

Baba

*Udbhav Agarwal**

for Varda and Shubhangi, who couldn't be there..

My grandfather was seventy-one when he passed away. I couldn't stand him when he was alive. I always thought he disliked me. That I lacked something, that I was too fat for him, too un-boyish for him. Once, I was wearing deep red Crocs and he asked me why I was such a girl. I couldn't answer him then. The ICU in Allahabad didn't have the necessary equipment for his treatment. My father and tauji flew him to Max Hospital in Delhi. I stayed back in Allahabad. Going to Delhi would mean something was seriously wrong. Something was seriously wrong. I took a train there eventually. They made me wait for three hours before I could meet him. I was with my cousins, I was having fun. When they called my name and I entered the ICU, I touched my grandfather's hand. He looked weak from treatment, his skin seemed gauzed around his skull. It was the touch that did it. I had cried before, but this crying was something new altogether. Never had tears leapt so easily out of my eyes, and his eyes. He, who never cried in front of anyone. He who talked about trophies that were nowhere to be found, of this one time when he catapulted Mr. Mohapatra's Doberman by the tail across the lawn. He, who hated me all these years. He was crying profusely. Intimately. When I carried his dead body from our house to the shamshan ghat, chanting ram nam saatya hai, ram naam satya hai, I gave in. My father told my older brother Hemang, do not cry.

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The disgusting Mr. Tiwari whispered the same thing into my ears. But I couldn't help myself. With every chant, I cried more as I tried to cry a little less. A few hours ago, when the wife of my housemaster called me to her house and told me that I should talk to my father, that my grandfather passed away, I took a step back. I was wearing my boarding school uniform. There was a force there, something pushed me. I called my father and he said, he said: *baba nahi rahe*. His voice sounded different, as if echoing from another depth. As if a life depended on it. My tauji told me what is to be done next: *Abhishek chacha's brother will come and get you in two hours, the antim sanskaar is tomorrow*. I struggled with the obviousness of this demand. *But I can't*, I told him. I said *give me one day, just one day, and I'll wrap up everything, all my assignments, all my conversations, and come back indefinitely*. One day. Then he said this: *beta life mein isse zyaada zaroori koi kaam nahi hai*. No task is worthier of life than this. *Kya?* I questioned back. I thought I was doing the most important thing in my life. Finishing some assignments, working on my resume, trying to get into college. He said it once more: *life mein isse zyaada zaroori koi kaam nahi hai*. When I reached home the next day, my grandfather was laying in the middle of the ground floor of the house. He was covered in white cloth, two cotton buds in his nostrils. Someone had closed his eyes. I touched his feet, and then we carried him out of the house. Our uncles helped us in lifting the load.

A body takes six hours to melt. As we sat on the banks of Ganga, waiting for baba's body to melt into air- black fumes, black heat- my father recounted his last days in terrible detail. Our hands were greased with ghee and sandalwood. On the inside of my palm, I could feel the hardness of baba's face. I had managed to rub it against his forehead, just before my tauji had lit the pyre- this time, for always. I can sense this hardness even now. When my grandfather heard that he had just a few hours left for himself, he insisted that we take him back to his city. *Mujhe Prayag le chalo*. The doctors had advised against this journey, but they had not resisted. Maybe, even for them, the request wasn't unusual. The rest of the family took the train back to Allahabad that evening. My father flew with baba the next day. When they reached Allahabad, my baba asked to be driven next to sangam. He was. And then he asked to return to his home. He had made his flight. Once home, he visited the temple in the house. He touched the feet of the photographs of his father and mother that hung by the entrance. And then he went quiet as he lay in his bed. My family sang bhajans

next to him. He died, my father told me, taking the name of ram. When the body finished burning, the four of us went looking for any remaining bones. We collected them in an earthen pot. Small toes. Rugged remains of the pelvis. Humerus. After collecting the bones- coal hot- we scooped the remains of the grave in buckets and deposited them into the river. It took each of us six rounds to dissolve the remains. When the pyre disappeared, we congregated next to where my grandfather had been. The punda who was heading the procedures drew a few numbers on the ground and chanted some shlokas. He said that the essence of our grandfather was to be deposited from where it had emerged. From the river water and the earth. As the day came to an end, we set out on a boat to go to the middle of the river. There, from what felt like the epicenter between life and death, my tauji took the earthen pot and let the bones of my grandfather dissolve in the river water.

In that moment, I remember feeling deeply relaxed- as if the insignificance of our time here was suddenly brought to bear. I remember feeling satisfied- as if we had done something cosmological.

