

Residue

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Excerpt I

Soon after I came to England, the world started to fall apart.

Landing at Heathrow Airport, I was impressed by the clean floors, absence of unruly crowds, large halls and walkways. I was glad that the queue for UK passports was moving much quicker than that of foreigners. It felt strange to be in a different queue than the many Indians on the other side. When my turn came to pass through the check point, I also held my new red British passport open for display the way everyone else around me did.

I was about to walk past, having flashed my passport, when I saw an outstretched hand.

Instinctively, I reached out my hand for a handshake.

The Officer's hand registered a slight movement in response, then he immediately withdrew his arm and said 'Can I examine your passport please?'

I felt like an utter idiot. Of course, he hadn't wanted to shake hands with me! What had I done to deserve a welcome greeting! He was asking to see my passport. Embarrassed, I gave him the document. He directed me to another desk and continued to wave other people on across the post.

'Leon Ali, is this the first use of your UK passport which was issued overseas?'

'Yes Sir, it is'.

'According to your passport, you were born in Britain. Have you come here to settle permanently?' a white immigration officer queried. Another bespectacled older officer stood looking over his shoulder.

‘I don’t think so, Sir. I am here to satisfy my curiosity about my place of origin’, I gave the rehearsed reply, accompanied by the most charming smile I could muster. I wore trendy gaberdine trousers and a sweatshirt that had a Union Jack embroidered on the front. It wasn’t the most comfortable outfit to spend 11 hours in - the indirect Air India flight was via Rome - but I didn’t want to take any chances of being refused entry.

‘Young man, your place of origin is India. England is your birthplace’, he held the details page of my passport against some light on his desk.

‘Are any of your parents British?’

‘No Sir’.

With his gimlet-eyes fixed on me, he complained, ‘I wonder how they thought of issuing you a passport. You haven’t lived here in your childhood and neither of your parents is British’.

‘The British Embassy in India have all the documents’, what else could I say? Because I was born in England, the issue of the passport was a discretionary matter according to law.

‘What made you think of coming to Britain?’

‘Well, Sir, my father is no more, and my mother has joined an Ashram, something like a nunnery. I have no siblings. I am educated in English literature. It seemed -’.

‘So, you intend to work in the UK? I see that your English is very good’.

‘Not sure Sir. I have financial guarantees and savings’.

The elder officer behind him intervened, ‘You Asians are very good with money, aren’t you? Soon, you’ll be running a corner shop’, he appeared cheered up at his own words.

‘I am not keen on money or a shop’, I meekly protested, not wanting to contradict him outright.

‘I have money in the bank Sir. Here are the statements. I also have a letter of financial guarantee from my mother’s bank, and a letter of recommendation from my College, and there is a letter confirming my accommodation agreement in London, and a copy of my insurance policy -’. I even had my toddler photos with a row of Victorian semi-detached houses in the background.

‘Hmm’, the desk officer entered some data into a computer, then said, ‘Tell you what; you are a very organised fellow. Let me have that file. I shall be back with it soon. You wait over there’, he indicated me to a bench against a wall and walked towards an elevated glass cabin behind the immigration counters. Nothing inside this hi-fi cabin was visible.

The man standing behind him replaced him on his seat. I sat on the bench next to some black women.

I had been planning for this crucial ordeal for months. I had made Ammi dig up every paper from her London days: my birth certificate, the ‘Missing Person’ UK newspaper cuttings for my father Mir, the letter from a London MP supporting Ammi’s appeal to stay in England for a while after my birth on compassionate grounds, her old passport with British visa stamps. The British Embassy in Delhi had interviewed me several times and sent the papers to England for approval. Ultimately, I was issued the passport. Now it was the moment of truth.

After a long wait, during which I agonised over whether I had given the best answers possible, a woman officer approached me.

‘Waiting for an interpreter?’, she asked.

‘No, I am waiting for the Officer. He has my papers’.

‘Oh, you are being processed. Alright’. She turned away, then having second thoughts, swivelled on her heel, ‘Why don’t you go through the health check while you are waiting?’

‘OK, Ma’am’, I stood up. ‘Why is it taking so long for my passport verification?’

‘I don’t know dear. The systems may be down today. Like I said, you could go to that room and have the X-Ray screening for TB done while you wait. It’s up to you’.

‘Thank you’. She punched in a code on a wall and went away.

I joined the queue for tuberculosis screening. Many women were being asked to confirm that they were not pregnant.

My X-Ray technician wore lots of gold jewellery. I noticed because she asked me to take off any chains that I might be wearing around my neck.

‘If you was British, I don’t think they want you to be screened?’, she was not sure if I was required to undergo the procedure.

I didn’t know either. I said ‘If they need it for newcomers, they might. It is my first time ever here’.

‘Jus’ now, you said you was born here’, she reminded me.

‘Sorry, I meant first time as an adult. I was being particular’.

‘To be fair, I can’t see why they would. Never mind’, she emphasised, ‘you’ve got nuthin to hide. Take off your shirt then’. The machine came on.

I was healthy.

I was also quite bored by the time another official brought me my passport, ‘Mr. Ali, here you are. We were wondering where you went. We’ve checked your details. You are fine. Please proceed to the baggage area’.

I heaved a sigh of relief. I was In. I could begin another life now. Start anew in London.

Excerpt II

From his first collapse onwards, there was no agreed diagnosis, the inexact professionals had buffeted him relentlessly with tests from barium meals to bone marrow examinations, transfusions, and procedures, finally mis-administering an injection, causing a toxic ferrous reaction in his bloodstream – sudden acute liver failure.

The medicine-men in white coats had killed him.

The countdown had begun: he bloated yellow, lost consciousness, gazed skyward through the slits in his partially shut eyes, gurgled as his voice would not issue forth from his sputum blocked throat, sweat dripped through the growing facial hair, was brain dead. Relatives gathered around his bed, waiting. He was a spectacle of decay. No one should have to die thus. Blessed amulets from shrines chafed his skin and sanctified Ganga-*jal* from the river was sprinkled on his brow, but he was beyond rescue.

The hospital file recording his treatment was promptly misplaced by the institution hours after his death certificate was signed. ‘If you were very rich or politically connected, this would not have happened’, people whispered in the ward; the worth of a life was variable.

Keya’s father was considered beautiful. In dying, he was again all that. That night back home, in a room made bare, when his body lay tightly wrapped in white cotton sheets on a slab of ice, the natural proportions had returned and his face seemed alive. An earthen lamp burned near the corpse. To Keya, his lips might have spoken, told her of his childhood, of his first love, of his

voluntary exile, of his dreams and realities in imagined far-homelands – she could try to understand – how he had felt being out of Kashmir, living in the festering urban melt of Delhi, and speaking in English and Hindi.

She had mourned and remourned.

Today when Leon spoke of the search for his father, a part of her wanted to say: let it go. She who could never herself let go, how could she ever measure a death against a disappearance? Leon's father might still be alive; he could be an ordinary businessman and a loving father to a daughter like her, a traitor and a spy, a mercenary, a madman in some asylum, a beggar, a bar owner, or back in India, a solitary miser in some small town, an artist and a recluse. He could be anywhere. In a mortuary unclaimed – did they keep unclaimed bodies that long? And what about dead letters? Did they keep bodies as long as letters? Which one was kept longer? Leon's father had possibilities other than the ultimate. Leon could have an imaginary father in every stranger; her flying kites would always have strings broken in the middle.

Keya can see very clearly now, who she is.

She is a girl of 17 who has returned after weeks of staying with her relatives. Her written exams are over but she does not aspire to be a doctor anymore. She will study anything but medicine. A cousin has dropped her home, where there is no one, the main door is locked, and a doleful song from a new release is playing at high volume somewhere in the building. Mother has taken to living in the hospital and the flat is abandoned.

She lets herself in with the duplicate key. Tomorrow she will visit her dying father.

It is night and she thinks of her mother who has started carrying a handful of dried red chilli powder in her purse in case she is threatened as she runs about the markets and medicine shops near the hospital at all odd hours buying vaccines, capsules, tonics, oxygen cylinders, units of blood, food, water -- pepper sprays, mobile phones, the Internet, credit cards, lollipop ladies, patient rights legislation, are things unheard of in this place and time where accidents, deaths, and events roll on.

The flat has cast off traces of its inhabitants. The walls and furniture exude an aloofness – do they know her? has she laughed and played here? Family? What family ever resided here? They are purged clean of memory by the dust and dirt that has settled on everything. Lizards live here. In scores. She is terrified of these reptiles that surround her. They have asserted a summer sway over the flat. The way the lizards run freely about – jute brown and plump, with ringed flicking tails, pellet eyes –chasing each other, snaking, gliding, slithering, slipping – ‘plop’ – it seems humans have not dwelt in this place for decades.

Keya has to spend the night here as an emergency. She reaches her old room and pulls a single box bed away from the wall on which the tubelight is mounted; insects gather in abundance near the fluorescent light. She lies awake on the bed waiting for the night to pass. Hours confer with each other at ease and slowly part company at the corner of a circular walk. At 4 am the phone rings in the other room. She looks at her wristwatch and wonders. Cautiously, she climbs out of the bed and as she makes her way through the corridor, she is stopped in her tracks, stunned!

She cannot proceed. She cannot move. She feels nauseated.

She wants to vaporise into the air, un-see un-be, eliminate this moment from her consciousness.

The phone is continuously ringing. A soundtrack to that gruesome sight – there is a mad revolting frenzy of two lizards on the floor in front of her – they are dancing around each other, a dreadful cavorting, around and around, on the polished cement floor, spot-lit by the light filtering from the room behind her. The mouth of each is under the tail of the other and they form a repulsive ghastly circle of flesh inches away from her. Are they copulating? With their moist slimy flesh they wreath the moment. The O formed by their bodies swiftly moves and frolics, coiling, recoiling: O~O~O death-blood-sound – she is a lizard too – they will gird her, flesh for flesh, clamp her close, shackle and never loosen the bond. She feels them inside her mouth; she stifles her scream and runs back to the bed, keeping her eyes shut till the day breaks through.

Excerpt III

Why am I flirting? I have no clear idea. But I am. There is a bond. We banter back and forth. Pick up the threads of words and take them further, spinning, seizing upon connections. Walking and talking, we start towards somewhere.

I ask how her day has been. She actually tells me in unnecessary detail about a woman she met and had a long conversation with. I do not press further. We cross the road and wander into gardens with delectable names like Lustgarten and Kupfergraben; they open treasures when Keya details their meaning.

Couples of all ages stroll by, groups of people laugh, a pair of Frisbee playing lovers kiss. Keya turns her head to follow a poster on the side of a moving double-decker bus that goes past, and signals me to her returning glance, I see our shadows behind us.

She says, 'Look, two elongated outlines that take on the matter and form of whatever they cross'.

'Yes, it is strange that our shadows never desert us', I give a ludicrous reply.

I like how I feel. I haven't felt this light in a long time. I say nothing about my reasons for being in Berlin. I sense that she too wants us to consciously act like two people who have just met in a new city and have a lot to talk about and discover.

I apprise her of my wanderings in London. I have taken hundreds of photographs; I could show them to her someday. 'Not hundreds', I promise!

Keya enlightens me about a director whose movies I have heard of, but not seen: Tarkovsky. Movies such as *The Mirror* and *Nostalghia*. 'They are terrifically visual. I watch his films, and while watching them, I forget that *I am* watching them, you know what I mean', her shoulders move to the emphasis of her words. 'It is like I see the screen and then when I return to seeing the screen again, I realise that I have been watching the screen all this time, but without realising it, I have been watching another story, my own images have been placed on the screen before me'.

I nod.

'Anyway if I go on about the politics of cinema by exiles, it'll bore you. It's too sentimental', she reflects.

'I'd love to be a bone dry cynic and I try, but I can't resist sentimentality', I offer.

‘Sentiments are not in fashion’, she casually replies.

‘Owning up to them is not in fashion’, I retort.

‘Sentiments are the stuff of cinema, literature, and music. Who wants to shed a tear over art when compared with the actual sufferings around us?’

I cannot deny that but I press on. ‘Actual sufferings?’

‘Yes, like when people die and starve, get killed’.

‘Unlike the fabled sufferings of love’, I conjecture.

‘Hmm. Unlike love, because it is self-inflicted’.

‘I disagree’, I state, ‘We cannot choose when or why to suffer’.

She smiles at my naiveté, ‘We choose to inflict love. But, when a fatal illness strikes, we must die’.

‘Right. In an illness, we may die. And we suffer. In love, we suffer, and sometimes die’.

‘You are winding me up’, she says perkily.

‘Sorry’, I reply, sparkling. ‘Can I buy you dinner as a peace offering?’

‘You don’t need to. But go ahead’.

Going past a building, we see enticingly enlarged images of produce – fresh carrots with leaves and traces of the earth on them, water splashed tomatoes, peas in pods agape on the stem – that whet the appetite. We go in for dinner at this crowded self-service restaurant. It is a popular joint, she tells me, pointing out a large dandelion clock painted to cover an inside wall. The atmosphere is incredible.

‘Get me anything. I am flexible’, she says.

Carefully decoding the labels, I pick Bratwurst with Sauerkraut and Kartoffelsalat for myself and Kasespaetzle and a slice of Stollen for her, while

she stands on alert to grab any table that might be vacated. We get two good seats at the back and tuck into the hearty fare.

In between mouthfuls, I tell her how I came to be interested in photography. It was a passion that replaced playing cricket when I moved to London.

‘What is yours? Gathering stories?’, I hazard.

‘So it is’, she answers.
