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LEFT BACK FOREIGNERS

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“Afeeling of suspicion and mutual distrust had always existed between Anglo-Indians and other Indian communities. Anxiety about its future gripped the community who had formally enjoyed British patronage…”

“Anglo-Indians were associated with English cultural patterns, but they never reached a plateau of equality in the English socio-cultural sphere. At the same time, they were never an integral part of the socio-cultural composition of indigenous India and indigenous populations never considered Anglo-Indians to be an integral part of India.”

— Nagorao Zapate,
The Politics of Representation: Identity, Community and Anglo-Indian Associations in South Asia

Summer of 1997. We're in the courtyard of the Ballygunge house and Grandpa Basil is handing me envelopes of letters from his brothers and sisters in Middlesex. I'm soaking the envelopes in a mug of water and waiting for the Machin stamps to peel away from the paper. I sit for hours watching the multi-coloured side-profiles of Queen Elizabeth II shimmer and dry in the June sun. My shirtless grandfather is moving in and out of sleep on his maroon easy-chair. The leukoderma on his back, knees, and shins makes him look whiter than he really is—like a dalmatian. He tells me Calcutta is a retropolitan. No matter how many tall buildings they make, how many flyovers they construct, the city will always move at a snail's pace. 'Then why don't you go back to England,' I ask him. He clips the back of my ear. 'We're left back foreigners,' he says. But nobody in our family looks very white: If anything, we're all shades of beige, like condensed milk left out in the sun. I tell him the grammatically correct phrase is *left behind*. He calls me a smart-arse.

We're in the dimly-lit waiting area of the Park Circus branch of Allahabad Bank in Calcutta. We're sitting at the far end of the ground floor building; a row of metal benches bolted to the floor. Grandpa Basil hands me the brass triangular token and I spin it on my fingers waiting for the clerk to call our number. It's pension day and we're both happy. Grandpa Basil will get to stock up on hooch and I'll get my fortnightly pocket money of fifteen rupees. Another old man sitting next to us is chewing paan and shaking his legs. In a spurious mixture

of Bengali, Hindi, and English, Grandpa Basil turns to him and says, 'Is it really so hard to save the uncouthness for when you're back home, you wog?' The man begins to retort, flecks of maroon paan escape his pursed lips, but before he can get a word out sideways, Grandpa Basil biffs him on the chin. I watch the betel-juice fly out of the man's mouth, in a graceless arc, and splatter the glass window at the clerk's counter.

Basil Rosario, browner than he would've liked to be, was an Anglo-Indian—a minority community, with Indian and British or European ancestry, that is just 0.015% of India's population today. He joined what was then known as the Bengal Nagpur Railways, not because of his academic achievements, but as a welterweight boxer. A diesel train driver in the railway town of Kharagpur, he retired and moved to nearby Calcutta in the late 70s, where he struggled to come to terms with India moving away from its colonial past. His fear of the unfamiliar manifested itself as prejudice. Like those of his generation, he was constantly distrustful of anyone who was not Anglo-Indian. As a character in the Anglo-Indian novelist Irwin Allan Sealy's The Trotter-Nama, says, "What about us… who were neither Indian nor European, who spoke English and ate curries with a spoon."

Anglo-Indians of Basil's generation were guaranteed cushy government service jobs by the British who grudgingly accepted the "eight annas" (sixteen annas made a rupee, eight annas was a common slur directed at Anglo Indians). As Laura Bear writes:

"Even as late as 1923 nearly half of the Anglo-Indian community was employed by or associated with the railways as dependents of

employees, and in 1932 almost 100 percent of the upper subordinate positions on the state-managed railways were filled by Anglo-Indians and Europeans."

But this preferential treatment petered out by the 1960s. Anglo-Indians of post-independence India struggled to find new forms of employment mainly due to educational limitations, and also because they did not fit the mould of a certain 'genealogical Indianness.' After Independence, the Anthropological Survey of India described Anglo-Indians as possessing a "spurious" culture that posed a problem for national integration.

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It is interesting to note that, between the 18th and early 20th century, when one used the term Anglo-Indian in the Indian context, they were referring specifically to colonial-era British expatriates. In some ways, the actual meaning of the term has been hard to pin down since it came into being. During, and after, the Indian census of 1911 the term began to be more widely utilised as a classification denoting those of mixed ethnicity. The term was officially codified in the Government of India Act (1935), where an Anglo-Indian was recognised as "a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is a native of India." The main details of the definition as per the Act were maintained when Anglo-Indians were officially listed in 1950 as a minority group in India's constitution.

—Laura Bear, *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self*

Ma says that there are two kinds of Anglo-Indians. 'The first kind is like milk,' she said, 'and the second kind is like milk but with a pinch of turmeric thrown in.'

I asked her what kind are we. She rattled off surnames of Anglo-Indian families that were all milk. O'Connor, Macdonald, Thompson, Anderson, Lambert. 'They either took off with the East India Company or they stayed back because they knew they had enough money to live comfortably,' she explained. She wasn't lying because the surnames she'd mentioned, I only ever read about them in the newspaper. And all of them lived in Calcutta or Bombay. None of them were in Kharagpur.

'But milk tastes so much better with turmeric in it,' I said. We'd been drinking it that way for as long as I could remember.

Ma said that nearly all the Anglo-Indians I'd ever meet would be like me with turmeric in their milk. She said she was all milk but my father had so much turmeric in his milk that it was the colour of winter sunshine. I said I wanted to be like her—all milk. And she said that it was too late and that once you add turmeric to milk, you can't get it out, and the longer it stays in there, the yellower it gets. 'If you'd married someone just like you then we would be living much more comfortably,' I said. She told me that that's not how love works. Sometimes you meet someone and it don't matter where they're from,

you just want to be with them. That much I knew to be true from the kind of people I knew in Kharagpur.

After that day, I began to see turmeric everywhere I went and in all the people I met. It was not such a bad thing and then I read about the other Anglo-Indians in the newspapers and I thought, how stupid these rich people were with their mansions and their chandelier dogs and their ridiculously archaic surnames. Why the hell would you stay back when the country wasn't yours any longer? If I ever meet an all-milk Anglo-Indian, I'd tell them that. And I'd force them to taste milk with turmeric in it, and then they'd never go back! I told Ma this and she laughed and rubbed the back of my neck and said, 'you're a smart little boy.' And I was chuffed for days because Ma paying you a compliment was like expecting a train to always be on time.

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"Fears of reprisals and insecurity about their future in India led to three major waves of migration from the sub-continent... Immediately after 1947, tens of thousands left for England, which they had always considered as some sort of a homeland... The second major migration wave was in the early sixties, coinciding with a move in India to replace English as the national language... The destinations for this second migratory wave were Canada and Australia, as immigration to the UK had become difficult due to the introduction of controls to regulate immigration and also because Australia had dropped its 'whites-only' policy, which had affected all but the fairest Anglo-Indians...The third wave, from the seventies and continuing, is sometimes referred to in India as the 'family reunion' wave...referred to

in migration literature as 'family reunification'…The main destinations for this wave of emigrants have been Australia, England, Canada, and to a lesser extent, New Zealand. There may now be more Anglo-Indians living out of India than there are in India."

—Robyn Andrews, *Quitting India: The Anglo-Indian Culture of Migration*

Maggie calls around noon—it's five a.m. in Brampton where she is—to tell me Ma's been giving her grief again. She reads out snatches of WhatsApp messages Ma sent her out of the blue: 'I feel ashamed of you …I'm used to people taking me for a ride…You are not doing me any favours…After getting a man you forgot your so-called mother…Just doing the same as your father done to me…'

'She's really driving me up the gum tree,' says Maggie. 'Can you talk to her? I had a double shift today. I can't do this.' I can hear the anger and sleepiness in her voice. I'm at the Kashmere Gate metro station toilet mixing a pint of Royal Stag with Coke and soda. I tell Maggie not to worry; she asks me how my Masters is going and I tell her it's great and that I came second in class. 'Of course you did,' she says, 'you're thirty-five years old, it'd be quite sad if you were failing.' We laugh and she says she went to a casino in Niagara Falls last weekend with her boyfriend's mother and they got to sit in on an episode of 'The Price is Right'. I tell her to get some sleep, 'you know Ma's a nutcase, I'll take care of it.' She yawns into the phone.

I call Ma two days later. She's watching reruns of MasterChef Australia.

'Look what the cat dragged in.'

'I have college, I have work. Can't keep calling you all the time.'

'Excuses, excuses, excuses,' she says. 'Lot of excuses you and Maggie have.'

I ask her what's for lunch and where her sugar's at.

'Mixed fried rice and 257. This Sri Lankan fellow on MasterChef, he made this dish with prawns and peanut paste and curry leaves. I'll make it for you when you come home for Christmas.'

'You need to stop fighting with Maggie.'

'Don't talk to me about that woman. Ever since she left, she's become too big for her boots. Talking back to me, being rude, I don't owe her my patience, I told her straight.'

She goes off on a long tirade of Maggie's transgressions ever since she moved to Canada. She quotes verbatim from perceived curt messages, brings up an incident from twenty years ago when Maggie bunked school to go meet a boy, and she cites examples of dead people she used to know who got 'too proudy' when they moved abroad.

'People change, Nico,' she says. 'Next thing you know when she comes back to Calcutta she'll be calling dal puris lentil puffs.'

I can't help but laugh and she giggles.

I remind her that she only has one daughter.

'Yeah, yeah,' she says. 'Don't tell me how to be.'

We gossip for another half an hour and she tells me all about the neighbour's drunkard son and how the vegetable man keeps staring down her blouse.

'Don't bend down then.'

'How the hell do you expect me to pick the right tomatoes? You're not here to help me.'