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Above the waist-high magazine stand is a dry, brown scab that had once been fish skin. My mother flicked it there one afternoon and forgot about removing it after lunch. This was years ago and it came back to me now sitting in the easy-chair my dad used to sit in. We were just in from his funeral and Mum made coffee. I lit a cigarette and looked around for the ashtray. "Behind you," she says. "Under the table cloth. Want some brandy in your coffee?" I nod and flick the matchstick into the porcelain ashtray of a girl on a beach. Her belly hollowed out.



By Priya Sebastian

The front door is left open for my sister and her husband who are on their way here. Outside, a man tries to kick-start his scooter but the engine doesn't catch. After three attempts, he gives up and wheels it out of sight. A dog crosses the street, sniffs at a black garbage bag on the pavement and moves on. "I'm moving out," says Mum. I look at her and she's staring straight at me, her eyes bright as if she's been drinking. The only time I saw her drink was at my sister's wedding, five years ago, and she couldn't stop dancing. Now she was in her cane chair talking about leaving the house she had spent over forty years of her life in. It makes no sense for a 65-year-old to go house-hunting and then I thought about how I'd moved out, a decision made and executed in a day's time, and I understood: when you want to leave, you just do. No two ways about it. And it made sense to find a place not built on memories.

"Thought about where you're going to go?" I ask her, taking a sip from my mug and tapping a cigarette out with my free hand. "Goa, and I'll take it from there," she says, running her palm over a crease in her dress. "That's where we went for our honeymoon, you know." I've heard this story more times than I can remember. She tells me anyway. How they befriended a hippie couple, drank

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too much feni on the beach and got themselves arrested for misbehaviour. Their bail receipt was framed, still tucked away somewhere in the house. "He was a fun guy, ha," says Mum. I smile and get up from the chair. I walk over and hug her and she squeezes my wrist. "I don't know what to do, Jimmy. I really don't. Some days I wake up and it takes me a while to remember where I am. Other days, I don't remember waking up. All my friends have left. Now your father's gone too." I don't know what to say to her so I ask if she wants more coffee. While pouring it out from the flask I stare at her back. Her shoulders are broad but drooping. She's scratching the plastic tablecloth and the sound is that of an old cricket chirping aimlessly through the night.

As I bring her a fresh mug of coffee, my sister and her husband walk in. We hug each other again, second time since the funeral, and settle down around Mother. My sister has on a long, black dress and her bony hands rest on the little bump of a stomach. "Smoke in the courtyard," says Mum. "It's bad for the baby." My sister's husband joins me and he has the last bit of a roach in his wallet. We light up as Mum and Meg hug it out some more. "How's the job?" "Ah, you know," he says. "Slaves can't complain." He laughs when he says it but his eyes tell me he isn't cracking a joke. "How's the writing?" I tell him about the new short story I'm working on. He looks interested but I don't think he is. I don't blame him. You don't need a guy talking about putting words together on a page when your wife is pregnant and in a few months you're going to have to worry about a brand new family member. We finish the roach, I throw the butt over the wall and we come back in. Mum and Meg are discussing baby names.

Meg asks me what I think of the name Orlando. "Sounds like a king," I say, but it comes across unintentionally sarcastic. "Jeffrey's a good name," says Mum, looking around for approval. It's Dad's name. I look at Meg and she's staring into her cup. "We'll keep that in mind," she says, finally, and tries to change the topic. "What's wrong with Jeffrey?" asks Mum. "Nothing's wrong with it," says Meg. "I said we'll think about it. For all we know, it could be a girl." "Rubbish," says Mum. "I can tell from the size of your bump it's a boy. It was the same with Jimmy here. I knew." "I wouldn't mind either," says my sister's husband, placing his hand on her belly. "Of course," says Mum. "But I'm telling you. It's going to be a Jeffrey."

"Mum's going to Goa," I say, adding some more brandy to my coffee. "You're selling the place?" asks Meg. "Don't be ridiculous. This is home. I'm just moving out and around for a few months. I'll be back when you pop." "You can always stay with us for a few weeks," says Meg, but we all know it's an offer made in and for the moment. One not to be taken seriously. "No, I couldn't," says Mum. "I'll just be a burden with my arthritis and all." "No burden," says my sister's husband, but he mumbles it, as if worried he might add too much authenticity to his wife's suggestion. As soon as I think that, I realise I should be the last one making these assumptions. Mum could always move in with me but that would never work out. The way I was living currently, fried egg nights and beer mornings, she'd have a fit. Not that she didn't know how I lived but it all worked out because she wasn't around to witness it. My mother needed things to go her way under "her" roof.

We refill our mugs and I ask if she wants to listen to music. "I donated all his cassettes to the Salvation Army last week," she says. "And the radio music is trash." She's right about that so we sit around once again. I can't take the group silence for long and I walk out to the courtyard for a smoke. A child is wailing somewhere and a crow on the telephone line is staring straight up at the clear sky. I look up and two kites, one purple, one yellow, are circling each other. Their lines swirling around, waiting for one of the fliers to get too close. The purple dips and weaves and the yellow falls for the bait and snaps, fluttering over the buildings, falling in slow motion like the sun. "Jimmy, come in here," says Mum. "You have to hear the story of our honeymoon in Goa." I stub the cigarette out on the mosscovered wall, it dies with a faint hiss. I cross the threshold and look at Mum. Her hands are up in the air telling Meg and her husband about the hippie couple and the framed bail receipt. I stare at the dried fish skin on the wall. "What?" asks Mum. "Nothing," I say, and point. "That brown mark on the wall..." "Yeah," says Mum. "That's from the time I was cleaning fish. Meg wasn't even born then and you were sitting in that same easy-chair..." "I remember you flicked it across the room and it stuck there." "I'm surprised you remember," she says. "That was a long, long time ago."

Mum walks to the bedroom and comes out wearing a powderblue dress with off-white flowers. She presses her palm down on the frilly collar but it's stubborn in its wrinkliness. She leans against the old double-door Kelvinator fridge and starts to hum a Jim Reeves tune. "Daddy loved his Jim Reeves," says Meg. "Remember when he sent us around New Market looking for the cassette." "Uff, don't talk about New Market," says Mum. "It reminds me of the time Jimmy got lost there." She



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goes on to tell us how I'd sneaked into an antique dealer's shop and climbed into a brass flowerpot. "All I could see was his head poking out from the top," says Mum. "He was very naughty." We laugh together and she drags her cane chair across the room to where I'm sitting, looking out at the courtyard. Someone peeps out from the building opposite and Mum goes off. "Look at those wogs. No decency. Jimmy, I want you to stay here when I'm gone. You'll have the house to yourself and I won't be around to nag you." "You don't nag me," I lie, putting my arm around her. "Hush. I know when I'm nagging. Some days, just to get me angry, your father put cotton in his ears to block me out. Today when I saw the cotton in his nostrils I was thinking about that," she says. "It's funny. All the inappropriate things you think about in church."

The yellowing double-door fridge takes me back to the funeral. Dad's coffin was about the same size and had two doors. They only opened the one that covered his shoulders and head at the service. The rest of his body was too mangled. Meg made up a story about not having an open casket funeral because of all the dirt and grease on the body, but Mum didn't buy it. "I'm not a child. I know what happens when you jump in front of a train," said Mum, standing outside Peace Haven, the funeral parlour. "He didn't jump, Ma," said Meg. "He slipped on a banana peel." "Sometimes I wonder why you didn't become a writer instead of Jimmy," said Mum and laughed harshly.

I make another pot of coffee and pour it out. "Put some more brandy in mine," says Mum. I tell her that's too much. "I'll stop drinking the day you stop pulling the blues," she replies. Meg's husband laughs and looks at his watch. "Stay for dinner," says Mum. She won't take no for an answer and Meg checks the fridge. There's a bowl of chicken roast, pepper mince and an old flower-vase used to store pepper water. "We need bread," says Meg. "There's rice in the kitchen," says Mum. "I knew you all would come home after the funeral." I tap out a cigarette and walk out to the courtyard. "Don't throw the butts over the wall. I've been telling him that since he was 15 but you think he listens?" says Mum, looking at Meg's husband for support. He's busy texting.

Lord Jesus thank you for this meal. And thank you for making Jeffrey's death a painless yet mangled passage. I hope you have wheelchairs up there or down below. Amen. "Very appropriate, Ma," says Meg. "What?" says Mum. "Everything happens for a reason, right? And the reasons for anything happening are always unknown to us except to that motherfucker up in the sky." "You shouldn't have poured her so much brandy," says Meg, looking at me. "Stop it, Ma," I say and we eat in silence. The only sounds come from the garage opposite the street and Meg's husband chewing as if the food were made of plastic. "Can't you eat with your mouth shut?" asks Mum, putting the spoon down. "Sorry, M—," he begins to say. "Don't apologise," says Meg, pushing her plate back. "Don't you dare take it out on him." "Maybe if you hadn't married an uncouth wog your child would turn out better," says Mum, staring straight at Meg. Shit hits the fan. Meg picks up her porcelain plate and throws it across the room while Mum jumps up from her cane chair and knocks the coffee pot off the table. Now they're hurling abuses at each other and Meg turns around at the door, spits on the bottle-green threshold, and smiles, "You've always loved Jimmy more than me. I hope I never see both of you again." And then they're out on the pavement. Mum walks into the bedroom as I stand at the door watching Meg and her husband walking, arm in arm, towards the tram depot. I come back in and Mum's in the living room with her black suitcase between her freckled shins. Shards of glass, and coffee, are steaming on the maroon floor. The wall with the dried fish skin now has the addition of pepper water and a dark smear of pepper mince. "My train's at 11.30," says Mum.

On the way to Howrah station she has an argument with the taxi driver about charging ten rupees more than the fare. "Let it go, Ma," I tell her and she turns on me. "You're so fucking rich, huh," she says. "Fucking waster. Your father was right about you." I look out the window and we're on the flyover that drops down at the racecourse. She's still blabbering on about how I left when they needed me most. I don't say a thing because I know it's true. While passing the racecourse she says something that cracked me up. "We're all horses who never win a race and end up at the maidan for fat Bengalis in saris and their ugly children to sit on. Running in circles." I laugh and she goes off again. Now she's sure I'll die before her because of all the "shit you smoke".

The familiar railway station stench of piss, rotten vegetables and sweat hits us as we get out of the cab. I carry her suitcase and don't bother buying a platform ticket. We walk up an escalator that doesn't move and down a wet staircase to Platform 17 where the train to Goa has just come in. She cools down inside the three-tier compartment, and holds my hand in hers. "I wish you were coming with me," she says. "Why don't you come home with me tonight and we'll book tickets for next

week.” “I know you don’t really want to,” she says. “Do you think he really slipped on a banana peel, Jimmy? Tell me the truth.” We sit silently staring at each other as passengers shove their luggage under the berths and chain them to the seats. “No, he didn’t,” I reply. She dabs her forehead with a crumpled handkerchief, “I knew it. He was never the clumsy type.”

The whistle blows and I hug her long and hard as if to stem our missing tears. Her eyes are as bright as they were when we got back from the funeral. I try to think of a fitting goodbye but don’t find the words quickly enough. She tells me to clean the wall with the food stains. I catch one final glimpse of her from the platform and she’s fiddling with the frilly collar. I leave the station, cross the road and walk towards the jetty where the ferry will take me across the river. I imagine the train picking up speed at night and my mother standing at the compartment door ready to step out. Her grey hair flat against her forehead as she falls into the blackness. How can you think that? I ask myself, standing on the upper deck of the ferry. Across the river there’s a giant billboard advertising a sale of some sort. Exchange your old something-something for brand new something-something and I can’t stop laughing. The other passengers look sideways at me and back away. “Is he going to jump?” whispers somebody behind me as I stare up at a night sky devoid, like all else, of any comfort.

This short story was published in the Jan-Mar 2018 issue of *The Indian Quarterly*.

About the author

Nicholas Rixon’s short stories and non-fiction have appeared in The Statesman, Penguin Unplugged, Hindustan Times, The Wax Paper (NY) and Scroll.in. He currently lives in Delhi and is working on his debut short story collection.

2 Comments



Ram Iyer February 27, 2018 at 12:01 pm - Reply

What a fabulous story – multilayered, unctuous and muscular. Interesting dialogue setup – in compressed format. Is that technique a way of mirroring just how scattered this family is? Thanks for sharing



Vasumathi Rajamani September 3, 2020 at 3:58 pm - Reply

This was beautiful! A fragile topic dealt with humor. The writing, the characters, the setup... everything about this story was wonderfully constructed.

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