T. Kalé

Destination

I needed to be on the train. ‘It was *bhai tika* today.’ My sister had reminded me of this fact every hour yesterday, but getting from CU to Tsuen Wan took at least an hour, so I was already late. The festival just happened to be on a Friday– one of my longer days, but there was an auspicious time frame for the celebrations, and my sister would not perform the ritual outside of it.

I took out my reading for Thursday’s class: *Forgiveness in Family.* The brother, Cam, was such a narcissist, always sauntering off to complete his side quests, disregarding everyone’s feelings besides his own, and his holier-than-thou attitude was irritating. His sister, Val, was the real priest for enduring his behaviour– she did not need to feel conflicted in her hate for her brother. Even in such moments, my mind always wandered off to look at the surrounding people. There were so many of them, either seated or standing, and I knew none of them. Yet, we were on the same train, and we all had to move on it, move through the forward path of the train line. Of course, you got off when the train stopped at a station, but whether an hour, a day, a week, or a month later, you would have to get back on the train and keep moving. Everyone had to move on– everyone.

Tsuen Wan. You have arrived at your final destination. Thank you for travelling with us.

The apartment smelt of sweet *sel roti*, greasy ghee, and sandalwood-like incense. My sister had already set up the *thali* on a bronze platter that we just got from our trip to Nepal. This brother-sister festival has been celebrated every year of our lives, though I always did think of it more as a transaction rather than a celebration. My sister had begun circling her thali and her blessings.

It was the same incense that was drifting through the air in the morning that Didi carried me away from Jhalunge. Her trembling, barely adult arm, supporting me, and dragging a suitcase with the other. The sizzling ghee sounded like wooden doors she opened with her shoulder because her arm was busy holding me for eight hours.

“Be a good boy.”
Study a lot.”

“Don’t get too angry.”

“You forgot to say the most important one.”

“Earn lots of money.”

My favourite part of the whole day was applying tika; I always applied it like a rainbow. We did not have to, but it looked pretty. Crooked, but pretty. My sister’s favourite part was different. It was the *dhog*, a cackle escaped her mouth the moment my forehead touched her feet. I have truly never seen her express more glee than at this one specific moment of the year. I am supposed to give gifts as a way to express gratitude for the blessings. She knows that, but she always gifts me more than I can give her.

When I did not have an income. I would starve to save up my snack money. One year, I collected up to a hundred dollars, but she gave me an iPad. Even now, when I hand her the money, she dragged a white box with the Apple logo on its cover.

“*Didi*, why are you doing this again?”

“Just shut up and take it.”

My niece would start crinkling her eyebrows whenever we talked to each other. Somehow, Didi’s love was limited to one person, and Soyee wanted it to be her. She screamed, cried, and kicked if she felt it necessary to win her mother’s love, but we had full, intelligible conversations even with her tantrums. She threw one today as well. Each time a new colour of tika was added, her voice amplified.

Didi took photos everywhere she went, in the house or at a restaurant; she required capturing moments of life. I found it mildly annoying, but it was a useful visual aid to refresh our memory later, so it was fine. What I feared was her eagerness to drag everyone in the photos with her. Photos were scary; they were not words; you could not manipulate them as much. They could capture every single detail from your stance to your arm position. Didi knew this well. Whenever she forced me to pose for one of her photo sessions, my back would hunch, or my hips would sway sideways.

“Stand like a man!”

What did she mean? I was a man. She really meant that I needed to be less gay. I wonder if she did know and was acting like she did not. But there was no way she would know. My voice got deeper at home, my stance got more rigid, and my speech pattern would change. She could not have known.

I became a chameleon at home near relatives or family friends. Society, or as my parents call it, *samaj,* was a guest that never left. When wearing a new pair of sneakers or a shirt, they would always ask,

“What would samaj say?”

They asked that question to Didi her whole life, and she used to complain about it until she began repeating it. She asked that question not only to Sooyee, but also to me. Sometimes, I wonder if this is how she began despising gay people so much. Someone must have taught her because, innately hating another human being is inhuman.

A peace sign was always the safest option. It was a common move, and she thought it was acceptable too. I wanted to hide it, I did not resent her either because she was not making me hide this. I did not want to be another burden on her life after all she had gone through. She deserved better.

Didi was divorced, and she exclaimed it with her chest. I tell anyone who asks, but the atrocities committed by her ex haunt me to this day. She held on to it for ten years and only revealed once the chain was broken. The physical and verbal torture, the adultery. She revealed many more that I do not want the pictures reappearing in my mind. How did she hide it all? She said she told no one, but surely there must have been someone. No one can keep all that to themselves. Maybe she did. She was different from me. She was strong. She would face anything. Then that would make more sense. She should have never met that demon; it was a pathetic excuse of a human being if that was still a label applicable to such a hideous creature.

The sight of her slipping from her faith was a tragic one. She had left the most divine bronze statue of Lord Buddha in her divorce, and her belief had been lost somewhere too. Instead of waking up to a sandalwood aroma, you would smell lentil soup.

“I don’t think I believe in god anymore.”

“Why?”

“If gods did truly exist, why would they make me suffer through this?”

“I guess you’re right.”

I was quietest in her moments of confession. Didi had always been beside me, guiding me to my destination; having to do that for her felt unnatural. My voice could not speak for her nor could I cry with her. I could only agree

Didi has been returning to Buddhism. It has been fifty-four days that she has been visiting a *gumba*. I was invited that one time to go with her, but my busy schedule has made it difficult to keep up with her regular visits. One thing I can experience is the returning sandalwood aroma. She does not light the incense as consistently as she once did, but smelling her lighting, even one, gives one hope.

There was a white weather ball on the hills that I always gazed at through the windows. It was a habit of mine to dance into her room and lean against our adjoined closet once it disappeared. The room is small, barely enough for my sister and Soyee. They definitely needed a separate room, but her move-in had been so rushed that our current apartment is the best we could find. The living room was large enough for Soyee to play, and though small, the bedrooms were enough. Having enough meant everything right now.

She would usually be lying on her back, her head positioned upwards with a pillow, scrolling through Instagram. She was in the same position today, except Sooyee was lying across her stomach.

“You look so gay,” she chuckled.

“It’s called expressing yourself. You’re just jealous that you can’t move like me.”

“I wouldn’t want to move like that.”

Her chuckle would reveal her crow’s feet and smile lines. A warm sigh of relief left my lips, thankful for the chuckle. But it was also a reminder that Didi was getting older. One day we would both be wrinkled and have white hair, and she would have to be a worn out container for all the experiences she had gone through. Would she accept me then? I probably would not have said anything to her about my sexuality even then, though.

“We’re going to the Big Buddha the day after tomorrow. Remember to be free.”

“That’s a Sunday. Are you sure? It’s gonna be very crowded.”

“It’s the only holiday I got, so we don’t have another choice.”

She would tell me about her troubles that day. How the head chef yelled at everyone. The aches on her body. The upcoming troubles she had with Sooyee.

After the updates would come the juicier conversations; they were the reason I danced into the room. Her work was the first topic of complaint. There was this recurring head chef character who was an asshole, forcing his subordinates to work unnecessarily till their arms began shaking. He would also yell if you did exactly what he asked. Didi compared pleasing him to a chocolate rain– only idiots would think they were possible. Then came the body aches.

“My upper back really hurts. Can you punch it?’

I never understood why she would never ask me to massage it, but always to inflict some bodily harm to that part of her body. I can only assume the pain would temporarily numb the aching, or that she thought my messaging skills were subpar. Once the aching subsided, she would rant about Soyee: her future, her upcoming payments, and her mischievous acts throughout the day. The way I saw my sister during these talks would always change. She just looked different to me, not like the sister I knew. The Didi I knew was always smiling, running, and shouting, but would look so exhausted.

This expression did not lay on her face even when she had to pawn all her gold. I was child then, and our whole family had returned to Pokhara for a relative’s funeral. Only upon arriving there were we told that we would have to bear the entire cost. Most of our money was in Hong Kong, so we had to pawn all the gold we had worn to Nepal. Even in that grief-spilling, she touched my shoulder and smiled,

“Let’s go up to Annapurna.”

I would exit her room with an almost ballerina-like twirl, to which Didi would respond,

“Why are you acting so gay?”

She would release a chuckle. Sometimes, I would test the limit and see how far I could go with the moves. But, of course, the more obviously flamboyant ones would remain sheathed. I would always restrict my moves anytime she would be close by. I’d see her wrinkled face and sunken dark eyes, and my limbs would feel a sudden weakness in them. Even though Didi never mentioned it, Mummy would tell me when she and I were alone in the house. Mummy told me about the time Didi snatched me from *Jhalunge* and brought me to Hong Kong. She grabbed me in her arms and single-handedly carried me to a better future. They thought I did not know because I was so young, but I could remember every detail. Did I deserve to move my arms for such pleasure when her arms fought for me?

It was Sunday

After Didi, Mummy, Soyee, and I took the train to Tung Chung, we had to take the cable car to get to the Big Buddha. We chose the Standard Cabin because we could not handle the Crystal+ Cabin again. You could see everything around you, even the things you did not wish to see. Averting your eyes would not work because you would eventually have to move your eyes. Be it from your peripherals or direct eye contact, you would have to see it. Worse yet, everyone could observe you, and you could only control your act. How long could you keep that up? Even a millisecond of error was not permitted. The opinions of random people did not matter, but what if someone important was out there? There was always the possibility.

The limited view seemed to make everyone in my family happy, Didi especially. With a wrinkled smile, she asked me to take photos of her.

“Take a photo of me doing this pose.”

“Ok. Ok.”

“Remember to get the angles right. Don’t give me crappy photos. I just wanna warn you, you’re taking photos of me at the Big Buddha.”

It had been ten years since I last visited this place. Its calming aura had remained, and the statue had kept its divinity. From the bottom of the stairs, it looked as if the statue was touching the heavens. We walked up all 268 steps.

“Let’s circle the statue a hundred and eight times.”

“Now, that’s just ridiculous.”

“We count the *mala* a hundred and eight times, so imagine circling the statue.”

The circling began. Soyee did not have the slightest interest in circling the statue, and that was just cause to not fight for her mother’s love. She went with her grandmother to the seating area to watch the view. On the 3rd circle, Didi began complaining about her work again; to be fair, that’s most of what she was doing at this point in her life. In the morning, she sends Soyee off to school, cooks breakfast and lunch, and vacuums the apartment. After picking up Soyee in the afternoon, she goes to her job and returns home at 11 p.m., and then does homework with Soyee. I only listen to her rants. I do not interject in any way. This went on until around the 54th circle, when she ridiculed a reel on Instagram.

“Look at these two gay guys. Why’re they acting like girls? There’s something very wrong about this.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“A man is supposed to be with a woman, not a man. It’s just against nature.”

I did not want to demolish her joy by starting an argument. This was who she was, and I needed to accept that. I held my peace, but my mind was not as quiet. Yesterday’s event kept popping up. If he had stayed, maybe Didi would too. But they were two different people. Matsa was younger– he was more prone to accepting new ideas. Besides, whether she would stay or not was not the question I needed to be asking. I should be asking if I deserve to confess. She has done so much for me; I do not want to repay her with more trouble.
I did hold it in for until the 107th spin, but that’s when I decided I needed to say something in a way she would prefer– gossip.

“One of my friends came out of the closet recently.”

“What’s ‘came out of the closet?’”

“Like he said, he’s gay.”

“Well, that’s strange.”

We had moved on to the 108th circle.

“I’ve been asking everyone this, but what if someone you knew came out as gay? What would you do?”

“That’s such a strange thought. I guess I would cut all communications with them. I don’t see the point in still talking to such people.”

“Really, I guess I would.”

I knew this was going to be her answer from the very start. I knew it, but why did I ask her the question if I knew? I guess I thought the exact words were never uttered from her mouth, and she had never been faced with such a situation. Perhaps there was a possibility that she would have a revelation and transform her opinion on homosexuality. She did not. I was at peace with that. I had returned to my previous self, before I asked anything. She did not know anything, and that was all I needed. What if she knew this whole time? Was she inflicting pain on purpose so she would not have to deal with another burden? She could not have known because she would never pain someone this knowingly, especially her brother. She was my caring, hard-working sister; something such as this is out of the question.

Soyee and Mummy had met up with us, so we went down the stairs. I took the left side. Everyone was going up on that side, but I kept moving on down. Two white men had passed me by holding hands. I wonder if I could ever do that. To be able to walk, unconstrained by the possibility of getting caught. I would want that. It was a beautiful sight. Their hands held walking up to the Buddha.

“Om mani padme hum. Please permit me to live as these two humans in front of me.”

I saw Didi gesturing to them. At first, I thought she was pointing to the statue. Only did I realise her real target when she started mouthing ‘gay.’ I could not believe it. She was making fun of them.

“Didi, what are you doing in a place of god?”

“What do you mean?”

“Leave them alone!”

“God wouldn’t want these people anyway.”

“Lord Buddha would be so mad at you right now.”

“How can you say that to your own sister for some people you don’t even know!” she cried.

I returned to my silent state and stared at the ground for a few seconds, but it felt like a few minutes. Was I betraying my very promise – to not be a burden to my sister? Was I becoming Cam? I did disregard everyone’s feelings when I uttered those hateful remarks. I was selfish. But I only said it because she insulted a place where I saw hope for my future. To be in public unconstrained by the views of another. She tainted that hope with her hurtful words. Didi did not know that. How could she? I did not tell her.

We took the train back home. It was a silent ride. The seats seemed cooler than usual. When we reached home, everyone went their own way. I went to sleep or pretended to until everyone had taken slumber. Tears fall from cheek to pillow. I heard a knock

“Can you open? I got leftover sel roti.”

I let her in, and we sat on the edge of the bed. She was rearranging the stiff and oily piece of two-day-old sel roti. She broke the silence with a picture

“Look, I was still eighteen, and you were just four. It was so long ago, your skin is still pale.”

She was carrying me in the photo with her usual smile, with fewer wrinkles. She was always there for me, always.

“Didi, I’m gay.”

“I know, Shahil. I know.”

The ending did not occur. I never confessed, but everything before the confession was true. My sister might act as if she is oblivious to my sexuality, but I know she knows. She never apologises even when she is aware that she is in the wrong. I would like to think that the brief moment of entering my room with a sel roti was her way of apologising. Since Didi grew up in Nepal, food meant a lot of things. One of its many meanings includes love. I believe she used that moment to subtly acknowledge who I am. I have convinced myself that her silence on my sexuality is a way to protect me if I were to come out, from the scrutiny of my parents and samaj. The pair has probably conditioned her to think that way, too. By not explicitly confirming it, she most likely believes I will not either, But, in my mind, I have long acknowledged the fact, and so have many of my friends. I may not confess directly to Didi today, but her acceptance means more.

Much like how she has carried me my entire life, she may be carrying me to my destination once again.