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Learning to Bake

Janhavi Acharekar

The breeze brought in the pungent smell of drying fish, as it did those days. Windows opened to reveal a washed-out blue sky. Bluer than the one remembered from their childhood, perhaps. But childhood had been some time ago and memories can be elusive.

The ocean is a blob. It reflects the colours of the sky to a cliché, encircling the bobbing fishing boats in swirling strokes. It echoes the shrill whistling of the kites as they glide the warm currents, slowly at first, and then dementedly, threatening to swoop towards the open window – an inch closer than the previous day – only to take a sharp turn and fly away into the horizon again.

They paint in silence all day. A cyclist goes by, one hand fidgeting with his face covering, before adjusting his crotch. Hours later, two women with shopping bags walk past, oblivious to the egret hunched over the edge of the promenade.

He lights a cigarette from his fast diminishing reserve, resting an elbow on the window sill. His eyes rest on the neighbour's garden, a rarity in a city like theirs.

"You could smell the grass from their lawn this morning," she says. "Made me long for the hills."

The pavement dwellers get into a fight, only to behave themselves when the police jeep drives past, on its languorous round at noon.

Aat raha. Stay indoors, instructs the sub-inspector on the loudspeaker, going on to elucidate the ill effects of disobeying orders in the wake of a pandemic.

The street children stand to attention, listening carefully. Stay indoors, they seem to mouth, bursting into giggles and wrestling each other to the ground as soon as the jeep turns the corner.

"I'll make us some sandwiches for lunch," she says, making her way to the kitchen.

"I'll cook dinner later," he promises, distractedly, training his gaze on a pizza delivery boy being stopped from entering the building.

They lapse into silence and then congregate again to observe the sunset at six. He dials his father.

"Too many patients, son. Too many. And the nurses are too few," says the voice at the other end.

"Yes, dad," he sighs. "I know."

"Let's speak tomorrow, okay? I need to tend to a new patient in five minutes. Emphysema. Twenty-one years old."

"Okay. Let's speak tomorrow," he replies, and hangs up.

She puts her arm around his waist. They gaze at the ball of fire in the sea. The illusion of tongues of flames leaping through the waters in the shape of a ring; a trick played by the sun.

And in this manner, the day stretches into a yawn. The silence and solitude in the metropolis are new. The isolation, not so much.

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The next day is no different. He attends a few calls. She speaks with her mother. In a repetition of the previous day's routine, they chat by the window occasionally, and then separate to tend to their works of art.

The pavement dwellers are huddled together in a group under a copperpod – the lone deciduous tree amid a queue of toddy palms and coconut trees swaying at a distance of a few feet from each other like a socially distanced line of people outside a grocery store.

The street children ride a colourful tricycle at noon, three on a seat, oblivious to the arrival of the oppressive summer heat. The older boys play a game with stones. The women wear colourful saris – magenta, parrot green, purple with gold and silver piping – as if the onus of bringing cheer into their lives rests on their own shoulders.

Two men on a scooter cause the group to scatter. Their rudimentary kerchief-masks give them the appearance of bandits but to the pavement dwellers, they are Samaritans who distribute rice and biscuits. The younger siblings fight over the biscuits.

He calls his sister and she assures him that all is well.

"Does Dad get his meals on time?" he asks. She affirms that he does, adding that the nurses are lovely.

Today, the blue sky reminds him of doctors' scrubs. The white clouds, of nurses in uniform.

"Are you done, Daddy? I'm waiting to have dinner with you, okay?" a high-pitched, little boy's voice from the distant past surfaces from the recesses of his mind.

His earliest memories were of waiting for his father to get done with the last patient. Of acquainting himself with names of medical conditions like bronchiectasis and pleural effusion at the end of the day, when his father returned from the hospital. Of being invited by the nurses for the cutting of his father's birthday cake, the numerals changing from thirty-five to seventy-five in a flash. For as long as he could remember, his father had tirelessly met the demands of the medical profession.

"I know it's hard being away," she says, gently, when he hangs up. "But you'll meet him soon enough."

When they speak that evening, his father is agitated; he rants about the younger doctors. "No good, I tell you," he complains. "One fellow doesn't know what the Jerusalem Syndrome is and

another doesn't know the treatment for...for... hyperekplexia. They don't make them like they used to."

The next day, he recounts the conversation to his sister and they laugh, picturing their father driving the young medics crazy with his quizzing.

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The days are fluid, melding into one another like the gooey desserts he's learned to bake. "Do we need more flour?" she asks while preparing a grocery list for their weekly shopping.

"No, but some sour cream perhaps...and Brie," he replies.

When he calls his father that evening, he asks to speak with the nurses, too. He checks if they have enough supplies. If they are taking adequate precautions given his father's advanced age and vulnerability. They assure him that they are, telling him what he wants to hear.

Later, she checks on their house help. Asks for her bank details so she can wire her salary.

"My son knows all that, Madam, and he's stuck in our village. I don't know how to operate the ATM," the maid informs her.

"I hope you've stocked up on food, then?" she asks.

"Where, Madam. We live from one day to the next."

"They are distributing food packets. Don't worry," she assures her.

On the pavement outside, a boy drinks water from a large can. The pavement dwellers have spread themselves out, as if claiming ownership of the open road and the sky above. They have befriended a stray dog that sits close to them, wagging its tail.

The scooterists arrive late that day, distracting the crows with the cooked food in their open basket. The birds mill about the basket like vultures; the men flap their arms to shoo them away. The activity draws the attention of the pavement families who begin to sprint towards the men, elbowing each other out of the way like athletes playing foul.

The first to reach emerges victorious, with his meal wrapped in newspaper in one hand and a steaming hot cup of chai (or coffee) in the other. The children dance a little jig of joy. One child sacrifices a few morsels for the dog that bounds up to him, wagging its tail wildly.

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A feeling of lethargy sets in.

The first few days had felt like a gift. Like added time that seemed to stretch the year, slow down the earth's rotations and revolution. They had scrambled to make the most of it, cleaning, cooking, sifting through old photos, filing away important papers, catching up on reading, movies and calls with people they had long lost touch with. Throughout, work had kept them sane, a thread of continuity that seemed to hold together their old way of life with this suspended state of inaction. Now, there is the danger of taking this state of limbo for granted.

The scooterists stop coming with the food packets and the pavement dwellers lie listlessly under their tree, picking at their hair and noses. A man stops by on his evening walk to feed the stray. No sooner has he laid the meal before the dog than they hurl abuses at him, causing him to quicken his pace. They swoop down and snatch the food – a roti and raw meat – from the confused animal. The dog emits a low growl, then starts barking madly. They throw stones in its direction; it shies and runs off, casting sad backward glances at them. Perhaps its newfound attachment to the pavement dwellers prevents it from showing further aggression.

Then one day, they disappear. It is only when the pavement glistens in the light of the midday sun, freshly hosed down and sanitized, that he notices their absence.

“They must have gone to the migrant camps,” she muses. She dials their maid.

“There are no food packets being distributed here, Madam,” says the maid. “But I have some biscuits left for the children, and my neighbours are kind.”

His father no longer takes his calls. Any communication between them is strictly through the nurses who are already overburdened with work.

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It was his father’s wish that they find him a care home, one managed by medical staff, in the environment he was most familiar with. The deterioration had been gradual and the slow progression of Alzheimer’s disease had been largely self-diagnosed. He had worked at the hospital for as long as he could until the management decided that it was too risky.

“I know how this progresses,” he had told his children. “It’s not pretty.”

He had insisted on a medical environment for reasons of health, he said, but they suspected it was to prolong the association with his profession. Work, for him, had been paramount. It had been the reason for his existence, his *raison d’être*. Medicine had been his life.

The siblings had looked for appropriate care homes in and around their respective cities. It was an uphill task. They zeroed in on one located on the outskirts of his sister’s city and she made sure to visit him every week. He flew down to meet his father whenever he could.

The deterioration had been slow. As a doctor, he was popular with the staff even though he slowed down the nurses and young medics with his constant medical banter and instructions. Prone to bouts of irritability at first, the confusion had set in. And then the delusions.

“Dad thinks he’s still a practising doctor, that all the nurses and medics are the staff working for him and the other residents of the home, his patients,” his sister had called to tell him.

“What?” he reacted, knowing that the decline had begun.

But they had laughed then, seeing the humour in it together with the sadness.

It was inevitable. Even when forewarned, one is never truly prepared to witness the collapse of a brilliant mind.

His father had taken to giving instructions to all and sundry, diagnosing medical conditions – not always accurate – of fellow residents.

The staff continued to be patient and always accorded him respect by addressing him as “Doctor”.

But now, his sister calls to say that their father no longer recognizes her. He does not respond to the names of his wife or parents, all long gone. He no longer responds, she informs her brother, to their own names either.

It is difficult to visit, she says. Both emotionally and practically, given the restrictions.

He had hoped to fly down for his father's birthday but it is impossible now. They must make do with the daily phone calls. Living apart and locked into separate worlds, with memories and without.

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She wakes up to him whisking the batter. He adds the egg, butter and sugar, and mixes it all together.

"Mmm. Is that a chocolate cake I smell?" she asks in her morning voice, hugging him from behind.

"The pavement dwellers are back," she observes, as she sips her morning tea by the window.

He wipes his hands on his apron, and joins her by the window to look.

The families are back. The men place fraying straw mats and soiled bedsheets on the pavement. The women rock their babies. A teenager attempts to catch some sleep on a ledge, in the glare of the morning sun. The younger children rub their eyes and snotty noses, and bawl.

His sister calls earlier than usual that day. She is crying.

"Has Dad passed away?" he asks, his heart sinking.

"No," she whispers. "The nurses have baked him a birthday cake."

That day, it is the head nurse who calls him. His sister has already logged in from her home. The residents of the care home are seated around a table covered with a lace-patterned plastic tablecloth.

He watches as the nurses round up the stragglers; the last of the residents enter the room with measured steps revealing arthritic knees and burdened spines that slow down the pace of the evening.

The nurses wheel in his father. Even at his age, indisposed as he is in his wheelchair, his father has the bearing of his youth. The impassive, creased face belies his confusion upon seeing the crowd. Gnarled fingers grip the handles of the chair. Wispy hair flies with the gust of breeze from a floor fan.

A ward boy enters, smiling broadly. He presents a bouquet of deep red roses to the old man. A nurse brings in the cake, holding it carefully so as not to smudge the icing. Happy 90th Birthday, Doctor, says the vanilla-flavoured sugar.

The nurses lead by clapping and singing enthusiastically. The residents follow suit. Happy burd-day to you, happy burd-day dear Doctor, they sing off-key, clapping and swaying their heads from side to side.

When his father has cut the cake, aided by a nurse, and the guests given their share of this and other treats, they hang up.

"Look who's on the phone, singing for you!" the nurse had said to his father, adopting the tone of an adult speaking with a child, pointing towards the phone as she spoke.

But he had stared blankly, failing to recognize his children.

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They stand by the window observing the pavement dwellers in silence. He stubs his cigarette and returns to the kitchen to check on the cake. Not bad for the first time, he thinks to himself, and looks for a box to place it in.

The pavement dwellers are seated in a circle, huddled together. She cannot tell if they are playing cards or partaking of a meal.

She starts upon spotting him on the road. Cradling a makeshift box crafted from a paper bag, he approaches the street children with the gait of an uncle bringing a treat. They break out of the huddle and descend upon the cake.

He glances up towards the window and waves.

A police jeep drives past on its daily round. Aat raha, says the police officer, into the loudspeaker. Stay indoors.

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Janhavi Acharekar is the author of the novel *Wanderers, All*, the short story collection *Window Seat: Rush-hour stories from the city* and travel guide *Moon Mumbai & Goa*. Her writings appear in various Indian and international anthologies and publications. Janhavi was a Charles Wallace Fellow at the University of Stirling, Scotland. She is a contributing editor to *Condé Nast Traveller India* and lives in Mumbai.

Learning to Bake will feature in the forthcoming Indo-Australian anthology *Relatively True* (Orient BlackSwan).

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