

Babu

‘What happens when we die?’ I asked my *babu* (grandfather) over dinner one night, with all the sincere curiosity of a 9-year-old. I remember feeling proud of my formulation. I could sense that I had touched upon something real in the world, something with weight.

‘*Precoshus*’. That’s what my mother called me. She looked concerned that her young boy had been pondering mortality. ‘Is everything okay at school?’ she asked, nervously. I ignored her and stared expectantly at my grandfather, who didn’t think of me as a mere child. In fact, he didn’t think of anybody as *mere*.

He approached this question, as he did my countless others, with care. An otherwise animated man, he began to chew his food slowly, the very act of chewing representing an image of thought in the midst of gradual formation. Lowering his fork, he said, ‘I am not sure, but I think we simply continue living, only now within other people. We relocate from our own selves to other selves. In a way then, I suppose it’s not so different from when we are alive.’

I had no idea what he was on about. *What nonsense, how can anyone live in other people? Surely that can’t be right*, I thought to myself. But I got distracted by something my sister said and didn’t press him further. Later that night, I jotted down and memorized what he had said at dinner, in the hope of repeating it at school to sound intelligent.

I was 18 when cancer claimed babu. Naturally, the world stopped making sense, given the person I had turned to with all my curiosities was now gone. But where to?

I grew up in a joint household. My parents and grandparents raised my sister and me together. My earliest memories are of sitting in our veranda and watching babu read the newspaper or ring up one of his many brothers. ‘Sachin looked nervous while batting yesterday,’ he declared without so much as a hello, picking up where they had left off when they last spoke. Distance had nothing on fraternal love. These conversations lasted hours, punctuated only by uproarious laughter.

I still hear it sometimes.

Babu wrote hundreds of letters to his friends and family, including those of us he lived with. His poor handwriting sometimes made it difficult to decipher his English sentences interspersed with Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi phrases. He would often write to strangers too, like his favourite authors – who I can now appreciate one barely thinks of as strangers – and would be delighted if they ever wrote back.

For each family member, he left behind folders full of letters, clippings, doodles, and knick-knacks pertaining or belonging to them. Perhaps he believed that people not only lived in other people but also in other things. My grandmother has not yet found the strength to revisit the letters he wrote her over the years. When I ask her about them, she just shrugs. Maybe courage has nothing to do with it. Maybe since they were each composed of the very fabric of the other, she sees no need to talk to him through words. Afterall, what sense does it make to read letters addressed to oneself?

Watching sport was another of babu’s obsessions. He would be glued to the television on match days with a glass of whisky in his hand. Each time Federer walloped the ball for a backhand

winner, he would stand and applaud at the screen, ice cubes clinking against the base of his favourite crystal glass. 'He thinks they can hear him,' quipped my grandmother. Evidently for babu, distance had nothing on *any* form of love.

A consummate reader, he meticulously made lists of the books he read, writing a line or two about how each book had made him feel. For all his encouragement of his children's and grandchildren's intellectual cultivation – 'There is nothing more important than education,' he often said – it was emotion that guided his encounters with the world.

He lived romantically. He once told me that the smell of rain on dry earth and the sound of young lovers laughing together at a café filled him with deep joy. I didn't ask why. Sometimes the trivial feels too profound for words.

Food could stir his spirit. He especially loved all kinds of fruit. He was a particularly fast eater who wouldn't pause to breathe while eating. I hadn't realised that I had inherited this from him until, over dinner one night, a friend joked that I had 'huffed' my food.

Each night before retiring, he would change into his nightclothes and dab some Boroline on his face. I would wish him goodnight and sit by his bed for a few extra minutes to take in his smell. I cannot describe it. Less because of our limited collective vocabulary for describing scents, and more because of the sheer singularity of the experience. Which dictionary could possibly have a word for 'the fragrance of a jovial old man with soft skin and fluffy white hair, who adores his family, his books, his sport, and his fruit, who laughs with all his heart, and loves with all his soul'?

I still remember how he smelled at the hospital. I cannot describe it. Then again, which dictionary could possibly describe the odour of grief?

Perhaps this collection of things about babu is not simply an assortment of memories, but *beings*. Something more than testimony or remembrance. More than the 'dead who live in our heads.' Maybe this is what babu had in mind when he thought of death as life relocated in others. A kind of haunting that reveals itself only in less-than-conscious occurrences. In the interstices of the trivial and the profound.

A sneeze, a smell, a sound, a gesture, or an impulse.

The impulse to write this as a way of stretching towards him, as he does towards us through his letters.

The urge to question, even when – especially when – the answers may not satisfy.

'What happened when you died, babu?' I ask him directly this time, nine years after he left, eighteen since I first posed the question to him.

'I didn't. I just live elsewhere now,' he might have replied.