Strangers and Other Ghosts

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Abstract
Mother, it is the smoke in your kitchen that teases these tears from my eyes, this thin smoke, ruinously tinged with old mustard, that you have inhaled daily for so many years, it is the smoke, mother, not the fallow weight of my fattened prose that brings tears, today, to my eyes, as I sit to compose another episode of the unending saga that brings us our daily bread, to drag my characters through another week in their lives, brushed always by deadly fronds of their histories.

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Mother, it is the smoke in your kitchen that teases these tears from my eyes, this thin smoke, ruinously tinged with old mustard, that you have inhaled daily for so many years, it is the smoke, mother, not the fallow weight of my fattened prose that brings tears, today, to my eyes, as I sit to compose another episode of the unending saga that brings us our daily bread, to drag my characters through another week in their lives, brushed always by deadly fronds of their histories. This week we will have a chance encounter with a young woman, a rainy Wednesday afternoon, perhaps, much like this one, on the long verandah of the Marble Palace, the Mullick family mansion, mother, that you have never visited, one of this city’s few attractions, I must take you there, mother, perhaps next year, after you retire, you will have time then mother, darkthroated afternoons of endless silence, afternoons that once would have been measured out for you by the chime of the school bell, but I digress, as always, I digress, and how my audience feasts upon my digressions, mother, it is a habit that I get from you, I believe, a childhood of opened parentheses, the glorious insulation of nested anecdotes, that is the essence of a child’s security, is it not, mother? And now it is I that am charged with the duty of building a labyrinth of tales for my readers to hide within, where one story dives into another and resurfaces without its fins, we will have a chance encounter this week in Marble Palace, a young woman, newly graduated, born and bred in North London, shall we say, come for the first time to this city, to excavate her roots, no, not for the first time, for she will have been brought before as a child to be exhibited to the grandparents, the aunts and cousins. With one favourite cousin, her age, she will have maintained a correspondence, will have sent her precious posters of Madonna, slipped chewing gum slices into the crevices of excruciatingly coded letters, this cousin will have been married now for a few years, our young woman may even have attended her wedding a brief two weeks in the tropics between college terms, but much has changed within her since then, her horizons have broadened, but with nothing much to fill them, the undergraduate romance with the fiery Welshman has ended, all too trivially, her dog has been run over by an ice-cream van earlier in the year, her best friend has left for graduate school in Canada, all she has left to her are her secrets, old now, and rusty at the edges, and all she wants to do is to sit in a corner somewhere and
write poetry, and for someone to read it, endlessly read it, drink deeply of her mindbroth, and smack his lips in limitless delight. Such are her thoughts as she stares into the dull August rain, falling breathlessly into the old courtyard of the Marble Palace, falling without adjectives into the curled phrases she longs to use to describe a tropical downpour, if only someone would give her the run of a place like this for a year, she muses, or better a ruined mansion in the tangled heart of a forest, hung with diseased mirrors, and peopled only with the shadows of strange and useless furniture, would she not then be able to wring music from words, words within her that have never been given space to breathe, jostled by traffic and smoke, trivial social intercourse, and the felted shoulders of other words, packed too closely together. Such are her thoughts, mother, when he comes upon her, not our regular protagonist, but his rarely mentioned older brother, the introverted business executive, Arunavo, he has taken the afternoon off, feeling a cold coming on, and then on sudden impulse (what other can be the nature of impulse, mother?) he has directed his driver to the Marble Palace, and not home, where his daughters will be returning around this time from school, and though he does not directly make this connection, we will make it for him, that he has chosen to spend a few quiet hours in the antique insulation of the Marble Palace, to rest awhile amid sweet Victorian decay, before returning to his luxurious but busy Alipore flat, for he has three daughters, our Arunavo, all popular with their schoolmates, whom they drag back in hordes to fill the afternoons with wide giggling and sandy whispers, that he cannot bear to return to this he does not know, but my audience will suspect it, for they know that Arunavo is a man with a passion for silence, that years ago he lost the woman he loved because of his addiction to silence, for he had not dared speak his love, silently he had worshipped her, and with ardent silence she had responded to his adoration, but he never declared his love, not even when the threat of an arranged marriage loomed large, he had not intervened, and she had married a young doctor, and left with him, a year later, two months pregnant, to find a new life in the United Kingdom. You can see the beginnings of the intertwinement, can you not, mother, of these two separate threads, my young woman, thirsting for poetry, staring into the rain, and my middle-aged executive with a sore throat, come to seek silence in the clammy ruins of the Mullick family mansion, you can see now, can you not mother, the clumsy node, the fat and crude knot I am about to tie?

Intellect without emotion, arrogance without passion, violence without pain, these are the worst of evils, she decides, staring into the numb rain, and my readers will excuse her, for it is the fragrance of these musings that arrests Arunavo, as he passes by her in pursuit of a mustier silence than the empty courtyard can offer, but it is only the train of his thoughts that is interrupted, polite momentum propels him into the dark picture gallery, where he finds himself deliciously alone.
But he will not wallow for long in this half-light, thick with the floating
scabs of old dreams, her thoughts curve like elbows around his head, she
follows him in, treads softly, slipperless, into the picture gallery, as the
rain suddenly rears and bucks and comes pelting onto the verandah.
He turns to her and smiles, he is not shocked to find hovering beneath
her ghostly features, a pentimento of his long lost beloved, I loved your
mother, he longs to tell her, I am almost certain I loved your mother,
think, but for my silence you would not have been. But he is a man of few
words, Arunavo, and my audience would not tolerate such an indiscreet
outpour on his part, and least of all you, mother, you would never
countenance such appalling behaviour on his part, he is frightening the
child, you would protest, thinking of your own granddaughter, my dear
niece Urmila, whom we saw off last night, put her on the plane to
Heathrow, she did not look well, mother, did she, last night, three months
in the tropics had eaten deep into her unaccustomed flesh, so terribly pale
and thin she looked, last night, mother, drained of all the youthful
enthusiasm she had come with to our household, three months ago, she
had great hopes of these three months, mother, three months with you
and I, her literary maiden aunt, the madwoman in the kitchen, scratching
away among the mustard frowst and the fennel fumes, she had great
hopes of me, mother. And instead I simply milked her for details of her
North London life, borrowed shamelessly from her breathless confidences
to spice the lives of my characters, hunted for authenticity in the labels
of creams and potions, the tags upon her T-shirts, these scraps that my
audience savours above the convolutions of my narrative, but it is a
common affliction, they tell me, the disease of brand-names, the
martyrdom of Marks and Spencer, the detached benevolence of Boots, the
asthmatic solicitude of Harvey Nichols, all are palpable to me now, I who
have never crossed the seas.
But my young woman in the Marble Palace is not Urmila, mother, you
will see so, soon, for Arunavo will describe her as delicate, her nose
shaped like a reedpipe, her eyes large and quiet, her lips full but always
in grim compression, she is certainly not our Urmila, mother, with her
rooster hair, and collandered earlobes, no, mother, my young woman has
hair that hangs like autumn clouds about her neck, and her ears have
holes enough only for a pair of diamond studs that serenade the rainlight
in hasty, abrupt flashes.
Arunova sneezes. Excuse me, he says to the girl.
Horrible rain, she says, a soaking in this is worse I am sure for the health
than a miserable cold English drizzle. And a cold in hot weather is so
much less tolerable than a cold in cold weather, where it can be nursed
with fires and brandy, and mugs of hot chocolate.
Colds are good for you, says Arunavo, perversely. There was a belief in
North Bengal, he remembers, that colds protect from insanity, a stuffy
nose flattens unwary convolutions of thought, popping ears distract from
the obsessions of moonless wind, dense tropical silence will sear a wakeful
mind unless it is cloaked in the midst of rheum, he tells her so.

Colds, says the girl, and all manner of respiratory infections have been
elevated to the level of ideal to curb the creative impulse within man, as
with the image of the ailing domestic angel that enfrailed so many
generations of women. Yes, colds can protect against madness to be sure,
for colds will divert from the energy of authority, that first clause of
madness: the total recognition of the self.

You remind me, says Arunavo, of a schoolgirl to whom I gave private
tuition, many years ago, when I was in college. She had strange ideas
about everything, and was just as eager as you to communicate her fancies
to strangers.

I was in love with her sister, he longs to tell her, I loved her sister, loved
her with the deep boundless energy of silence, her every action encrusted
in silence would repeat endlessly within me, a glimpse of a hand pulling
in the shutters in the outside corridor would chorus inside me all evening
as I discoursed with my precocious student, tried to straitjacket her wild
thoughts into sentences, it was I that gave her the curse of coherence,

It is only to strangers that I would communicate such fancies, says the
girl, to strangers and ghosts.

I may be a ghost, for all you know, says Arunavo.

This is uncharacteristic of him, my readers will frown, we know Arunavo,
he is not schooled in such verbal indulgence, we have known him now for
many years, my readers will protest, and never has he been so inclined,
Arunavo, we know, is a man perpetually sucking in the sprouts of his
thoughts.

But I have known him longer than they, and I know what lies buried
behind those walls of stone, I know what labyrinths are still packed with
the translucent folds of unspent passion, I know what sighs still remain
unburnt between tall corridors of dream, I know the window from where
she would watch him waiting for his tram, I know the strange disquiet
stirred within her by his utter lack of agitation, as tram after tram would
pass, and not one of them going his way, I know the restless brush of his
frayed shirtcuff against the tea saucer, as he fought with his student's
plaintive oxymorons, and thought incessantly of her sister.

I might easily be a ghost, he pleads to the young woman, in a roomful
of scrofulous oil paintings, he has been a ghost, all his life, to his family,
to his friends, a mere outline of a man, even to her, who had loved him
with passion, how quickly he must have lost substance, become a faint
shadow in her past, she who had been driven to distraction once by the
proximity of their fingers as she handed him the discreet brown envelope,
his monthly wage, mother you sent it often by her, did you not, did you
hope, between all hopes, of encouraging their tenderness, did you hope
that he might declare his love to her, save her from impending sacrifice,
the marriage that her uncles were already arranging, for we have had no father for many years, lived on the charity of our uncles, supplemented by your meagre teacher’s salary, mother, and now by my inadequate earnings. Did you hope he would rescue her, mother, from a lifetime of submission, or rescue you, rather, from a lifetime of gratitude, my uncles did not spare any expense at her wedding, oh rivers of curry flowed between rice dunes at that wedding, and I stood behind the mountains of cutlets and wept, and resolved never to marry. Was she to be a vehicle of your protest, then, mother was that why you sent her so often with the tea and the sweetmeats, and his pay, always in a used envelope, the address scratched out, did you hope that he would give you the courage to refuse my uncles’ charity, that in this one matter, the marriage of your daughter, you might have a say, that you might proudly declare that the nice young tutor was in love with her, had begged her hand in marriage, of course they would have to wait, for he had barely finished his Master’s degree, but his prospects were brilliant, that much was clear, he was a prize catch, but he slipped your nets, mother, never dignified their solemn ardour with vows, perhaps you knew he never would, mother, perhaps this was your cruel way of acquainting us with the monstrous proportions of our misfortune, perhaps you wanted her to love him, only so that the keenness of her loss would echo your anguish, mother, as you handed her destiny over to my uncles, for their eager hands to knead into shapes far beyond your control.

And so you watched helplessly as they gave her away to a squat engineer, how we grieved at his appearance, for he a good halfhead shorter than her, and his nose squashed like a warthog, and how old he seemed, thirty-four, we were so young then, mother, you will forgive our youthful distress, will you not, for we all came to appreciate him in due course for the gentle and loving husband that he was to her, and our dear Urmila was born of their union, his dark eyebrows arching over her claysmooth features, the fatness of his nostrils pulling down upon her fine nose, our Urmila is no beauty like my sister, but she has a pleasant face and a cheerful disposition, has she not, mother, but three months long in these humid climes for her, she returned sobered and spent, grateful to climb into the stolid pegasus that would bear her back to the land of her birth, you dabbed your eyes as the plane took off, mother, who knows when you will see her again.

But my young woman in the Marble Palace is not Urmila, mother, I promise you, she is a true figment of my imagination, she has come to this city in search of something quite different, and now in the sumptuous decay of the Marble Palace she finds sudden reason for hope, for the man before her has declared himself a phantom, and now she knows, that wherever she goes she must take her own ghosts with her, and those of her fathers, and their fathers before them, and that wherever she goes, there will always be within her a feast of phantoms, that their laughter
and their tears will forever softly percolate into her consciousness, and she will be content.

We will leave them there, I think, the sore-throated executive, and the dreamy young student, we will leave them before the knot that ties their fates together becomes a noose, we will leave them with their deliciously unfinished conversation, that had begun with such promise of unrestraint, we will leave them to their own devices, for the moment. Perhaps I may bring them together again, if, as I have often schemed, I send Arunavo on a business trip to London, where he is sure to bump into his lost love through the North London Bengali network, and your daughter, he will ask, after the first trivial disillusionments are cleared from his palate, your daughter, whatever became of her?

My daughter? his lost love will echo, why she is well, though still seeking suitable employment, why not have her show you around London tomorrow, she has little better to do, and knows the city much better than any of us.

And so they find themselves again among the debris of a past that is not their own, within the holy coffers of Sir John Soane museum perhaps, exchanging absurdities in the alabaster stillness, until the meaning of his life will have been unravelled to a point of excruciation, and knowing that the time has come when finally he must abandon silence in favour of the firmer insulation of the ridiculous, he will wave the girl goodbye, return to a solitary park bench, and there he, who robbed me of my imagination, denied my sister the dignity of choice, and denied you, mother, the defiance of fate, he will bury his eyes upon the rancid sleeve of his borrowed overcoat and weep.