

On the Ghats of Ganges in Banaras

I don't know the meaning of shlokas, but my mouth follows the chants of the nameless priests, my hands folded, my eyes open; my feet holding their ground on the slippery stairs of the temple. I follow the hurried footsteps of dhoti-clad saints walking past dim earthen lamps, my forehead smeared with vermilion, my fingers soaked in sandalwood scent.

I've been here before, on the Ghats of Ganges in Banaras, I've done this before. Four days after my father's demise, being the only son and child, I've shaved my head and looked at the river and the temples around it, the pool of offerings swimming in the rocking water, the dispersed ashes returning to earth. I've seen the bodies soaked and bent by fire, water and rituals. I've felt the steady hand of the head priest over mine, guiding me to invoke Gods in his deep and old voice. I've writhed in my hotel room, holding the sheets and finally sleeping through a dreamless night.

For days, following his death, I've stayed in his study like a ghost googling after life. I've meandered through his bedroom several times a day, slept on his bed, and spent hours dismantling his closet, collecting his books and clothes, the sheer volume of it smelling old and sweet and odd. I've stood before the bejeweled Gods he worshiped daily, tried to feel the softness of his presence inside me.

There's nothing new. Pilgrims and deities, half-clad priests with long threads across their bellies, the universe in glimpses of light on the ripples of Ganges. After finishing my prayer, I sit barefoot, where the stairs begin, close to the Ghats. My father's body was adorned with flowers, a pair of sandals by his side and a pillow underneath his head, a silence that sheltered him; noise still surrounds me. I feed rice to crows; I sprinkle flour around the ant mounds. And just for a moment I become one with the soft waves, singing like the whispering voice of an old affection, taut like a bond with a newborn.

I drive out of Banaras and visit my college friend. He lives in a luxurious two-story home with his parents, wife, and kids. He doesn't say "I love you" to his wife the way most of the men from our generation do and I am stirred up with thoughts of my family that aren't new. The ways of my parents: how

they never shut their bedroom doors at night, how my mother used to fall asleep sitting in a corner of my study so I didn't feel alone and scared in the middle of the night, how after his prayers, my father touched my forehead to mark it with a tika, a dot of ashes as a blessing for the day. How he never said "I love you" and how I never questioned it.

My wife and children are in another town because Banaras is too loud and morbid for them. The city speaks a language they don't wish to hear. But someday they'll come here and feel the rapture and abundance of this place, the mysteries of body and soul unfolding amidst chants and ringing bells. In a couple of hours I'll go back and as my twins come running towards me, drunk with freedom, I'll hug them and inhale the applesauce and juice stains on their shirts. And my grief will reduce to a dusty lump of the departed, held by the breathing cells of my own.

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