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Leaving home? Don't forget to pack your trees

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when grief weights you down like your own flesh
only more of it, an obesity of grief,
you think, *How can a body withstand this*?
Ellen Bass, The Thing Is (2017)

There is an *imli* tree that has been standing guard to my home for twenty some years now. When I first laid eyes on her, she was taller than everything else in view. Over the years, changing surroundings have tried really hard to outflank her, but the addition of even taller buildings and other concretes… a school, a sprawling mansion owned by a renowned ophthalmologist, and my gated colony…has not really diminished her. Ironically, she seems taller than ever now, a proud *skein of green* holding all surrounding *strays of grey* in place. Given that the average lives of *imlis* is at least two hundred years, I'd say she's rounding up her first fifty. Or seventy maybe? It's hard to know whether the age of trees should be marked by how many years they've been around, or how many they have left. This is true for us humans too, the unresolved ethics of measuring life by death. As a temporary resolution, let me say that she was there before the bricks and mortar of my housing colony were. She probably oversaw the construction work; watching, as men in hard hats looked at the plot of soft green before them and drew up architectural plans. She probably smiled to herself, musing about the modern human ability to look at open spaces and instinctively think of ways to close them up- with walls, rooms, doors and gated colonies. Maybe trees and humans are not so similar after all…

The sprawling *imli* tree was also witness to a young, tentative couple that packed up their life- which comprised of two trunks of clothes (neatly separated by the woman into winter and summer seasons, only to be jumbled up by the man who didn't believe in such sorting), bank accounts which they had traded in as down-payments for their new home, and and a brick red office file filled with love letters and salary payslips, in equal measure. They also had two daughters – seven and nine – who were unaware of it then, but would later come to see how they had been the catalyst for this young, hard-working couple to move away from their joint family in the old rustic part of the town, to enable a more modern life for their girls, in the school district. The nineties in semi-urban India were a time where nostalgia wasn't the strongest performing currency, and my parents, the young couple, were but one of many, trying to grow up fast enough to raise their own children, while still meandering changing relationships with their own parents and

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reluctantly adjusting to being the kind of adults that did not go to other adults when things got hard.

My mother and one important half of the couple had transitioned from being a dutiful MBA student to being a wife-daughter in law-mother-working professional and other intangible hyphenations in what must have felt like the blink of an eye, and was still coming to terms with her uncharacteristically rebellious decision to get married without her parents' blessings. For my father, the other half, an MBA itself had signalled a rebellion against social expectations of joining the family busines and settling down, and he was still balancing his deep love for independence with a new, and even greater love that demanded from him a specific brand of responsibility which he had not yet come to terms with. Their love letters successfully hid their fears in professions of love and freshly minted terms of endearment, and as far as I can remember, they played each hand they were dealt with love.

The move was especially difficult for my father, having grown up and around an extremely interconnected family that lived under one roof, which seemed to magically expand itself as more members joined in, much like a tree that retained the past in its bark and welcomed the future with new leaves. Of course, he now had a beautiful new family and a shiny newly built flat, and the promise of all the new memories they were yet to make. He must have known however, that this new concrete, modern roof would not be as malleable as the previous one and life would have to be; for the foreseeable future, about fitting in, rather than branching out. Maybe that's why, he cried in his mother's arms when she was leaving that first night…maybe the housewarming was simultaneously a cold ending of his childhood. When flooded by post-facto empathy for their struggles, I like to believe that the *imli* tree sheltered my parents, not just from the molten scorch of mid-April in the Gangetic plains, but also from the equally sweltering heat of grief that comes from leaving behind the familiar, in full knowledge that the magically expanding roof would not stretch out wide enough to overcome the reality of leaving. I find myself hoping that the *imli* tree watched over them; her lowest hanging branches brushing the top of their tiny but proud white hatchback, bought under a five year loan, each time they drove it out of the garage. She probably caressed their young hearts and filled them up with sweet, moist smells of her fruit, encouraging them towards a future they had no way of anticipating.

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Between 2020 and 2021, I lost a total of five people who I knew personally, two of them intimately, one of whom was my only remaining grandfather. Never before have I felt the pressure to qualify my grief, pack it neatly into containers, marked with affiliation and arranged by proximity, so that it can find a place on the shelves of the library of collective grief, the invisible but undeniable monument built in the COVID world. I also lost more people, more lives, which did not find appropriate containers, for reasons of either being claimed by someone else with more suitable vessels than I could have arranged for them, or simply slipping through my hands because there was already an "obesity of grief" I was documenting, labelling and shelving constantly. While I keep hoping that the former reason is the real one, the rivers of grief still

coursing through my bones and body, would defy the absolution I am trying to find in it. Maybe there just aren't enough shelves, ones within my reach anyway…

I was reaching for the top shelf of my kitchen cabinets, when my grandfather died. Or at least when news of his passing in India, reached me in the UK. It was over a phone call, as I was scoring chicken thighs and soaking dried tamarind pulp in warm water to cook myself a curry, that my mother spoke – clearly and regrettably – about my grandfather's passing. It has always confounded me how the delivery of all difficult news in the family falls squarely on my mother's shoulders. She does it so well: a crack in her voice that enjoins her to the defeat contained in the message and the timbre of her voice offering a branch to hold on to as the news seeks to drown the listener, all while maintaining the kind of composure needed so that the finality of the news cannot be questioned. I wanted to raise doubts and concerns; make her reconsider, but her composure made it impossible. How did she get so good at it… how does anyone get good at speaking out and confirming the end of a life? Devastatingly true as it might be, in that moment of realising that I would never see my grandfather again, the only things I was grateful for was my mother's self-assured tone and the equally confident unspooling of the tamarind in a shallow pool of its own warm, brown liquid, oblivious to the fact that the curry it was coming undone for, would not come for it tonight. As I also came undone, in my kitchen, the only part of my new world that still smelt and felt like home, I wanted to ask my mother how my father-her husband-my grandfather's oldest son was doing; how he was dealing with the loss of my grandfather-his father-his only alive parent. But how does one do that – inquire about the loss of hyphenated existences and the quantum shattering they leave in their wake. In the absence of the right words, I was also grateful for such chaotic and coexisting ownership-claims of relations, which allowed me to claim my grief as mine, while reminding me how it is also not *just* mine. How could it be, with all the hyphens grammar just couldn't cope. Neither could I. Nor could the unrelentingly rehydrating *imli*.

Grief, at its simplest, is a beckoning to come undone. At its most, however, grief is a burning of the heart. What entails this burning, how long does it last, and what does it leave in its wake? Canonically, we tend to make peace with the severing of the self that comes with distancing ourselves from home, by believing that distance makes the heart grow fonder. What distance does to grief however, is a rupture so internal, so immediate, that it is impossible to "go on". How does one, traverse a loss that never quite happened where we are but was communicated because technology makes it possible to transmit experiences we cannot and probably ought not to have? While I was no stranger to grief that comes from losing a loved one, doing so from across a few time-zones, without the safety of ritual and community that usually surrounds such grieving back home, felt like having to take appear for an exam for a module I hadn't signed up for. The irony of returning to an academic metaphor to make sense of and grapple with my heartbreak is not lost on me, but every unfurling is also a turning into one's self, and the only way I could exist with grief that I could not experience in real time, was to return to the bits and pieces of my identity that did not follow Scottish time or temperature.

I could not even fully comprehend the timeline of my grandfather's passing, because there was a four and half hour lag between every second of his dying and my living (thankfully he didn't pass

away in the winters which would have added another hour to an already unbearable lag). I struggled to make sense of those hours, and tried to think about how far I had come, to have spent four and a half hours living without knowing that somewhere, my grandfather was dying. The appeal to the laws of physics and maths to understand how time-zones work and how we exist comfortable in the knowledge that our loved ones are existing before or after us, frustrated me, and left me feeling powerless. Grief came not in waves as promised, but in jolts; pushing me into my Scottish present where my grandfather had never existed, while ricocheting me into my Indian past, where I had not been able to exist. Struggling to find a metaphor in nature for the severing of an old substantial bough from my family tree, how was I to substitute the enveloping arms of the wide-spreading crowns of the leguminous *imli*, with the Scottish conifer pine; its arms drawn tightly behind its back making it tall but also withdrawn?

Split right down the middle, like the *imli's* pinnate leaf, each half mirroring and opposing the other, I found it difficult to occupy my own body which had not witnessed this close familial loss but was tasked with remembering it. The burning was intense and seemed determined to leave in its wake a shadow of someone I knew to be myself, but not my whole self. How could I be whole, when COVID denied me the claim to exclusivity of my pain by offering me daily reminder in statistics, phone calls and governmental insensitivities, that my loss was in no way unique, and distance denied me the balm of community where healing from death occurs through reiterations and recitals of a life well lived? Anguish and anxiety outlined my existence as I felt my heart drop each time my phone rang with an annihilating prospect amidst the celebration that the onset of summer and easing of COVID restrictions brought about in the UK. Government reports showed their belated triumph and Indian defeat in the same breadth, as if the only way to feel better about the over hundred thousand lives lost here was to compare it to the millions of lives being lost in another, distant place. I marvelled at how the distance which exacerbated and made acute my own loss, making it impossible for me to grieve, could somehow be engineered into ameliorating the loss of others who felt respite about being away from India. More importantly, I didn't know how to feel about that; should there be an ethics of grief: apologies for how we choose to repair what the world has caused to break within us? I knew somewhere, my parents along with others from my family, were sipping their morning tea and smiling wistfully when one of them reminded the others of my grandfather's child-like particularity about food, his generally skeptical nature which made it impossible for him to trust even his own children with his finances and made for some funny stories, and his quirky side which was always just two glasses of moderately priced whiskey away. Strangely enough, the knowledge that his passing was doing more than sitting on the COVID library shelf, by living through stories told by those he was succeeded by, involved a kind of emotional splintering which also made our grief coherent. Who was I then, to deny that splintering to others?

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There are several similarities between my hometown of Allahabad, and the quaint little Scottish town of St. Andrews where I now live. They're both old, historical, and happily trapped in a simpler, softer time, even though the modern city life engulfs them from all sides. There are however, no *imli* trees in Scotland. There are majestic pines and birches, but the simple, non-

showy, sweet-savoury pods of the *imli* could not follow me here. Nor could the home that my now not-so-young parents built around me. At twenty-eight, living by myself, working towards a doctorate and trying to build some kind of home in an alien land, I'm still attempting to be that kind of adult: the kind who doesn't search for other adults when things get rough, and am often in audible awe of how my parents did it. How do they continue to endure a world where their fathers are not a phone call away, when that confidence is what gets me through the darker, lightless days in this much colder part of the world.

I like to believe the *imli* tree continues to watch over my parents as they apprehend the loss of my grandfather and that she held his spirit before it reached for the heavens, extending to them the grace of having a loved one linger on for some extra borrowed moments, even after their earthly time has run out. The *imli* tree bears its flowers and pods in peak spring, but its life-giving insistence exceeds its fruit-bearing capacity. The insistence on life in the face of death, the choice to measure life by (re)living, and the remoulding of grief from something that takes loved ones away to something that allows us to hold them, is what makes it possible, even imperative, to live and love. The grieving that circulates among and refuses to desert us, becomes a metaphor for the fight that our loved ones put up, to remain alive and go on living within us, from beyond the grave. I have unresolved questions about how in times of grief, distance does not always bring with it the possibility of *distancing*. How time zones do not factor in felt experiences which slip through, splinter and reattach themselves as shards that pierce us. How the experience of unfamiliar grief is compounded by the absence of familiar/familial surroundings…But right now, I wish to return to the woven tapestry of the *imli* tree that has been standing guard to my home, and to the dreams, hopes and disappointments of the young couple that once left family, for family.

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The airline's website had said nothing about how to pack a tree, so I didn't. Maybe I should've insisted. Would it have worked? I was already carrying more than their *baggage allowance*...surely they would've noticed if there were bright green, alternately arranged, tart and sweet smelling *imli* leaves peeping out of my suitcases. Maybe if they were tucked away…if I had wrapped them in cellophane…but how...There's a curry that needs me now.

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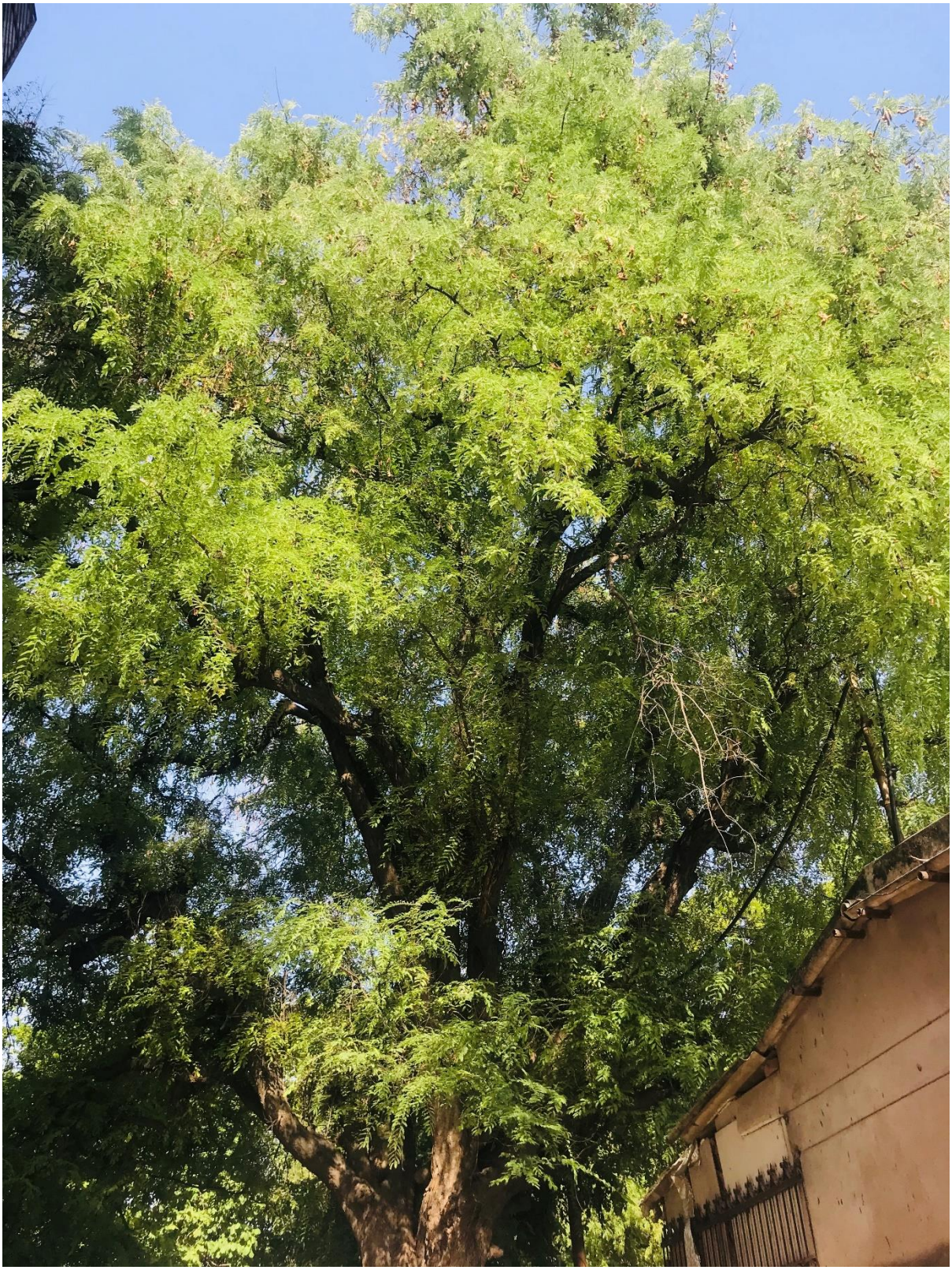

Picture by Shambhawi Tripathi