

# **The Swimming Pool**



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Spring 2021

## **CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL**

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

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## **DECLARATION**

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

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## **Dedication**

*The Swimming Pool* is dedicated to all those who are fighting addiction and for all the friends and families that are affected by those who are fighting against addiction. It is for all the people in the darkness who cannot seem to see the light and need our help the most.

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### **Abstract**

The dissertation titled *The Swimming Pool* is a novellete that aims to tell a fictionalized story of a family across four generations battling with addiction and alcoholism. The family experiences are told from the narrative viewpoint of an unborn child of the latest generation who has the ability to traverse parts of the family's history. The story relies heavily on personal experiences and it is an attempt to come to terms with the troubles of the family due to alcohol abuse. The dissertation aims to explore the question of balancing the personal experience and how it is curated by the author to provide a narrative for a wider audience. The dissertation also aims to explore the question of authorial intent versus reader perception.

## Critical Introduction

*The Swimming Pool* is a personal narrative that explores the theme of alcoholism and addiction and the ripple effect it has on four generations. While reading the novelette, readers will see that there is an emphasis on the metaphor of liquidity. Liquidity in different circumstances is used to show the fluid nature of the reality we inhabit. *The Swimming Pool* is deeply personal and it relies heavily on my own experiences though exaggerated for effect. Regardless, the feelings behind the words that I try to express left me in a dilemma about the word choices I use to frame the story as I have seen it but, when read by another, transfigures into a narrative that is not the same as the one I have set out to tell. This raises the question that has hounded me throughout my Master's journey: what role does authorial intent play in a story? Whether the author's intention should be given priority when judging or critiquing a text? I wanted to also see how that interaction would work in terms of my own work. To grapple with the writing process I undertook. I have organized the critical introduction into four sections; the personal narrative, alcoholism and liquidity in *The Swimming Pool*, authorial intent, and audience perception.

*The Swimming Pool* is a story that reflects great parts of my own childhood and the struggles of dealing with alcoholism within my family. Still, I would not go as far as to call it a memoir because a lot of the personal narrative has been propped up with the scaffolding of fiction to fit into a cohesive, meaningful story that will appeal to readers. Herein, a distinction needs to be made on where the personal ends and fiction begins. For the story, the experiences of my childhood work more like research than anything else. At ULAB, Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam taught us that for any good story to be written it needs to be believable. This resonated with me while writing *The Swimming Pool* and the story evolved from the first-hand research that my

experiences had provided and though it might not seem to be subjective, it allowed me to look back on the experiences from a detached view. It would be a lie to say that recounting the experiences was not emotional. However, after such a long passage of time and introspection, the experiences gave a value that I could not have had otherwise.

In a way the entire writing process was a therapeutic experience. I would also posit that every story contains a part of the author in their composition. It would be very difficult to draw a line from where the author ends and the creation begins. The personal narrative I believe is always a part of the author's story. As Laceulle states,

Among the varied interpretations of personal identity, the narrative view stands out for its rich and nuanced, yet practical conceptualization of what it implies to answer the fundamental question of personal identity: Who am I? ... the narrative view focuses on what is seen as a fundamental feature of human life, namely the ability and inclination to engage in *storytelling*. The narrative view assumes that there exists an intrinsic connection between our lives, our personal identities, and the stories we tell about ourselves. (128)

In essence, telling stories are an intrinsic part of our identities. We yearn to tell stories that will leave behind at the very least an idea that we have generated. By that argument, the personal narrative is a crucial part of the storytelling process. The personal narrative takes the story and gives it authenticity but authorial intent and the fictional elements provide a bed of context that makes the story more memorable and universal.

*The Swimming Pool* tries to call upon the problem of alcoholism and addiction. Alcoholism is a driving force in the plot of the story and it acts as a metaphorical lubricant

pushes the characters and the story towards a climax. In the story I try to implement a parallel with liquids and drinking. The swimming pool itself is an acquired metaphor for alcohol abuse from the song “Swimming Pools (Drunk)” by Kendrick Lamar. The initial inspiration for the parallel between swimming pools and alcohol came from the song. Upon further research I found the idea taking shape in the short story “The Swimmer” by John Cheever. The story also provided me a framework to see how the swimming pool made allusions to social mobility in the American middle class. It also reinforced the idea that the swimming pool would be the perfect metaphor for the effect liquidity has on our lives. The story takes a moralistic approach towards alcoholism and it tries to bring awareness to the issue. It delves not only into the effect it has over the generations but also about the type of people that are usually addicted to the liquid. Benville states that, “There are 18 million children of alcoholics in the United States. Children of Alcoholics have a higher risk of becoming addicted to alcohol because of genetic and neurological predispositions” (1). Research shows the problem that I have tried to highlight in the story. The problem can be pervasive and it can have far-reaching consequences throughout the ages for a family. As Benville states, “Without interventions, the cycle of passing an AUD [Alcohol Use Disorder] from parent to child can continue” (1)

Throughout the novelette I have used allegories towards liquidity. The emphasis on liquidity was made to show the prevalence of liquidity in the lives of the characters. The driving liquidity of the alcohol has the biggest impact. Furthermore, there is the liquidity of the swimming pool that serves to drown the alcoholic characters literally and figuratively. The metaphor of the swimming pool also takes on the role of being a portal for the protagonist and the narrator to traverse past memories. The swimming pool also alludes to the liquidity of memories and gives them a fluid quality. The memories of the characters flow into one another

and they converge in the pool. The aspect of liquidity is used in the story in different phases as well. There are points in the story where liquid turns to solid in the form of ice cubes drowning in whiskey and in the end there is also an illusion of water phasing from water as a gas at least that is one metaphysical way of explaining the ending. The forms of liquid play a role in clashing against other elements like fire. Water as a liquid plays a significant role in the story as a conduit for life and death. I also wanted to play on the liquidity of time passing through the swimming pool. Though these are the metaphors I have tried to imply in the text, I have to be wary of the communication barriers and the noise that will inevitably drive readers to encode their own meanings.

Coming to terms with the message of the story I have written was a difficult process for me to work through. I had been mulling over authorial intent throughout my Master's days and the idea that no matter what happens the true meaning of what I want people to understand will perhaps be lost. This idea made me wonder whether the messaging that I wanted to convey was important at all. I contended that, as Harker put it, "...the notion of a literary work as a communicative act – what T.S. Eliot described as 'one person talking to another'" (6). These words gave me some cause for concern for if I had to create a story to talk to the reader, the messaging within the story would have to be extremely precise. After all, I would not like anyone to misrepresent my intentions. The understanding could not be the entire picture for what I was thought the answer to my question on authorial intent was. I wanted to strike a balance in my understanding of authorial intent. It is my belief that if writing a story was "one person talking to another" (Harker, 6), then it would include the nuances of the non-verbal cues that would assure me that the other person has understood my message. There is a gap in literary work where it cannot connect the author directly with the reader as they are reading the work.

This meant that I had to accept that there will always be an imperfect translation of the meaning I try to give. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, “Intention is design or plan in the author's mind. Intention has obvious affinities for the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write.” (469) The author’s intention or my own for writing is something that is both intrinsic and extrinsically driven. The work does not exist in the vacuum of my mind it is filled with references and symbolism that are out there in the entire world and readers will interact with them in different ways. Harker states that, “[L]iterary texts are not entirely removed from the everyday world. Despite the uniqueness of the author’s insight, this insight still depends upon the everyday world for expression” (7). The answer to my question meant that I would have to create a work that borrowed from the perceived reality of the world to tell a reality that I had personally experienced or wished for readers to experience. In that way it was a complicated relationship to navigate with the reader. I would have to ensure that I simply constructed sign posts for the readers but they would have to choose the path by reading the signs. As Zhang states, “Transcendent though it may be, the author described by Schiller is depersonalized. Here, the author is identified with the whole work while being totally invisible within the work” (17). As an author then I could create a central path encouraging readers to walk but ultimately the journey would be shaped by the readers’ perception.

I believe for all authors, readers’ perception of their work is half the battle. In the words of Roland Barthes “...the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.” (148) By the terms of the New Criticism a movement that talks about the close reading of texts, the readers perception to the text is much more important than the intention of the author. Perception leads to message encoding and that is a reaction that will lead readers to appreciate the work in new and exciting ways that they will defy the author’s expectations. Cheyne states

that, “In her theory of literary appreciation, Feagin writes that part of appreciating a literary text is ‘getting the value out of it’ (2). In the context of genre fiction, this means being moved or engaged affectively. However, appreciation also involves recognising the ‘properties, aesthetic qualities, or artistic values’ of a text... Appreciation involves ‘interacting with a work [...] not simply reacting to it’” (164). Appreciation of my work would then be the ultimate goal in my mind. I tried to keep that in mind when weaving the reality I perceived through the work. But there is a limitation to the goal that derives from the fact that every reader will have their own perception of the text and as such they will seek to find their own value and appreciation shaped by the contexts and experiences that they personally have gone through. As Wimsatt and Beardsley states, “The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public.” (470) Therefore, as the quote above states for a poem it can be applied to prose as well that any writing when published becomes public knowledge and herein lies the question of whether the value lies simply in the author’s intended knowledge or the readers’ interpretation. As Roland Barthes states, “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to 'close the writing.’” (147) In my opinion, there is balance between where the author’s intent and audience’s perception marries. Definitely to seek to find only the meaning the author intended is to limit the reading of the text, but what the author intended whilst writing the text or their aim is a necessary framework needed to make the story more coherent and meaningful. It could then be seen that the author sets a travel plan for the reader to reach a destination but, the along the way the readers will have to perceive their own meanings in the different sights, sights that have escaped the author’s view, the reader may choose to stop at the destination prescribed or find themselves moving to a completely different

place. Therefore authors act as a guide through the journey the readers take, they might suggest and infer points of interest dear to the author but ultimately everyone takes on a different journey.

In conclusion, the process of writing *The Swimming Pool* was an exhilarating ordeal that challenged me to contend with ideas that I would have never thought of. To make this story I needed to access and process old memories. Bringing old memories to the surface and giving them a new view meant that I had reached a new level of understanding of myself and narrative that was a part of my story. Writing the story also meant I got the opportunity to bring to light a problem that I had suffered from, alcohol abuse, though the biggest exercise was trying to fit in my intention and messaging, keeping in mind that readers will have their own perception of the story. I had to understand the complexity of storytelling and the craft required to make a story. This made me appreciate the craft of authors and the dedication and work required to tell a story.

## The Swimming Pool

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I see the feelin', the freedom is granted  
As soon as the damage of vodka arrived  
This how you capitalize, this is parental advice  
Then apparently, I'm over-influenced by what you are doin'  
I thought I was doin' the most 'til someone said to me

- Swimming Pools by Kendrick Lamar

## Chapter 1

The cold unerring symmetry of the swimming pool, reflecting my father's face, startled Abbuji – what I called my father - from his drunken meditation of all that had led him to this moment. He broke from the liquor dream as the chilly water seeped into the crevices of his consciousness, slowly, with each breath. His thoughts were now starting to break from the haze. He regretted the clarity. He remembered why he was in the swimming pool that had claimed his own father's, my Dada's life.

“Where whyy am I here?” he murmured “this..er wasss te last place... I shouldd be.

The rush of thoughts made him feel human again. He moved only once when he realized he had been in the murky water for quite some time. His sloppy movement upset the calmness of the pool. The reflection of his face disappeared into the depths. The spell of the other liquid was breaking. He was starting to take stock of his surroundings. The light was leaving the bleeding sky fast when his blurry eyes slipped unto the abandoned glory of his former home.

Now it was pitch black except for the distant glow of the car lights in the distance as they sped past. The weight of his clothes made him realize he was fully clothed from shirt to shoe. Even the contents of his pockets were present. The weight of the clothing was growing heavier as they drunk in more of the pool water. The cold of the water and a passing gust of stale fall wind made him shiver reminding him to get out unless he wanted to catch his death; that was his plan he remembered suddenly but, instinct urged him to retreat.

“Itss cold.” He shivered.

His head hurt from the stupor. As it wreaked havoc on his system, the comfortable numbness was fast being replaced with a concoction of emotions that left his head dizzy. Luckily, there was no one around to observe Abbuji’s ruin. He plopped himself up on to the edge of the pool, his feet dangling in its depths. His clothes clung to him like dear friends embracing after a long passage of time, they didn’t want to let him go. The water felt comforting to him and he wasn’t completely ready to give it up. The idea of suicide still lingered in the back of the tempest in his head. He kept his shoes in the water as he opened his shirt to dry himself. The shirt fell heavy on his side with a hefty thud and an unobservable weight dropped from my father along with it. He tried to piece together the events that led him to this place. He couldn’t think too far into the fog

and started again to navigate the familiar surroundings. His mind followed suit and started flooding him with scattered memories of his childhood.

He remembered the smell of chlorine from his earliest interactions with the pool. Remembering the warmth of lost summer days spent splashing around with his brother and mother. He remembered the dark shadow of my grandfather lurking on the patio and the amber liquid that sparkled in a cut crystal glass in Dada's hand. It was audible through his memories, the crackle of the ice in the burnished golden whiskey and the tinkle of the shifting ice cubes as they melted in the sun. He remembered Dada putting the poison to his lips.

He regretted drinking. It was his first time and it was a pathetic cry from his memories of Dada elegantly sipping Johnnie Walker in his white cotton panjabi. Abbuji could taste the drink in Dada's hand. He didn't taste the alcohol, only the fear.

Dada was a serious man. He was always dressed in a panjabi creased from working all day and most nights. He spoke seldom at the house, but when he did he had to be heard. It's not that he didn't enjoy talking; there just wasn't much for him to say to his family. He usually grunted out orders and chided his family for their lack of appreciation. Abbuji was scared of Dada and the constant reminders of him being a disappointment. There was a lot that occupied his mind when it came to Dada. I don't think he realized how much Dada affected him. Dada was not malicious with his words; he was just very matter of fact. Abbuji was never going to be the man that he was and he let Abbuji know it whenever he could. Dada had a talent for digging into people's sentiments, a tactic that he used to dominate both his business and family.

"Listen, when you grow up and I am dead, just sell everything. There is no way you will be able to take care of the business. Do you understand?" he would say frequently.

Abbuji knew from an early age that he was never going to be like his father. As he grew up, he cherished this thought like a personal rebellion.

It was October and though the weather was not chilly enough to be called fall, there was something of the early hauntings of winter. He was tempted to jump back into the water and carry out the task he had intended, but he remembered Dada. He told himself out loud,

“I am never going to be like you, Abbu.” His words were clear.

He tried to get up but the mossy water stuck like glue to his feet. He didn't feel like getting up. It would take a little more time and a lot more effort before he freed himself from the water's spell and he could shakily get on his feet. The water sloshed down his pants like tiny waterfalls, returning to their place in the pool. His head pulsed; the act of standing drained him of whatever energy the day's meager meal provided. He stumbled to pick up his shirt and trundled to take a seat on the dusty wrought iron lawn chair Dadi had bought on a whim. Abbuji's wetness gave it a new coat and it savored being used after almost 7 years. Abbuji rummaged through his pockets to pull out his wallet and cellphone, sticky and wet; he laid them on the dusty glass top of the garden table. The phone blinked aggressively green, blue and white from the countless messages to remind him to reenter reality. He looked at the 23+ messages and calls from Ma and flipped the phone over.

He turned his gaze back to the swimming pool. The water was settling back to its mirror state, the cloudy moonlight lending the pool a smoky, milky glow. But the symmetry was back. He could see the shadow of the great redbrick duplex behind him as it stretched its haunches out over the water. He didn't want to look back. It felt painful to him. He just looked ahead into the milky darkness of the pool. He put his heads on his hands and let go. I cannot tell why he cried

so hard that night. It could have been any number of things, from the many that had gone wrong. He was left with a crumbling business, an estranged family, a failing marriage, the death of my grandfather, and I, only a couple of days away from coming into the world. I think it was because he had failed where my grandfather had succeeded or that he had allowed himself to be in the same place as Dada. He bawled like no one in the world saw him, but I saw him there clearly in the dusty ruin on that moonlit night.

After the cry he managed to vomit out a hefty chunk of his sorrow and the better part of a bottle of vodka. He leaned back on the chair and it creaked under his weight. He didn't know what to do. He let himself dry in the heat of his fragmented summer memories of the haunted house. The memories came in droves, with little waves in the beginning what started off as little surfs quickly materialized into a deluge of nostalgia that swept him into the past. He just sat there drinking the bitterness. It was an important moment in both our lives. It was important he drowned. He needed to drown.

## Chapter 2

Abbuji was born in 1990. The air was sticky with sweat and heat when he came into the world. Dadabhai was pacing restlessly in the crowded waiting room of the clinic, counting the intervals between when he could get out for a smoke. He was a heavy smoker and easily crumpled two packets in his powerful yet small fists. Sweat stains marked the pits of his grey shirt. He didn't have the time to change and rushed over straight from my great grandfather's gas station where he worked as a cashier. Dada rummaged through his pockets impatiently with an anxious irritability that is expected of a 23 year old soon-to-be father. He soon found the cancer pleasure sticks and looked about the room for a suitable candidate to borrow a light from. An older man sitting across the room caught his eye. He hurried over, interrupting the man's casual conversation.

“Bhai, can I get a match or a lighter?”

The man looked over to my short statured young grandfather, towering over him, and yielded his neon green lighter. Dada quickly put one to his lips and inhaled as the cigarette burned. Upon returning the lighter to the man, he turned towards the entrance to the waiting room and resumed his pacing.

My grandmother's sister walked over to him. She was concise in relaying the news of my Abbuji's arrival and reported that he had a son now. A small smile birthed on Dada's face and he eased his bite on the cigarette. “Alhamdulillah” he replied. Family members and Dada's friends started to come in one by one. They all congratulated my grandfather's achievement. The women congregated in groups and inquired about the baby's weight, complexion and mother's condition.

The men spoke excitedly, patting each other on the back, cracking jokes. The room was filled with felicity. Soon my Boro Abba joined the scene; everyone turned to him and extended their salaams and congratulations. Dada hurriedly hid the cigarette and rushed over to tell him about Abbuji.

“Congratulations, son you are now a man, a father and your world will not be the same anymore,” my great grandfather told him.

The two men shared in the pride of having sired three generations of first-born sons. The son of the eldest son of the eldest son of an eldest son, the pride between the two was palpable. Meanwhile, my father was bawling not unlike the way he had done beside the pool. He was experiencing the discomfort of being alive.

I'd have to undergo the same ordeal in a few days and can honestly testify to the thrill and discomfort of coming into the world. It is a trying tribulation, the biting cold of breathing, the confusion of the colors and light that blind us at the time when we are most vulnerable. It is an awful din, an assault on nubile senses that are shocked into operation. What stings the most is the liquid coldness of the first breath, it sinks into the brittle jelly bones, it cracks on the skin, and it invades to fill every crevice of our liquid meat sacs. Small wonder then that babies greet the world with a cry (or at least the smart ones). My father had yet to understand that the discomfort of being alive would only grow with the years. He was placed next to his mother and it helped ease his discomfort a little. The warmth of the bosom of the tired woman who had brought him into the world soothed him. The doctors left the small bundle with my grandmother, a young woman of 21. The two studied each other, observing hidden bonds that I cannot yet describe. They both looked on at each other, one with a hormone addled adoration and the other with a

quiet deferential suspicion. They both knew that their lives were connected, they knew it the moment my father was placed into Dadi's tired arms. They would have to comfort each other in this uncomfortable life.

The humdrum of the nurses around the post-op room was largely ignored by the tired pair. Dadi was so tired that she hardly noticed when the nurses came to clean up Abbuji and returned him, swaddled, next to her. Both were exhausted, and neither would notice Dada as he entered the room to take his first view of his son. He satiated himself with only seeing the pair from the door. He took care not to disturb the scene that swelled him up with love and fear. The nurses prepared a bed for them and they were transferred to the ward. The abruptness of the move woke Abbuji up and he promptly resumed bawling to make his presence known. Dadi instinctively tried to feed him to comfort him, to no avail. He is hungry but he doesn't know it yet. He is set to nurse; drinking in his first drops of succor that reinforced the bond between the two. Abbuji realized then he needed this woman to survive and it was his job to protect her.

Dada walked into the room followed by various relatives all bearing good tidings. They were a family; it was hard for me to understand the stories Abbuji told of his childhood. I would have been hard pressed to believe that there was anything lacking in his childhood. Dada was beaming and Dadi content with having fulfilled her duty of providing an heir. Boro Abba came in shortly after and took command of the room. His presence silenced everyone as he came up to Abbuji and whispered the Azaan into his ears. Abbuji was annoyed at the intrusion to his slumber and looked back at the vibrant balding man with the thin moustache. He smiled so ecstatically that even the baby had to soften his ire. Then it was Dada's turn. He came up to my father and picked him up, holding him tight, afraid he'd drop him. Everything was idyllic, a scene out of a movie. I

wish Abbuji had gotten the chance to look at Dada the way I had seen them. Then again I wouldn't have been able to tell him even if I wanted to know.

You see, we unborn children have the power to observe our families before we come alive. Most of us are too lazy to venture out from the comfort of the abyss to risk viewing the harshly lit realm of the living. I mean most of us would be going there soon enough. But some of us brave or curious ones have the freedom to seek out the families that will adopt us and have been given the privilege of our presence. I cannot explain why I was among the ones who chose to venture out into the cold light of the living. We were given the extraordinary ability to traverse the timelines of our parents to our choosing to go back and forth. I cannot tell you why it was that I followed the light of my father and delved so far into his life. I guess it was a way for me to sample what life was.

The years sped by the happy family and within a span of a few blinks, 4 years had passed. Dada was an alcoholic. His family in their unconcerned wisdom decided to offload him onto my Dadi who was oblivious to the twist that fate had for her. She was the most ill-equipped person to play the role of keeper to my grandfather. Dadi came from a simple family from Khulna. The frugality of her upbringing stunted her self-esteem. A beautiful woman, inside and out, she possessed a calming and down-to-earth beauty that arrested people's attention not for her features but with the weight of her kindness. She was oblivious to her power and her lack of confidence meant that she never took advantage of her power to influence people. In a way perhaps she was perfect for the role that was thrust upon her. Her years with Dada would serve to steel her heart, soften her resolve, and destroy her peace of mind but the kindness she possessed never waned. In truth, she was as patient as a mother for Dada, staying by his side till the end. Dadi was a mismatched substitute for the mother Dada lost at 14 years old. He hadn't grown up

since then. The conditions of her death left him scarred. He would repeat many times over the years to Abbuji that this loss was what left him broken, what made him the way he was, Abbuji thought of this as excuses, when really he was pleading for help.

It was an uneventful evening when Dadi came face to face with the monster at the bottom of the bottle. She was alone with Abbuji in a small two bedroom apartment in Mirpur - a few minutes' walk from Dada's workplace at the gas station. She was preparing his meal for the night when the monster came knocking at the door. She heard the familiar voice with a stranger's ferocity.

"Openrr up, hurry. How longggg do I have to sthaaand out here?" thundered the monster.

She was terrified. Dadi obeyed with the unquestioning deference that had been bred into her like most women of her time. She would not see her husband that night. She was pushed aside as the monster entered their lives, stinking of degeneration. Her mind was racing; confused at the sight of what she was audience to. Her humble background meant that she could not fathom the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde relationship of one who seeks solace in a bottle. The man looked the same, but he wasn't there anymore. There was someone else, gone was the pride and love, replaced with an unbridled rage. The orders and insults came thick and fast.

"Whatt aree you shtanding there gawking... at me for? Hurry up.. you little bitchhhh I amm hungry."

"Yes, what would you..." she tried to mutter.

"Shtop looking at me dumbfounded. Get something! At the leeeast make me food. What elsse do you do all day??"

She wasn't given the time to comprehend the words. She hurried to feed the monster as it hurled blurred abuses at her. She was shell-shocked.

"I work all day.. Do you.. ....know how hard I work to feed you and your son? No, no? How would you know.. How would you know what Abbu puts me through?"

They sat together at the table, silent, while the monster gobbled up the labors of love meant for her beloved husband. He eyed her with all the hatred he could muster and jabbed,

"Whatt's wrong? Have you... become mute? You whore. Don't think I don't know all the men you talk to all day. Are all your words used up on them?"

She looked down to hide away her shame. The shame should not be hers but she couldn't help blaming herself for the predicament she had been thrust into. Two heavy tears swelled up in her eyes and she fought to keep them from dropping. The monster continued to hurl his spears at her heart, determined to exhaust as much of his inexhaustible hate on her tonight. He stopped only to shatter the plates on the floor.

"What a pile of shit! Never have I eaten anything so terrible. But what can I expect out of a peasant woman like you?"

He smirked at the last remark, proud of his accomplishment and retired to his bed, stumbling on the way. The footsteps of the monster as he walked past couldn't have been heard any louder or met with as much welcome as anything else as far as she could remember that day. She sat frozen in her place, alone, and let the burden drop silently to the floor, the two liquid gems shattered on the cold hard floor just like her innocence. The monster was already snoring and the stink of poison wafted through the small apartment and choked its inhabitants. My grandmother

waited until she was certain the monster was asleep before she stirred from her place and picked up the shattered pieces off the floor. With every piece she picked up, she dropped another jewel to replace the pieces of her childish view of marriage. She would not sleep that night. Instead she would let her tears dry on my sleeping father's soft blanket. He would be spared that night.

## Chapter 3

The young family awoke the next morning as they had always done as though from a nightmare and nothing else. All that remained of last night was the pervasive smell of alcohol lingering in pockets around the house but they too were retreating fast with the rising sun. Dada awoke, refreshed from his slumber, still in his work clothes, surprised at why his young wife and child were sleeping in the other room. He wasn't ignorant - it just hurt his head to try and recall. He didn't have the energy to grasp the nightmare he wreaked. Ashamed, he softly went up to his sleeping wife and nudged her awake. She forgot about the previous night for a moment and a smile cracked her face in two seeing her loving husband, but in as short a time as a synapse firing, she remembered the monster that this gentle, loving man was last night. He gently caressed her and she could not help but melt in his arms. He whispered the words,

"I am sorry."

And all was forgiven. Such is the folly of young love where all is forgiven. She eased up and quickly dismissed all the threatening doubts from her mind and went about her daily routine as though nothing had happened. She knew it was wrong to dismiss it but she was desperate to let the illusion stand for as long as it could.

"I'll go into the shower. Could you please prepare breakfast, my love? I will be right out"

"Mmmhmm," Dadi agreed, delightfully

Dada kissed his wife and headed into the shower. He was determined to wash away the stink of last night. In the shower he felt his head splitting. He let the cold water seep into the sinews of

his tired muscles. The coldness of the shower was effectively numbing him, one liquid pushing out the other. He vaguely remembered the night before, but what he really remembered was the feeling that he had said something unforgivable. He was suddenly scared; he was scared to lose his family. He could hear my Dadi scuttling around in the kitchen.

He thought, “The naïve and sweet girl doesn’t know what she has got herself into!”

He shuddered in fear because he knew it would happen again, like it happened so many times before, ever since his mother died. It was the way that he lost her that drove him to seek all forms of intoxicant. She took her own life, drinking herself to death.

“Alcohol poisoning,” strangers explained to him. “Poor woman, a bad batch of bootlegged alcohol has done her in. Her husband should have kept a tighter leash on her. What do you expect, leaving a wife all alone at home?”

Even now, remembering the words hurt him; it made him want to reach out to for the bottle. He looked up and let the flowing water fill his mouth. His fist curled up as he struck the wall of the shower. He didn’t like remembering. This was a ritual the bottle let him forget for a time but as soon as the haze cleared he remembered with greater clarity. The more he tried to drown his memories the harder they would resurface. As a teenager he did what most teenage boys do; he found a scapegoat for his helpless anger. He turned it all on his father. This was the greatest mistake in Dada’s life. No amount of hate is ever justified especially when you let it govern your entire life. Dada blamed Boro Abba for not being there. He thought Boro Abba should have been there to protect Boro Amma. In his blind suffering he only wanted to hurt Boro Abba and make him suffer. In searching for a method, he found addiction.

My great grandfather was an austere patriarch and he ruled his sons one of two ways – either with disregard or with cold and authoritative orders and comments on how big of a disappointment they were. To everyone from the outside my great grandfather was an upstanding patriarch, working tirelessly to create a thriving business empire. He supported all thirteen of his siblings and his ailing mother. The fact that his father was a humble madrasa teacher made his rise to success even more astounding.

“Thank God, his wife wasn’t alive to see her boys grow up. They are nothing like their father. She would have died,” commented people.

She had killed herself. It was etched into Dada’s brain. He was the first one to see her contorted body splayed on the bed with the contents of a bottle of sleeping pills and a blood red liquid strewn on the floor like an abstract painting. The stink of the decay and the alcohol was days old by the time he had gone into her room. He was her favorite. My great grandmother was a trophy of a wife and in the turmoil of post-war Bangladesh she was a beacon of modernity and an original cosmopolite. Boro Abba needed her by his side. She was the perfect hostess. Dada remembered her with a very specific vagueness. He remembered that she would sing whenever she combed her hair with a pearl inlaid brush but he couldn’t remember the songs. He would remember her short sleeve blouses being the talk of the town and the stock of keys at in at her saree-wrapped waist, but he couldn’t remember her voice. Most of all he remembered she drank blood red nectar in crystal glasses shaped like tulips. He remembered she would drink the sweet red juice that stank of rotten fruit in exuberant amounts whenever Boro Abba wasn’t around - which was often. It seemed as though she wanted to drown herself in the dark red swirl. She would often disappear into her bedroom with the bottles with strict instructions to the staff and four children not to disturb her.

My grandfather would wait for her to wake in the morning like she used to for her husband but she never did. It's as though she stopped trying once her husband wasn't in the house. Little by little this observation grew into a green little seed in Dada. He wanted more than anything for her to notice him and was a beggar for her love. She showered him with it whenever she felt like it - but a seed doesn't grow without constant nourishment. Boro Abba was partial to his daughters but my great grandmother always knew her little boy needed her more. She made him a cripple for her love and he was a willing victim trying to give Boro Amma the male attention that my Boro Abba denied her.

Abbuji would recount to me how, when my grandfather was young, he had once dug up the family lawn because he overheard my Boro Amma saying, "I would love a swimming pool in the yard. It would be a lovely addition for the summer parties."

The poor soul would be thrashed by my great grandfather for digging up the perfectly manicured lawn that existed where the pool is now.

A gentle knock on the bathroom door and a soft voice spoke, "Breakfast is ready," breaks my grandfather's introspection.

"I am coming, dear" he replied as he squeaked the taps shut.

As the last drops of the cold water fall from his body he promises himself that he won't ever drink again. He doesn't want to be like his mother. He doesn't want his son to go through the hurt and disappointment that he had to go through.

"I am never going to drink again" he told himself.

## Chapter 4

While waiting for the stupor to clear, Abbuji had a lot of time to recollect the history of our family. He couldn't help but wonder about all the choices that had led him down the path. He recognized that all the sons and their fathers had a very complicated relationship that often spiraled downward in a loop. My great great grandfather who was a holy man would often say, "Three generations define a family. The first struggles, the second builds, and the third destroys." These words kept popping up in Abbuji's mind. He wondered where the three generations actually started. Was it with his religious great grandfather who brought the family from the villages of Noakhali to bustling Dhaka, or his grandfather the hardworking businessman who created an empire only to let it fall into ruin? Either way, Abbuji was anxious about the superstition and the fate that it entailed for him. He would be the start of a new generational cycle, the one who struggles, or he would be the one who destroys. These thoughts swirled like a frenzied whirlpool in his mind until he could not fight the stupor any longer and was dragged into the depths of yet another recollection.

The vastness of the house blanketed my father's mind and it seeped into his drunken nostalgia. He thought of his childhood spent as a nomad travelling from one rental house to another. The first one he could remember was the small 2 bedroom apartment in Mohakhali DOHS. His memory of the place was very hazy, perhaps more so because of the liquor. But he remembered living opposite Boro Abba. By this time, Boro Abba was married a second time. Boro Abba loved Abbuji. He afforded him all the love that he could not seem to spare his sons, or maybe, like people say, the love of grandparents for their grandchildren is doubled. Abbuji was four or five back then. He cherished the idea of living so close to his grandparents; after all they gave

him so many gifts. He specifically remembered the yellow Tonka cement mixer that his step-grandmother had given him. He was convinced that it would mix cement for real. He tried mixing mud and sand in the toy only to be sorely disappointed. He wouldn't play with the truck anymore after that experiment failed. This would be the first of a long line of disappointments in his life.

Abbuji's relationship with Boro Abba was very difficult to decipher. They were locked in some sort of a transactional relationship. I always thought that Boro Abba displaced a lot of his guilt and expectations onto Abbuji. For Abbuji, he looked at Boro Abba as a reprieve from his own dysfunctional family life. Their interaction was very shallow to be honest. Boro Abba would give gifts to Abbuji and, in turn, Abbuji would give him affection and the fleeting attention that was succor to the aging patriarch who had lost most of his power and energy because of his stroke and subsequent paralysis. Boro Abba tried to instill all of his vigor and mannerisms into Abbuji. He would speak to him only in English and this was enforced vigorously. He would insist that Abbuji only use cutlery to eat because eating with the hand in the traditional Bengali way was frowned upon by Boro Abba. He consistently decreed that a college fund be made for Abbuji because he must have a foreign degree. In that inconsequential way, Boro Abba tried to shape whatever part of Abbuji's life he could.

Living in Mohakhali DOHS, Abbuji's time was spent roaming the guarded streets on his bike. He would fall and scrape himself countless times and it would teach him that pain was an essential part of life. As we went through the memories in his mind, there was a lack of anything concrete, only flashes of a rose colored life that seemed to me the only time that Abbuji was really happy. He didn't have a care in the world. He explored the confines of his Eden, sucking nectar from red hibiscus flowers near the park, smelling the green grass of the local park where

other faintly discernible beings were living their own hallowed lives. He remembered a great metal slide. It was the only true adversity he had to face. The great shiny beast towered over the small frame of Abbuji and I am sure in his mind it was much larger. He stood many a time at the base of the slide contemplating climbing onto its mammoth back and slide down its smooth metal trunk. He was caught by the first grips of anxiety and his free, young brave mind was starting to comprehend that pain came in varieties. He rationalized with himself back and forth, “I am not going to fall if I hold onto the sides. So many other people have gone on it. It was made for children like me. I am sure it’s not going to hurt.”

With that, he prepared to mount the great beast and started to take the first steps up the slide. He didn’t remember how he managed to get up to the top. But, once up there he was wracked with a primal fear of falling. They say even a newborn is born with the innate fear of falling, (I can attest to that). That fear took hold of Abbuji’s feebly gathered courage and engaged the folly of his adventurous spirit. He hated getting up there. No one was around and he was paralyzed by the height. The warm lush green grass called to him dangerously now like reefs underneath the sea, they mocked him for climbing up away from him and to them. Abbuji needed to be punished for his blunder. Abbuji kept thinking, “It is going to hurt so much if I fall.... I can’t do this, I need to get away. Where’s Ammu? Please someone I need help.”

There was no one around. You see, much of this time Abbuji’s parents wafted like ghosts in the background of his life. He cannot remember their faces or them ever being there. He just remembered being alone and Boro Abba’s house opposite his own.

There was no going back for Abbuji and moving forward was an unknown. He started to feel a swell of something hot and heavy burrowing into his heart. It made him want to cry (he wouldn’t

allow himself). He needed to move. Clutching onto the safety rails of the mammoth structure was not going to be an option for too long. His eyes started to blur. He felt a great urge to pee. There was no point in crying. He wanted to go home. He led one foot to the edge of the silver trunk and let go of the safety rail. THUD!! on his bottom he slipped. The next moment he remembered the rush of the wind in his hair and the cold metal bruising his arms. He felt happy. And again THUD!! he plopped onto the dirt and grass at the bottom of the slide. He landed with a big smile on his face and tears down his face. His arms hurt from where the metal trunk caressed him and he had peed his pants but, he didn't care. He was happy. He must have gone down that slide at least a dozen times before heading back home at dusk.

## Chapter 5

“Have you been drinking again?”

The words strung like an odd note in my ears as it drifted into Abbuji’s memory. I was privy to riding the waves of his memories as they swept in and out like tides onto his mind’s beach. Like on any given beach the picturesque tropical paradise can quickly turn into a tempest. The serene foamy waves lulling visitors with their warmth and monotony turn their fangs to become vicious building sized monstrosities that will swallow you whole if you venture out from the safety of your coast. Floating through Abbuji’s mind reminded me of the beach. It was warm and sunny and the next moment he was swept away by the waves of his dark memories.

The words hurt Abbuji and triggered panic in him as he overheard Dadi accusing Dada. He couldn’t make out Dada’s reply apart from the snickering at the end. There was a clear disconnect from the severity and desperation with which Dadi was asking the question and the frivolous nature of Dada’s concern. It was really a rhetorical question at this point.

“Tell it to me straight. Just fess up and tell me. You stink of it.”

“If you know it already then why bother asking??”

“YOU SAID YOU WOULD STOP!”

“Stop screaming like a crazy pershon. It was only one peg.”

Abbuji could hear very little of the actual conversation but he knew how it would go. It was going nowhere. Dada was teetering on the edge of being drunk. He only heard the shrill noises of

the woman, incommunicable as to what the reason was behind the entire humdrum. To him the entire back and forth over one or a couple miserable pegs was beyond comprehension. It was to him like a child being yelled at by their mother. He knew, she knew that this was going to keep happening so why fight it. A loud bang from the door being slammed made Abbuji's young heart jump. And then urgent footsteps could be heard hurrying from the living room to the master bedroom.

"Does this look like one peg?" Dadi asks, brandishing a half drunk bottle of whiskey from Boro Abba's briefcase. She was livid, but pain and time had strengthened her. She was no longer the young naïve newly-wed. She knew better.

"Why do you have this in your bag? You are drinking again. If you continue like this I'll have to call your father."

The words triggered the beast in Dada. It was the one thing he despised, hearing his father's name. An immediate reaction sprung from Dadi's utterance of Boro Abba's name.

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU SAY?" Dada yelled out. "YOU think complaining to that OLD FART is going to do anything? I am going to keep on drinking and there is nothing you can do about it."

With that, Dada leaped up to his feet and grabbed the bottle from Dadi's hand and gulped down some more of the whiskey. It was like adding fuel to the fire, and the liquid swelled his rage. But Dadi was not going to back down. She had reached a crucial point in her life, the point you know where you have had enough to not care about the consequences, where your mind is overpowered by the raw emotion of understanding that the world is not fair. There is only thing

that works in that moment. How can you fight back against the unfairness? It was folly that everyone looking back would only recollect with regret. It could have been handled better, but it was necessary. She was already in the fire and the best thing for her to do was to fan the flames. She knew it would only add to making the fire burn harder. She only wanted to see how long it would burn; she didn't care if it burned her.

Dadi held the tears back that were naturally yearning to escape. She stood defiantly in the face of Dada while he continued hurling his insults. She called out for Abbuji, "Tutul, where are you? Come here right now"

Abbuji was already a witness to what was going on. He was scared. It would be decades before he reached the same point that Dadi was at right now. He meekly turned up at the room. It was unnaturally bright for what was happening. Abbuji remembered yearning for the cold comfort of the darkness because in the shadows of the hall, he felt safe. He didn't have to face the reality of the world. Back in the shadows, his life was still spent imagining the monsters that lay behind the wall. In the comfort of the shadows though, he wouldn't have to face the horrors.

Abbuji instinctively looked down at the floor as though something forewarned him not to be a part of the scene. He could sense his mother burning bright next to him and his father's cold energy sitting on the rattan bed in front. Dadi snatched back the whiskey bottle, the defiance was new and it had the effect of shocking the beast into curiosity; he wanted to know what was going to happen next. Dadi spoke calmly and clearly,

"Is this what you want for your son?"

"What are you talking about"

Pointing at the bottle, she repeated, “Is THIS, what you want for your son?”

Dada only smiled nervously - this was all very new for him. The meek wife was displaying strength foreign to the couple. Dada replied in a somber voice, “What are you doing?”

Dadi, ignoring him, picked up a glass and emptied the contents of the bottle, and turned to Abbuji.

“Here, drink this,” she said, handing Abbuji the glass.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?” Dada yelled in surprise. “Baba, don’t drink that. Give it here to me.”

“No, Tutul, you have to drink this.”

Abbuji was inevitably caught between his father and his mother. He was paralyzed with anxiety, except he didn’t know the repercussions of this day. He was being initiated into what would become his job until the day Dada breathed his last.

He didn’t know whom to listen to. His infantile brain was confused as to why he was here at all. He just wanted to go back to the park, anywhere that wasn’t here.

Dada got up and took the glass from Abbuji, lifting the heavy burden of the 250ml or so liquid that weighed a ton. He softly nudged Abbuji to retreat. Abbuji was never so grateful to Dada as he was at that point. He darted out of the room, catching a glimpse of his mother’s face burning bright with rage. She did not see him. She was too deep in the fire. Abbuji ran back to his room and closed the door behind him, relieved to have escaped. However, the smallness of the apartment meant that there was little reprieve. He could make out an escalation in the voices of

his parents. And then came muffled struggling of human bodies pushing against one another – at least that’s what he thought. Then, a CRASH!! as glass broke and running footsteps hurried to the kitchen next to his room. He could hear another pair run after the first and bang against the door. Abbuji was too scared to venture out for a peek. He retreated further into his bed, trying his best to get as far away from the awful noises as he could but to no avail. DHAK! DHAK! DHAK! He could hear the bangs as though they were his own heartbeat. But no reply, he could make out his father’s voice yelling to open up. Then nothing, but silence. It was getting warmer in the room. Abbuji broke into a cold sweat as though he knew something bad was coming. It was late night and he just wanted to go to sleep. Sleep he thought would make this nightmare stop. In his sleep he could dream of days in the park, sunny and serene.

The silence was growing eerie by this point. It was only a few minutes. A shocking yell from his father made Abbuji wince. The DHAK! DHAK! DHAK! on the door continued and intensified. It was as though Dada wanted to break down the house. There was desperation in Dada’s voice. Abbuji could hear running and the front door slammed open. Then nothing. Abbuji dared not get out. All he could do was hope that this nightmare wasn’t real. There was a strange heat about the apartment on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. A haze started to congregate near the crack under Abbuji’s door and the light from the hall made it appear somewhat ghostly.

Dada had returned and from the sound of it, he had brought back people with him. A new kind of noise assaulted the door THWACK! THWACK! The sound was ominous and it sounded Abbuji of wood being chopped. There finally was a crack and then the sound of something heavy falling. Abbuji was fatigued by the anxiety and he was in a daze. He needed to put his fear behind him and take a look. He could hear coughing and a great many voices clamoring over

each other. He curled up in his blanket and edged towards the door. With each step, the voices became stranger and stranger.

“Oh my God! What has she done?”

“The hospital! Quick!”

“Look at her hand! Get some towels and some cold water.”

He was finally at the door. It was now or never. Looking back, the bed seemed a mile away and the only way was forward. He cracked the door open and once again the brightness of the light outside seared his eyes. As they were adjusting, he could see hazy strangers huddled together struggling with something heavy in their arms. Dada was in one corner with his head in his arms, and Abbuji could have sworn he was crying. As his vision adjusted, his senses were affronted by a strange burning smell and a stinging smoke that filled the room, slowly exiting the apartment down the wide open front door. He could see a hand, Dadi’s hand, hanging lifeless and charred as the strangers were trying to take her away. Before he could yell or say anything, someone or something slammed the door and he felt blinded.

Abbuji fell back into the darkness. Cold water was filling up in his mouth. The farthest tips of his limbs felt wet and numbed by the coldness. He instinctively struggled, throwing his arms up towards the surface, trying to scratch and grab his way up. He couldn’t say which was up. Everything around him was cold and the air had turned into a viscous soup. He could make out a faint glimmer behind him. He turned and pushed up toward the light. His clothes felt heavy and he was tired. He wants to escape but everything was so heavy. He struggled up towards the light and, breaking the surface, he realized he was back in the pool.

## Chapter 6

Even though I would not remember it, after I was born I would look at the black vertical scars on Dadi's forearm lined up like those strikes used for counting prison sentences. I would stare at them for hours as a baby in Dadi's arms noticing the contrast between the brown of her skin and the black burns from that night that no one ever talked about.

For Dadi, that was the turning point. She was determined now more than ever to see this challenge through. She made up her mind in the few weeks she spent at the hospital. She had suffered a few first degrees, smoke inhalation and second-degree burns to her forearm. It was a warm day in the burn ward of the Suhrawardy Hospital. There was no AC and the discomfort of the warm day added to the urgency that she make a decision. The warmth of the day exacerbated the burns that itched with a ferocious intensity. She turned her mind away from the pain towards and contemplated the options that were available to her. The first was to run away. That further divulged into two options to run away alone or with Abbuji. She could have run away alone but, the responsibility for the life she had borne made her quickly dismiss the thought. She could run away with Abbuji, but then she thought what she would do for money. She was young, her family wasn't well-off and she didn't yet know Dhaka that well to survive all alone with a child. She also feared the repercussions from Dada. She decided against running away. Then she turned her mind towards the options of staying. If she had to stay, she knew that things could not continue the same way. Experience had taught her that it was ineffective to turn a blind eye and feed into her hopelessness; all it did was caused her pain. She knew if she was going to survive in this cursed family she would have to fight. She chose to hatch up a set of principles that would shape all the subsequent characters in this story even me. She etched them deep in her memory.

She would not allow her children to ever touch alcohol. She would tell them everything – they needed to see the truth if they were to be any different. She would fight Dada with all her might, she wouldn't let him go – she was determined to see him free of his addiction. She was slightly pleased with herself and felt a new wave of energy wash away the desolation of her circumstances. This was the beginning of a new life and a new fight. Her fight would be her purpose it would sustain her, she would not let this addiction destroy her right to happiness or at least she made up her mind she wasn't going to let it win. A loud boom of distant thunder seemed to agree with her newfound zeal. Soon, a pitter patter of fast approaching rain washed away the warmth of the day and any semblance of doubts that lingered in Dadi's mind.

## Chapter 7

Abbuji found himself with a nagging sense of déjà-vu, when he came to realize he was in the family swimming pool. He felt as though he had been in such a situation before – he just couldn't remember the specifics of when and why. His head hurt from drinking and he struggled against the viscosity of the pool that reacted more like a liquid soup than water because of the neglect that had led to green algae like substance to run amok. He realized he was there for a purpose but he couldn't remember the specifics. He swam to the edge of the dark pool – all the while struggling mentally and physically with the liquids inside him and outside. He realized he was fully clothed upon reaching the edge and clothing seemed to drag him down into the depths as he hoisted himself to the pool cabana. His head was throbbing and every thought he tried to muster, bludgeoned his head. After a while he found his bearings and beat a retreat to the dusty pool side chair and table. It had not been used in a very long time and the dust caked with the water into slops. Abbuji felt his insides churning and he heaved out the contents of his dinner and the better part of a bottle of vodka. He felt better now that the poison had left his body and his head began clearing. His thought suddenly raced to the scars on Dadi's hand. The thought cascaded towards him wondering if he had come to the derelict family home to kill himself. He brushed the thought aside hastily. After all he told himself,

“I am never to going to be like you, Abbu.”

He rummaged his wet pockets to pull out his wallet and his cellphone. There were a number of notifications that signaled that the real world was waiting for him. He thought nothing of the notifications as was his habit,

“I’ll check them later. I am in no condition to talk to anyone right now. What am I doing here?”

he thought to himself.

For now he had to focus on finding out what he was doing back in the place where his father had drowned in a drunken stupor. He tried to retrace his steps but his mind wore a heavy curtain on his short term memory. His brain kept urging him to think of the past and the day that he found out about his father’s death.

It wasn’t a very long time back that Dada had died; a couple of months had passed. Abbuji thought of the latest interactions between them. He felt a familiar swell in his guts that reached up to his nose. Something in remembering his father made his heart race faster and it felt the same as though he was diving in the pool when he was younger. There was something thrilling in the feeling and it was concocted of a mixture of fear and anger. The swell had now reached its peak and there was no use struggling against the feeling – though he did not want to remember, his brain wanted him to remember the past.

Abbuji remembered the time he had visited Dadi in the burn ward at Suhrawardy Hospital. He remembered the day clearly because he lost his mother that day. I mean, she was still alive but she was no longer the same person. When Abbuji walked into the ward that day with Dada holding his hand he saw that his mother was no longer there.

Abbuji and Dada had been staying at Dada’s sister’s house while Dadi was recovering. They were not welcome in the house given the recent scandal and Dada was going through a trial of his own. At the time Dada was a full blown alcoholic and he had to work overtime in order to make sure that his family did not catch onto his affliction. Of course they did know and Dada did a poor job of alleviating the problem. He did not stop drinking and living in another’s house

meant that his drunken raucousness was not tolerated well. One night after an especially indulgent night of drinking Dada had stumbled into the house at 2am waking everyone. He then proceeded to unload an ungodly amount of insults towards his sister and her husband. It was decided then that Dada needed to go to rehab until it was time for Dadi to return.

The next day Dada was given a bitter choice between going to rehab himself or to be checked in against his will. Trying to salvage whatever little sovereignty he had, he decided the former. For the next two weeks Abbuji was left under the strict and disdainful care of his Aunt. The time allowed for the shock of Dadi's action to dissipate considerably and the gossip and scandal of the desperate faded. It was decided that Dada would be allowed to return two days prior to Dadi's return and stay with his sister. Dada returned and Abbuji and he went to pick up Dadi the next day one day before she was scheduled to be released.

Seeing Dadi in her rejuvenated state was a cause for concern for everyone who visited her. Her family members urged her to leave Dada and move back to Khulna away from Dada and Abbuji – to start her life anew. She politely refused, stating outright that this was her fight and she was going to see it till its bitter end. No amount of pleading, coaxing or yelling would persuade her – it was as though she was possessed by an unknown entity that saw nothing else than the resolution that she was reciting now like a mantra.

“This is my fight and I am going to see this through to the end.”

Her demeanor took on a robotic pallor. The entire process burned away the naïve child in her and from the ashes she was born anew fiercer like the phoenix and this time she was not going let anything burn her. Seeing Abbuji clutching onto Dada hand looking at bandaged woman who sat on the ward bed did very little to ease the ferocity of the fire burning in Dadi. Her eyes were

fixed on Dada and she was singularly focused on something inside him that no one else could see. She saw into the demon that resided in him, she saw beyond Dada as a person. She knew he was not the problem; Dada didn't really even exist for her, her fight was the demon inside him born of the guilt of him losing his mother. She saw only the sleeping demon that kept clutching at the nerves of Dada seducing him into drinking, into numbing the pain of him existing. From that point till Dada's death Dadi's gaze would not wander from the demon, she would not allow it to run her life aground. She would keep a constant watch.

Dada could sense the seismic shift in the dynamic of the relationship between him and his wife. He felt goosebumps down his spine and the hairs on his body stood like thousands of little pins warning him of the ferocious companion who was now focused on him. He was partly scared by Dadi and partly relieved he got what we subconsciously always wanted a guardian who would not abandon him no matter what amount of trouble he brought back home. Dada edged closer to Dadi tugging Abbuji along. Upon reaching the bed, Dadi methodically pulled Abbuji to embrace him all the while her eyes fixed on her target. There was nothing but silence for what seemed like an eon. A lot was translated from the silence. It told Dada all about the new rules of the game – it told him that his demon was discovered. He was naked before Dadi now and she would be his keeper.

Dada nervously, leans forward to give Dadi a kiss. She allows it.

“I am sorry” are the first words out his mouth.

She says nothing.

“I have been to rehab. I am better now, you’ll see. I haven’t drunk anything for two weeks. My love I swear to you I am never going to drink again. I am sorry for everything but I need you.”

Dadi looks away from Dada towards her bandaged arms a reminder of her resolve. The words form in her mouth and she throws them at Dada coldly,

“It’s ok.”

Dada excitedly hugs her, relieved that she had forgiven him.

“You’ll see things are going to be different”

Dadi plainly replied

“I know things will be things will be different.”

## Chapter 8

Abbuji shuddered as he remembered the exchange and he almost let out a chuckle. The words were true and a lie at the same time. It was true that things were different in some ways but some things they stayed the same. Dada would continue to drink, in fact over the years it would get worse. Dadi though kept her word things became very different once she returned home. She was a woman on a mission – though the mission was a hopeless cat and mouse game to chase down Dada and whenever he tried to dive into his alcoholism. But they kept at it and Abbuji was at the center of it.

Dada was a genius and though he was afflicted by addiction he used the liquid courage to fuel his business acumen. According to Abbuji, Dada was a maestro at manipulating his numbness into amassing a quick fortune and carving out an empire. Dada was the quintessential middle generation; he outshone Boro Abba in terms of reviving the failing family businesses and taking them to new heights. Dada's financial success accumulated in the rebuying of the family home. The red brick one family duplex was very similar to its present state when Dada had released the mortgage and bought back the symbol of pride. It was my great grandmother's creation- one of her children. Dada had grown up in the pristine double decked hall, the lush green lawn with mango trees scattering their fruit all over. It was among the veloured sofas and the carpeted bedrooms that Dada spent his formative years. Then one day abruptly after his mother had passed, it was all taken away. Boro Abba had moved the family out from the house – he couldn't stand the stench of his disappointment at failing Boro Amma. Shortly afterwards, Dada was sent to India for schooling and that was where he picked up his penchant for drinking Chivas whiskey.

For Dada reclaiming the house was a one up on his father. He showed the world that he was not a failure as they had deemed him. He showed everyone that he was more than just damaged goods floating like flotsam in the sea of inebriation. He made it so that everyone could not deny his genius and asserted their dependence on him. He made it a point to have a great big pool put in as soon as his finances allowed him. It was the first major addition to be made and one that Dada took particular care to supervise.

Ever since Dadi's reincarnation, a pattern had emerged; Dada would go into a state of mania and overindulge until he would overflow with childlike angst and rage against the ones closest to him, eventually bringing himself or others harm and Dadi would systematically, after enduring till she could no more, put him in rehab. This cycle became a vicious cycle for the family and it dominated their entire lives like seasons. The season of drunkenly chaos and the season of solemn peace marred with an absent father. Abbuji thrived on the periods of months that his father was not present.

His memory sped along the cycles of Dada in rehab and out of rehab and he remembered all the times he tried to play peacemaker between his obstinate mother and his addicted father.

"Please Ammu, let's leave. You don't have to do this anymore. I am older now and we can manage" Abbuji would plead. But to no avail. Dadi was stuck in her mantra, she would not back down. Abbuji thought it ridiculous why she stayed and endured the mental and physical abuse. It was beyond anything he could ever fathom, he was not in her position, and he never would. I think Abbuji never understood what being a woman meant. That there were very few options for her and she chose to defy the world cast for her in the only way that she could imagine. She chose to endure. In this way the fact that Dada and Dadi managed to survive and keep their

marriage intact over 3 decades was nothing short of a miraculous victory – a testament to the sheer willpower that Dadi had.

The house was a reminder of his complicated past. It was the battleground in the silent war between Dada's demon and Dadi, Abbuji was collateral. His mind narrowed to an especially vicious one. He saw himself wake in the middle of the night shivering in the AC cooled room he shared with his four year old brother. He wasn't shivering due to the coldness of the room, but of the string of loud indistinct yelling outside. It was nothing out of the ordinary and of little consequence in his veteran experience. His brother was sound asleep. Abbuji felt bad for his brother who had grown up in the midst of this tumult and to him it was normal. Abbuji feared Chacchu Bhaiya would never understand what a real family is. The otherwise dark room was dimly lit by the bright light outside phasing through the curtains. The yelling and the light gave the impression that one side of the room was day and the other night. The hired help stood near the curtain trying to peek into the hall where the clamor was taking place. Abbuji tried to fall back asleep but he couldn't. He inched towards the curtain and the nanny. As he reached the curtain she replied in a hushed Rangpuri dialect,

“Something is going on outside, go and help your mother, they will kill each other today.”

The words shocked Abbuji, he knew there was no truth in the words but his fragile mind could not help but be alarmed. He was scared for his mother.

“You are lying” he bravely told the help.

Turning towards the curtain he reached out to grab a glimpse. Just then a SMASH!! of glass shattering startled him. He instinctively ran out towards the source. He reached the balustrade on

the second floor of the double height hall. He saw his mother and father downstairs struggling against one another. The shattered carcass of a porcelain bird lay dangerously close to their bare feet. Dada held Dadi's hand trying to force her back. Dadi acted like a feral being intent on scratching the face off Dada. A heavy SMACK!! fell so hard on Dadi's cheek that Abbuji felt as though he had been hit. Dadi reeled back from the hit, clutching her cheek she ran towards the kitchen. Abbuji knew this did not bode well. He ran downstairs to intercept the couple. By this time Dadi had run back holding a *boti* in her hand, she had lost her restraint. She charged towards Dada aiming to plunge the instrument deep into him. Dada charged forward swiftly like cavalry and grabbed Dadi's hands stopping her in her tracks. As they struggled Abbuji ran up getting in between them.

"Please stop. Please. I am begging you Ammu, Abbu please."

His words fell to the floor like the shattered pieces of porcelain. They were in battle mode. Nothing pierced their hatred for each other. Abbuji fought to grab the flat end of the *boti* and he didn't know how – even looking back how he managed to wrest it from their hands but he did. Having lost her weapon Dadi sprinted up the stairs in pursuit. At the bottom of the stairs she grabbed a great wooden statuette of a fat laughing Buddha and chucked it at Dada. The hulking divinity struck him square on the knee. OWWW Dada screamed as he winced from the pain. His knee buckled and started to bleed giving Dadi enough time to run up to Abbuji and Chachu Bhaiya's room. Abbuji took the time to hide the *boti* underneath a couch and ran up to join his mother. Dadi locked the door behind him and turned on the lights. The adrenaline in the room was palpable and the sleeping Chachu Bhaiya awoke annoyed at the disturbance. A few moments later Dada came up THUD! THUD! THUD! he slammed his fists on the door.

“Opennn the FUCKING DDooor, right now. How dare you hurt me” he thundered.

Dadi was regaining back her senses and she knew there was no point in talking to the demon. She grabbed Abbuji and Chachu Bhaiya and beckoned them to go into the toilet. The slamming against the door intensified and it seemed as though the mahogany door would give way any second. It was the only thing that stood between them. It held steady against the onslaught on words and fists and various showpieces hurled at it. Dada was no longer there, the demon inside him took the reins tonight. He punched the glass window in his frustration the pieces of which peppered the floor of the room inside. The demon started to bleed from the vandal act. He was desperate to come inside, ripping the curtains down he bled on the broken window frame. The dark, viscous blood splattered all over the floor as he tried to extend his arm inside. This prompted Dadi and the children to retreat to the bathroom adding another stalwart guardian of a mahogany door between them. Dadi huddled them close to her. Abbuji could only feel the warmth of his mother like a fire- it was stifling. He felt as though it would burn him. Warm slurry slowly crept down Abbuji's hand. He looked to find Dadi's blood bleeding from where the *boti* grazed her shoulder trickle down in a gooey stream across connecting Abbuji and Dadi. It was the first time Abbuji had seen Dadi's blood, it was hot like the rest of Dadi's body and a bright crimson. He focused on the red stream as it flowed over his hand. It was the first time he had seen Dadi's blood it seemed unreal to him, it was the first time he saw Dada's blood. They were so different he thought. The more he thought of the blood the more his vision reddened. All he could see was the blood bright and warm, cold and dark till he felt himself drowning in the liquid. He was struggling to breathe and the heat from his body was fast disappearing. His mother and brother were no longer next to him. The redness of the blood was going away his vision was clearing and he saw darkness around him. He was cold and the water above him like a

halo. He swam up towards the halo trying to breathe taking in massive gulps of soupy earthy water. He broke up to the surface and swam towards the edge of the family pool.

## Chapter 9

This time Abbuji came around to his situation faster. He realized he was back in the algae filled pool. His head still hurt from downing the vodka bottle. He swam as hard as he could towards the edge and propped himself up on the cabana. The throbbing in his head was a lot more manageable this time around. He knew he had been in this place before. He thought about why he was at the dusty family home. It had been years since he had been there not since the last time he had seen Dada. The house had decayed fast under the neglect of the family moving out. He thought of the lost splendor of the house. He remembered Dada sipping his whiskey like a statue while the rest of the family swam in the ornate stone decked swimming pool. His mind wandered to the golden whiskey creaking as the ice cubes melted. The image made him feel sick. He tried to contain the liquid bubbling inside to no avail. His body and mind was violently rejecting the poison inside him. It felt as though he hurled his insides out. The ordeal was over in a couple of seconds and nothing more than the silver of the vodka lay on the floor near his feet. He felt better once the liquid had left his body. His head still hurt but his body felt light as though he had been cleansed.

He slumped back on the dusty pool chair and laid the contents of his pockets on the table beside him. He picked up the cellphone; it lit up displaying a huge number of notifications. They blared green, white and blue reflecting on his face. He knew it was important that he respond to them but he waited a little. He felt that the swimming pool was not done with him.

He looked out to the green mossy swimming pool that glowed reflecting the dim moonlight. He saw a dark grey wisp materialize in the middle of the pool. The gray mass of a plasma

consistency took on the shape of late Dada. Dada was floating on pool his eyes vacantly staring at the sky. Abbuji crept closer to him. The clothes on his body wet with the weight of the water sloshed with every step. Dada lay on his back fully clothed in his crumpled white *punjabi*. Upon reaching the edge of the pool, Abbuji intently stared at the ghost of his father. Dada's face was oddly at peace, a small sliver of a contented smile was painted on his face. Abbuji felt rage at the scene and he thought of the demon inside his father. He could not believe that this man who had caused him so much suffering was smiling. The ghost would not leave his mind and Abbuji attacked the smoothness of the apparition by yelling at it,

“What are you so HAPPY about?”

Seeing no difference in the apparition Abbuji proceeded to try and disturb the tranquil liquid mirror by smacking the water with his hands. He thought the disturbance in the water would ripple through to the apparition.

“Don't you have anything to say? How can you be so happy with all the shit you have left behind?”

Abbuji was getting frustrated. His frustration manifested into involuntary tears. He let some drop into the swimming pool. The ripples on the water started to settle down. The apparition too slowly started to disappear. Abbuji slunk down on the floor. He bawled out his heart. After a few minutes, he realized he felt better, his head got clearer as the last drops of the cold salty liquid left his body. He thought of how the groundskeeper had found his father dead in the pool. The doctors said he had suffered from a heart attack. He had been of ill health for a long time mostly due to the substance abuse. Dada was only fifty-five when he passed away. He had no one around him because he had managed to alienate most of his family, only Dadi stuck on beside

him like she had resolved. In the end though, Dada was alone dying in the swimming pool he was so fond of.

The musical melody of his cellphone broke the silence. Abbuji picked himself up from the floor and walked towards the ringing phone.

“Hello...”

“I understand I am on the way.”

Abbuji looked back at the pool it had lost its glow as clouds above engulfed the moon. Abbuji need to leave the weight of his mixed feelings about Dada behind. The call had informed him that I was on the way and he needed to get to the hospital as soon as possible. He resolved himself on letting go of the anger he felt towards Dada. It was weighing down on him. He also resolved to never drink no matter how hard things got. It would make him no different and the cycle of poison inflicted pain needed to stop. He grabbed his belongings muttering to himself,

“I forgive you Abbu but, I am never going to be like you.”

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