Homecoming

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Flying into Manpura wasn't difficult, finding a river was. No matter whom I asked, the answer was the same; "We don't have a river in Manpura, Madam. What we have is Man Sagar, the biggest artificial lake in the region." I didn't believe them, for I was confident that my mother couldn't have been wrong. She couldn't have sent me across the ocean to immerse her ashes in a nonexistent river. For five days, after my arrival in that Indian city of malls and multiplexes, I drove around every day in Nathu's taxi as if I would find the river crouching under an overbridged or hiding in an alley. I didn't even find the dribble of a stream. I felt embarrassed facing the concierge every evening when I returned from my futile search. He never asked me any questions, although he knew that I had spent yet another day looking for an elusive river.

On the sixth day, however, when my search had still not yielded any result, I wondered if the river could have been a product of my mother's feverish imagination as she lay dying. Or, maybe, it was her yearning for the home she had left some thirty years ago – and never returned to – that had made her conjure up a river in her last moments. Whatever it was, my quest had begun to look like that of the Indian expats Nathu had told me about. On a short visit to their home country, they would make him drive them in search of odd things they still remembered from the past – a spinning wheel, a grindstone, an old HMV gramophone, an ancient *haveli* demolished long ago. "They're always in a hurry, Madam," he had said. "These Indian people from Amreeka come looking for strange things. Something is very wrong with them. No?" He had looked at me. "You're from Amreeka, Madam. Okay, tell me, what they are looking for?"

What could I have told that slight dark man with coal-black eyes in a pock marked face? What explanation could I have offered when I myself didn't understand what I was doing searching for a non-existent river in a city that never had one and when I couldn't even guess why my mother had wanted me to bring her ashes to Manpura? All I knew was that she had come to disdain

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the city she had loved when her orthodox Brahmin parents had refused to let her marry the man she loved. My dad, who had grown up in an orphanage, had no credentials to claim a lineage. They threatened to disinherit Mom. *I didn't care. I simply walked out without looking back*, she had told me. My parents got married in New Delhi where Dad lived and taught. They left the country when Dad accepted a teaching position at the University of Pennsylvania. Neither of them went back. Dad, because he had no family to go back to, and Mom, because she had renounced hers. I was ten when Dad died in an accident. Mom refused to go back to India at the suggestion of some of her friends. *I'm not going back, ever. Never!* She had said. I watched her face, sculpted out of smooth sandstone, roughen and darken. Her eyes (*like a startled gazelle's,* my dad used to say) grow beady behind thick glasses, and her midnight-black hair fade into a grey cloud as she sat copyediting documents for a law firm.

And now, there I was in a strange Indian city, waiting for a river to descend from the skies as the Ganges is said to have descended, and was contained in Shiva's locks. Luke Jones, my boyfriend in Philadelphia, a computer programmer by profession, would assure me that I would find the river. Passionate about finding lost rivers, he told me about the mighty river *Sarasvati* around which the Indus valley civilisation had risen. "It is said to have dried up in the deserts of Rajasthan," he said when I told him about my difficulty in finding a river. "And Manpura is in Rajasthan. The river might be flowing right beneath your feet."

"Sure," I had quipped.

"All I have to do is dig deep and the river will rise up."

He had laughed. He had a rich baritone for a voice and his laughter was an extension of that deep resonance. We enjoyed talking about rivers, but it had ceased to be fun as it began to dawn upon me that I was getting nowhere in my quest. I had just two days left before I flew back to Philadelphia.

When I returned to the hotel that day, I felt no attraction for the gleaming marble floors, the winding marble staircase, the tall marble columns, and the fragrance of rose petals floating in water-filled brass containers placed in the lobby. I had no desire to exchange pleasantries with men smoking at the bar, women in chiffon saris and muslin skirts sitting in sofa chairs and drinking beverages from long-stemmed glasses. After grabbing a glass of lemon-infused ice-cold water from the marble table top, I headed for the waiting elevator. When doors had glided shut and the elevator had begun to ascend, I faced the tall brown woman in the mirror. A pair of dusky eyes in a bony face framed by short dark hair tucked behind her ears were fixed on me. *Any luck today?* I shook my head at her. She grimaced. *What's next?* I shrugged my shoulders, I don't know. We were replaying the usual pantomime we had acted all those evenings, and kept looking at each other till the elevator stopped and the doors slid open.

Later, after I had showered and eaten the meal I had ordered, I walked to the window and stood gazing at the floodlit garden below where some tourists were sitting in garden chairs talking, laughing, drinking beer. They didn't seem to mind the heat or the mosquitoes. I wished I could have joined them. That would have made me feel less isolated, but I couldn't. I was still grappling with what I should do with my mother's ashes. I could have immersed them in the Ganges as most Hindus do, but Mom had never asked me to do that. Or, I could have taken them to Galtaji, a pilgrimage site some fifty miles away from Manpura Nathu had suggested. "People come from far to bathe in the waters of Galtaji and wash away their sins," he had said. "I can take you there." He must have thought that my search for a river had something to do with washing away my sins. I couldn't tell him that I didn't believe sins could be washed away that easily. I wasn't looking for salvation. Besides, Mom had never mentioned Galtaji.

I didn't know how long I stood at the window, grappling with myself. I realised the lateness of the hour when I saw that the lawn had emptied. The night had grown silent. I gazed into the darkness. What do I do now? I so hated Manpura at that moment that if I had a magic carpet, I would have flown out the window on it. And straight to Philadelphia where everything was familiar. Everything surefire, as they said. If you wanted to find a river, Schuylkill was right there meandering around the city. Here? I didn't even know if there was a body of water, the lake. Lake? It struck me then. I could certainly immerse Mom's ashes in Man Sagar. Maybe, that's what she had meant. In her delirium, caused by opioids to lessen the pain of cancer that had spread to her lungs, she could have said a river, when she had meant the lake. Of course. Why hadn't I thought of it before? It would have saved me a lot of uncertainty, even pain. In a rush of excitement, I called Luke and told him of my decision. "I'm sure Mom meant the lake," I said. "Probably," he said. "I'm relieved. And now, I think you should visit your mother's house. You must meet the family."

"And tell them what?"

"Tell them who you are. They'll welcome you."

"They sure will," I had laughed mirthlessly. "They'll think I'm some kind of a fake or crazy nut." I didn't tell him that, secretly, I had played and replayed a scenario in my mind – of going to Mom's house, knocking at the door, and holding my breath at the sound of footsteps approaching. I had even visualised the door opening and a withered old man looking up at me. But I could never go beyond that, as if the tape had snapped.

"They won't," Luke said. "You might want to extend your stay. You have plenty of leave left. I can inform the bank manager."

"No!" I had cried out. "No!" Why couldn't he understand my desperation to return to my life of cast-iron certainties? I couldn't tell him how much I had

hated driving in circles, through dingy neighbourhoods and upscale areas, looking for a river. I could see Luke squint his light brown eyes and run his fingers through his receding hair.

"I didn't mean to upset you, darling," he said. "Forget it. Just come back."

Neither of us belaboured the point. Before going to bed, I took out the small jar of ashes from my suitcase and put it in my shoulder bag. I picked up the picture of Mom's house I had found among her papers after her death. It had an address scribbled at the back. Unwittingly, I had packed it with the ashes. I looked at the old picture of a driveway leading to a house flanked with trees. Creepers climbing up the veranda columns. A fountain in the front lawn spouting water. I put everything in a bag.

Next morning, I asked Nathu to drive me to the lake. He was pleased that I had asked for something. We drove under the sulking skies. Perhaps, it was going to rain. It was very humid. The cab nosed its way into a sparsely tree-lined street. "These are gulmohar trees, Madam," Nathu pointed out. Then sweeping his hand across the newly sprung up apartment complex, he said, "When I first started driving my taxi, this street had many trees and many old bungalows. But now they're all gone or will be soon gone. We will see more apartment complexes, offices and another mall."

I kept looking at the sad old houses and the happily rising new constructions. In the mad rush for building, for clearing green spaces, for sweeping away remnants of the past, trees had vanished. Then I heard Nathu say, "Madam, we're there. This is 314 Trivedi Villa."

My heart began to thud like a cargo train; my face burned as if the earth had orbited closer to the sun. Why was I there? To do what? What was I going to say to whoever opened the door? Nathu had stopped in front of the closed iron gate. Wiping the sweat from my face and neck, I got out of the car and dragged my feet to the gate. The house sat in the midst of a scraggly and yellowed grass. Clutching the iron bars of the gate, I look at the chipped, discoloured walls and a couple of bougainvillea creepers hanging limply around the veranda columns. Shuttered windows. Veins of a leafless creeper clung to a sidewall. It looked like a pattern in cast iron nailed to the wall. The house, like an abandoned parent, stared at me. It hardly looked lived in. I was so lost in gazing at it that when a gruff voice asked, "What do you want?" I jumped out of my skin.

An old man, his dark brown face covered with grey whiskers, was staring in my face.

"I've come to see Trivediji." I stammered.

"No one lives here," he growled. "Old man and his wife are dead. Son sold the house and moved away."

"Sold? To whom?"

"Someone. He will build apartments here."

"Who are you?" I asked.

The man gave me a haughty look. "I'm the watchman. Who are you?"

I stared past his shoulder at the dry water fountain, at the burnt lawn, at the dead shrubs and shuttered windows. I heard my mother's voice: *There were gold fish in the pond with a fountain*.

"I'm the granddaughter. I have come from very far to see the people who lived here."

He looked at me with his piercing eyes. His brow wrinkled. "I don't know who you are. If you are related to the family you should… " he coughed and spat out phlegm. "I know nothing."

"Can I come in? I want to see the house. My mother was born here."

He didn't reply. I repeated. "I want to see the house before it's demolished. Please."

"I can't let anyone in. Go away, now."

I heard Nathu's voice behind me. "Any problem, Madam?"

I turned to him. "I want to go in and see the house. This was my grandfather's house." If Nathu was surprised at this new information, he didn't show it. "Let me talk to him," he said. Drawing the old man aside, he whispered something. The man shook his head, looked at me, at the house, at Nathu. They talked for a while in a dialect I didn't understand. After what seemed like hours, during which I was soaked in sweat and my throat grew prickly, the old man walked over to the gate and unlocked it, wordlessly. And wordlessly, he motioned me to follow him. We walked on the hot, cracked driveway, went up the unswept veranda steps, and paused. He unlocked a heavy wooden door, and let me in. "I will wait outside," he said, leaving me standing in the middle of a semi-dark room.

I stared at the bare stone floor, the naked grey walls and the undraped windows with dirt-smudged glass panes. There were oblong faded squares on the walls where once pictures must have hung. The air smelled of rat droppings and urine, of dust and rot. I wandered from room to room. I didn't know what I expected to find there. I didn't know what I was looking for. Once the house must have been full of children's laugher, of the aroma of fried bhajia or basmati rice and the peculiar aroma of dal wafting out of the kitchen, of servants whispering, of a dog barking, of the fountain spurting out water, of a gardener weeding the lawn. Now it was all ashen grey. All musty. All deadly silent. Which would have been my mother's room? I wondered. Where were the servants? All gone. Pushing a door next to the cold and dark kitchen, I stepped out on the back porch. The barren backyard with a couple of straggling neem trees gaped at me. Where were the mango and guava trees Mom had raved about? *Our mangoes and guavas were the sweetest you could find in the town.* The backyard stretched up to a cluster of lantana bushes. My knees seemed to give way. I sat down on stone steps leading to the backyard. Suddenly, the backyard

seemed to change. Lush trees were swaying in the breeze. The fragrance of *juhi* and jasmine wafted up to me from the emerald lawn. I could hear children's voices. Behind me, in the kitchen, pots and pans clanged. Someone hummed a tune. A gardener was pulling out weeds from flowerbeds. It was Spring.

The sound of wind among the dry leaves wrenched me out of the trance I had fallen into. I had been tugged into the world my mother had turned her back on, and yet craved for. I felt tears burn in my eyes as I had a sudden revelation of the extent of her pain, especially after my dad died. She was too proud to come back. Wiping off the tears, I knew why she had wanted me to come here. Were it not to bring her ashes, I might have never come here, never seen the house. She must have wanted me to feel and touch what had been hers. Rising to my feet, I stood there on the stone steps and pulled out the jar of ashes from my bag and took out a fistful of ashes. I stretched out my hand, unfurled my fingers, and let a gust of wind blow the ashes away. I didn't quite know if what I was doing was right, but it didn't feel wrong. Little by little, I took out the ashes and held them out for the wind to swirl them away, till the jar was empty. Dust unto dust. The wind had grown stronger. Mesmerised, I watched it sweep the dry leaves and twins and send them spinning across the backyard. I had released Mom's soul. Mine had gotten nettled.

The old man and Nathu were sitting on the front verandah steps. Nathu got up, saying, "We should go Madam. It's going to rain." As if in answer the first raindrops fell.

I nodded and gave the old man a hundred rupees, which he took indifferently. When the iron gate had clanged shut behind me, I turned to look back at the old house standing mutely under the overcast skies. It had begun to rain lightly as I walked to where Nathu stood holding the car door open for me. The scent of damp earth rose to escort me to the waiting cab.

Later that evening, I stood at my hotel window and watched the cascading rain wash the garden chairs placed upside down on patio tables below, cleanse the pebbled pathways, and flow down the dark road. I heard it streaming down the gutters, envisioned it sloshing Mom's home, drenching the dry lawn, the fallow flowerbeds, and seeping deep into the earth to merge into a subterranean river.