

Torn

I don't know what to believe anymore. My mind is convoluted. Concepts and ideas about society, previously set in stone, have now forced themselves out of their sealed abodes; they are calling for a reassessment. What I see around me mirrors this confusion. This mayhem. I don't know what this world has come to. Nothing is familiar here. I cannot find him.

"Rahul, can you pick up those newspapers and put them on the table?" Someone calls. I do not hear, for my mind is elsewhere. I am sitting outside on the verandah, where, with my eyes gently closed, I trace the movement of the calm breeze that has just passed over my small body. First I feel it on my neck, and then it travels around the rigid contours of my body, tickling me as it passes. I laugh at myself, and then keeping my eyes shut, I observe the different colours filling my view, passing over the thin layer of skin covering them. Purples, oranges, and networks of lines tease me; reminding me of the vivid colours I see when I go to the spice market with Amma. I am fascinated, and entranced, thinking of how marvellous my discovery is when my reverie is interrupted by the piercing sound of my name. I slowly unfold my legs from what I like to call my 'guru' position (for whenever I pass Guru Himanshu with his students beneath the Pipal tree, he sits as I have been) and brush myself off. I then make my way towards the place where I think the sound of my name came from; the house.

"Rahul, I've been calling you for so long. Come inside and pick up everything off the floor and arrange it on the table nicely." Urges my mother.

"But why, Amma? I was having fun outside."

"Because, beta, your Abuji is bringing over his friend from work, his new army friend, so we need to make the house look as though it hasn't been lived in by monkeys. Come on, hurry up. They'll be here in less than an hour."

I stroll over to the pile of books and newspapers, fighting off the drowsiness I feel from the sudden cosy warmth of the air inside, and from the almost intoxicating smell of the sweet Carrot Halwa that is simmering in the kitchen. I kneel down and my leg brushes against the cool of the hard tiled floor, giving me a sudden jolt back to consciousness. A refreshing sensation begins to spread through my mind, like an old nosy Aunty, expanding and involving itself in places where it shouldn't. Leaving no crevice untouched. No juicy gossip alone. After I arrange the items on the table, I walk back outside and sit myself down in my original position, my 'guru' pose, and wait for the visitor. There is no one home yet. None of my friends. No one is playing out in the street. There is no one out, except for the odd old man in a dhoti, or salesperson pushing a cart of fresh fruit, or recently harvested grain. With this lack of enticing activity around me, my mind begins to wander once more.

When the friend of Abuji came that day, almost a decade ago, he didn't come alone. He came with a young boy, around the same age as me. During that meeting, I sat close to my father, observing the boy; eyeing him. He was wearing a very smart kurta in crisp white, and

I could see that he was slim. When I directed my gaze upwards, I noticed that under his embroidered cap, his hair was a dark black, and that his skin was a shade of brown, similar to mine, but it had a slight glow to it. Initially I was a little reluctant to look into his eyes, because he looked proud and arrogant. However, when I built up the courage to, I noticed that he had an air of purpose about him, which I had incorrectly concluded as being pride, and was extremely polite. When he sat down in his chair, he leant forward and was attentive to the speaker, and when asked to speak, spoke with a fluidity of both language and expression. I was in awe of him.

As time went on, the interaction between our families grew, and he came over with his father for chai or dinner more often. Inevitably, this strengthened the bond between us; between Rahul and Ahmed, so much so that we became inseparable. When he came, we would both go and sit on the verandah outside, with a glass of cool lassi in our hand, to break through the evening heat, and narrate what had happened to each other since we had last met. Of course his stories were much better told, and I would always let him go first, for when he spoke, the world around me would stop, and my mind would be wholly focused on the words that came out of his mouth. To me, he was an artist of speech; he could contort and ply words to heighten the image he was painting, similar to a painter blending different colours to get the perfect shade. The words he chose for the descriptions he depicted were ones that only someone with a true grasp of language could use. So when it was my turn to speak, unlike when I spoke to my other friends, I would stutter and stumble with what I had to say. How could I talk to someone like him as though he were just another person?

But when we played cricket, it was a different story. When we went down and played with the other boys on the street, in the compound, with the slender bat nestled in my hand, my mind would be focussed only on the small spherical object flying towards me. Then, a countdown would begin in my head: 3, 2, 1, *swing*. I would hit it at just the right time and place, with the right amount of power and control, so that only occasionally I would fail to hit a six. But every time I hit that ball, every time I saw it flying in a gentle curve through the air, I felt something change inside me. I felt lighter, freer. This was me in my element, so I thought that this was how Ahmed felt when he spoke. How he felt when he was painting his vivid pictures in other people's minds.

Over time, his influence on me was clearly visible: I began to change my way of thinking, and of expressing my thoughts. He taught me what I was never taught at school; to debate, to reason, and to analyse. We knew we were different: I was a Hindu, and he a Muslim, but back then, this didn't mean much. We were growing up in a time when our only enemy was the one that had swiftly exploited our land, controlled our people, and forced them under its rule, before they had realised the true extent of what had happened to them. Our enemy was the white. The air was thick and clouded with a sense of anger, agitation, and revolt. Each day, the newspaper, or word of mouth from around the town, brought us information about what was happening over this country to those that stood up for what was right. Those that stood up against them. Ahmed would encourage me to verify the information that I heard through other sources so that the only facts in my head were those that were true. Working together, we found that some of the news from word of mouth was misleading and changed the context of the topic at hand. However, a recurring name was present in what was said, and eventually it became engrained in our minds: Gandhi ji. He was to be our saviour. He was the one that could take us out of the hands of this corrupt rule. He was someone that we

both looked up to, as did the entire nation, and was someone that we wanted to emulate. Gandhi.

My mind is drifting back to reality and once again, I cannot make out what is happening. Or rather, why it's happening. Dust has lifted off the ground and has caused a haze to settle. I am coughing, wheezing. I am caught in the midst of a stream of bodies. There is no choice for me but to follow its natural flow, for by going against it, I will be silenced. I cannot see, and I do not want to, for there is nothing worth looking at within close proximity anyway. There are thousands upon thousand of bodies around me, rubbing against me. They are mainly those of feisty, sweaty men, all different in appearance. Some balding, others in their prime of youth. Some capped, others turbaned. However, to me, they are the same. They are screaming. Shouting. Shouting at each other. I watch as a fight breaks out a few metres in front of me. I can't comprehend what is going on inside them. Why are they fighting against each other? Are they not of the same nation? This nation, India? It has barely been a month since the British left, our greatest enemy, and now we are fighting ourselves. What has come of this country? These people? Us?

As I am thinking these thoughts, I start to see a little clearer, and begin to advance towards what seems like a gathering of people around the train station. I know that this is no compassionate gathering, for beneath the smoke filled air, the screaming out of slogans, and sound of sweaty bodies pushing against each other, I can hear the sounds of people dying. Our own people dying. And if I cannot hear them, I can feel them through this land we all spawned out of, and through each breath of warm, metallic air. I can feel them, envision them, smell them. What has happened?

I am not here out of my own will. No. I am not the kind of person to involve myself in such assemblies of foolish violence. I am here with one purpose. With one ambition: I am here to seek out my friend, Ahmed.

When I came home from college yesterday afternoon, I knew that there were assemblies like the one I am in now, all along the border. I was annoyed and agitated, and my face was set in a scowl as I rode my bicycle through the semi desolate paths between fields of wheat, for I didn't want to go along my usual route through the town. I wasn't in the mood for interaction. My thoughts clouded my mind. People were killing each other. Killing each other for no reason other than the Gods they believed in. They were illusioned, for this wasn't a war of God against God, but rather the worst example of political ideals played out in a country. I knew that this ideal of a 'Muslim country- Pakistan' wasn't going to be able to happen swiftly over night, but was going to take time, bringing riots and mass violence in its wake, as it already had.

At home, I entered the compound gate with the same set face; my mind was elsewhere. I slipped my shoes off, rested my bicycle against the post, and wandered inside. Upon entering, my train of thought was interrupted by Amma calling me into the kitchen. As I walked in, I saw that her eyes were red, and it looked like she had been crying. Immediately I bent down and rested her head against my chest. The first thought that came to my head was: Abuji is dead. My eyes began to well, and when the threshold of liquid was reached, tiny pearls began to make their way down my cheeks. I had to control myself, for I didn't

know if it was true. Wiping away my tears, I then looked into my mother's eyes and gently asked her what had happened.

What she said was worse than I had thought. She spoke with a quiver in her voice and told me what I already knew, of the riots spurting up along the supposed border of 'Pakistan'. This once again brought back the emotions I had felt on the ride here, and my body began to tense once more. She went on, telling me of Muslim families that were travelling across to the West. I listened somewhat un-attentively, until I was jolted into consciousness by a gut wrenching thought that went through my mind that I hadn't thought of before. Almost simultaneously, Amma began to narrate what had happened, proving my heart shattering thought true. From then on, I could only hear some of what Amma was saying, for my body melted a little, my shoulders slumped, and I began to sob. My heart heaved, and Amma was now the one comforting me. With her turmeric stained hands around me, she sat me down on a chair, and spoke to me gently. What I caught out of what she said were these words: *train...tomorrow...early...leaving...forever*. These words were enough for me to realise the true depth of this situation, and for me to slowly compose myself, and come up with some sort of a plan.

That was why I came out this morning. Risking my life. I needed to find him before he left. Needed to farewell him. I didn't understand why he didn't tell me he was leaving. Anger and a deep sort of love had kindled in my heart overnight, urging me to do what I did. But now I realise how ignorant I was.

There are so many people here. Some dead. Some dying. How will I find him, when I cannot see more than a metre in front of me. I am like a cell of blood, trying to pass through a plaque filled artery. There is no space, but if I don't get through, I will be the one in despair. It will almost be like death.

I am close to the train station, for I can see the dull beige arch of the entrance. I regret what I have done, but I am so close; I cannot give up. I must endure this pain and suffering, for it is only momentary.

With each minute I am closer. To the station, and to him.

I know he will be leaving, forever, quite soon.

Time has been torturous to me, but I am reaping the reward. I am now making my way to the platform. The dark, soot filled platform. My heart is beating quickly. My body is fluttering with joy. I am scanning the faces around me, coughing at intervals and rubbing my eyes, searching for that glowing face. I am looking around, and have been now for a few minutes, and I am heartbroken. I have seen thousands of faces, but not one that I want to see. My chest heaves with sorrow, as I let out a deep breath and run my fingers through the scraggly mess on my head. I am almost in tears. Then, as I turn, something luminescent catches my eye, close to the entrance of the carriage. As I examine it closer, I see that it is a person. That it is him.

I push and shove through the plethora of people milling about on the platform, ignoring the obstacles in my way. Covering my mouth, coughing and spluttering, I reach him. He turns. I

look into his eyes. He sees me. Leaving his family, he reaches forwards, embracing me, and I in turn embrace him. There is no time for accusations. No time to speak. No time for anything. We stay locked together, amidst a sea of people, crying upon each other's shoulders, till the horn sounds.

Without much more than a tear stained smile, he boards the train. Leaving me for his new life.

His new country.

Forever.

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