets everything about lunch, food or the fact that I have skipped my meal. Because ironically for us Bengalis taking a shower is more important than having lunch. Well yes, hygiene is important in this present scenario. But so is food. She could have forced me to eat something. But no. Instead, she has to send me to the washroom.

“Onu, get up and go take a shower.”

“You are not here; you can’t make me!”

“Onu look at me.”

I looked up. *Ma*’s face was soft and sombre, concern visible in her eyes. She said, helplessness clear in her voice, “If I could, I would have flown there in a heartbeat. But I can’t *Mamoni*.” Whenever *Ma* called me *Mamoni*, it gave me a sense of comfort. It was her loving way to show that she loves me and will always protect me. “You have to fight this.”, she continued. “And you are not alone. We are here, just a call away. Don’t do this to yourself.”, she paused a moment and then asked, “Where is your sketchbook?”

“Somewhere in the wardrobe”, I mumbled.

“Get it out.”

“Ma, I have no inspiration in my life right now. I can’t just sit and sketch.”

“*Mamoni*, when all doors close...”

“... you have to search for the window”, I completed the sentence.

“So, take it literally. Look outside and see what you can find. Let the silence be your inspiration.”, *Ma* quipped.

“Okay”, I mumbled. Quarantine does funny things. Makes you realise your loneliness, sucks out all hope and surprisingly turns Mother India into *Guru Ma Maheswari*.

The call ended and like an obedient daughter, I sat down to search for my sketchbook.

To be clear, I am not an artist. I work as a data analyst for a corporate firm in Delhi. But being a Bengali had its perks. You had to be culturally sound. You had to ace your studies and be a pro in cultural arts at the same time. In my case, I am a trained Bharatnatyam dancer with a degree in Fine Arts. I loved sketching more than dancing though. Owing to my busy schedule and laziness, somehow, I lost touch with charcoal and paper.

Ma was right, it was time to reconnect with it again.

I pulled out my sketchbook. Scoured through the drawers to find my dusty and forgotten pencil case. Then finally, sat down on my bed, ready to sketch. But sketch what?

‘Look for a window’, my brain whispered.

The window. Of course. Oh, how many sleepless nights I have spent sitting by that window, sipping coffee, singing songs to myself, enjoying the breeze and the cacophony of the city. I quickly found a chair and sat down with my things.

It was quiet down there. Not a human in sight. Some stray dogs scurried here and there. A police van drove past. Probably patrolling the streets, I thought. I looked up. The sky was clear. After a long time, Delhi was not grey anymore. They say the pollution levels have gone down remarkably. Earth was finally healing.

I was lost in my thought when I suddenly heard a watchman from a nearby complex shout.

“*Bhag! Bhag yaha se*” Shoo. Go away!

I peered down and saw a boy running. His clothes were in tatters, his face streaked with dirt. He was crying.

But why was he crying? Is something troubling him?

“*Oye!*”, I called out. He looked up; his timid eyes wide. Inevitably he was scared. He tried to run away. When I shouted behind him, “Stop. Don’t be scared. Come here. Tell me what’s wrong?”

He broke down. His tiny structure shaking as he hid his face in his dirt covered hands and sobbed.

“Hey. It’s okay. Now, don’t cry.”, was all I could mutter.

“I have nothing to eat *didi*. It has been a week since I have had a proper meal.”

“Why? The government is providing ration to all. Why are you not going there?”

“Didi, you believe they can feed so many mouths? Many like me are dying of hunger.”

“Why did you come here?”

“To scavenge for food. They throw a lot of food outside. My friend Pintu got a packet full of meat and chapatti yesterday. I came here to see if I can find something to eat.”

My eyes welled up. Words choked but I somehow managed to croak, “Wait here. I’ll get you something.”

I quickly ran to my kitchen. Opened my fridge and pulled out last night’s rice and curry. I quickly packed it in a tiffin box fearing someone will shoo this boy away again. Just as I was about to send it down through my makeshift gunny bag dumbwaiter, something struck me. I picked up my bottle of sanitizer, packed it securely with the tiffin box and rushed to the window.

To my surprise, the boy already had his hands full. Packets of biscuits, chips, some food boxes were lying around him. He clutched as many things as he could, close to his chest. I stayed in an apartment with around ten other residents - typically aloof, never engaging in any conversation. However, when the boy was sharing his story with me, I wasn’t the only listener. Like me, everyone did their part to help this boy. To save mankind at this time of distress. He couldn’t contain his happiness and relief at the thought of not having to go hungry for next week or so. Smiling to the act of generosity of my neighbours, I added a big gunny bag to my package. He was going to need it.