

## If Only

The rusty fan in my college library coughs away while hunched over figures mechanically traverse through sites after sites of foreign universities. I'm probably the only exception to this daily ritual. I'm settled here with a suppressed rage that will pour out as I type. The tab that leads me to a University in Canada is sleeping away for I dare not wake it.

"Country of cow dung and illiterates," someone's comment on Youtube plays and replays in front of my vision. This malign isn't alien to me. In the summer of 2008, I visited my uncle in Australia for the first time. Born in a country of 'cow dung and illiterates', he wanted to build a life for himself beyond the borders. So, he decided to pursue education abroad. He was a dignified and proud man. Perhaps that is why it is quite regrettable that my most prominent memory of my uncle is him drenched in burning coffee, turban askew and eyes downcast. All because a livid white man on a bicycle threw the beverage at him, bellowing "Go back to your filthy village, bloody terrorist!"

The blatant disgust in that screech still echoes in my mind endlessly as I consider a future outside my country. For that man, it was a trivial demonstration of his prejudice; for my uncle, it was agony that burned his skin more than the coffee ever could. Yet, he endured. He endured until the winter of 2009 when he was found hanging from the fan in his dim lit apartment, all alone with everything but his turban awry.

In our 'filthy village' I would often sit with my saree clad *dadis* (grandmothers) whose skin sagged, weighed down by the jarring years of labouring for a living. The way they artfully fiddled with the wheat grains and rice in a copper plate like instrument mesmerized me. The *dadis* would often coo at me and affectionately regard me as '*gehoo*' (wheat). I was extremely fond of that endearment. It was symbolic of their warm affection for me. So, I wore it like a medal. But now, I despise it to bits. Being wheatish in complexion makes my identity as a South Asian too conspicuous. Being '*gehoo*' has invited snickers and condescendence during international events from my Western counterparts. If only I were '*chawal*' (rice) instead.

At one such international event, my Kashmiri roommate's *hijab* was banned because it 'fuelled anxiety' among our peers. When she was packing away her luggage because she would rather lose out on the academic opportunity than be degraded, I couldn't help but laugh ruefully through my tears. We bawled at the utter blasphemy of the entire situation. What did they expect my *hijabi* friend would do? Fish out a bomb in the middle of the seminar? But then, most injustices do not respond to "why".

In the arena of worldly affairs, the actors and their roles alter. You'd expect the victims of racism to be empathetic towards their fellow victims but we do not live in that utopia.

Momos is a beloved street food here and this dish owes its origins to Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. Perhaps it is because of this origin that 'momos' has moulded itself into a derogatory and racist tag for East Asians. I have become a witness to numerous uncomfortable instances where a mono lidded someone would be harassed by barbarians who wouldn't be so rash if they were the victim. A mister in his forties near my residence sobbed when I enquired about his well-being after some youngsters thrashed his modest stall. They claimed that there was dog meat in the dish he served. When asked if they had any proof for the accusation, they shrugged and said that they had spotted a dog loitering around the stall.

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The mister had come all the way from the forests of Arunachal Pradesh to a metropolitan city just to earn enough to fill the stomachs of his elderly parents and provide for his children's education. That assiduous and diligent man was left with his tears, trying in vain to save what was left of his broken stall. His stall has been deserted since the advent of Covid. People associate his face to China and now, China for them equates to a pandemic and subsequent illness. The mister now merely sits in front the greasy pedestal fan beside his forlorn stall, staring into the void.

To rest in one's prejudice is convenient only for the doer. But the victim never forgets, it never hurts less.

Just yesterday, I heard the beautiful giggles of a baby on the metro I usually take to my college in the later hours of the day. I was enraptured by the adorable being. With my heart at ease, I turned to look at the trigger for the laughter. And then, I was no longer at ease. A woman opposite to the child sat deliberately arching her eyes and repeating "ching chong" in a forcefully shrill voice. That is when it dawned on me that the baby had East Asian features. The clueless child, viewing the world from the lens of his naivety, didn't know. But his mother, visibly uncomfortable, knew.

My grandmother used to tell me that to be different is to be beautiful. If only the world would agree. Or if only we could all be born to look the same.

"What's stopping you?" my friend pulls me back to reality as she regards the incomplete application form on my laptop screen. Besides this tab, there is another tab concealed away surreptitiously stating 'Indian Medical Student Murdered in Germany.' The fan above my head is still whirring away, swinging from side to side like a suspended pendulum in a humongous clock. It oscillates and under it, I search for an answer.

What is stopping me? Perhaps my mother in funeral white in the winter of 2009.

Word count: 992