

## LONGING

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Aditi had got transferred to this Godforsaken place all of fifteen days ago. Luckily, she had not had to worry long for living quarters. A kind-hearted person, who would be one of her colleagues in the college she had been transferred to, had found her cell phone number from the Principal and had called her up, with information about a place on rent: ‘It’s not a very posh kind of place, you know,’ he had crackled over the telephone, ‘but it’s a place all the same. You can always look for a better place later, to shift over to if you want to’.

Aditi thanked him profusely, feeling very lucky to have such caring colleagues in a strange place. She was more or less through with her packing. She did not really have much to lug around as she was one of those people who could easily make do with very little. Her sparse lot of furniture—being a small gamut of a wrought iron bed and its mattress, one little writing table that doubled up each night as a dining table, one quaint little cherry red cupboard for clothes and a few pots and plates—had already been sent on ahead in soddy old boxes. All she had to do was to carry her hand luggage and of course, her most precious possession—her daughter—little two-and-a-half year old Mishti.

Aditi’s train ran terribly late that day. Troubles *did* have the exasperating habit of turning up in all the wrong times like stupid bad pennies. As the train pulled into the station sluggishly and jolted to a halt with a loud and tired sigh, Aditi gathered Mishti in her arms and slid the handle of her briefcase out to roll it out of the train. She panicked a little as she had trouble negotiating Mishti and the heavy suitcase out into the platform which looked a bit too low to jump down to with both, Mishti and suitcase in her hands. She desperately looked around, searching for someone who could at least help Mishti down for her as she lugged the suitcase out. But in the halogen burning above, the station looked absolutely empty of any sign of life. Just then, to Aditi’s frantic terror, the train gave a scream of departure.

A man—quite aged in the yellow overhead light—seemed to materialise out of nowhere like an angel on the platform and without having to be told anything, reached out for Mishti. Almost like acting according to a pre-decided plan, Aditi obediently handed Mishti over into the careful hands waiting below as if it was the most natural thing to do, before hopping out herself just in time as the train began snaking its way out of the place. Aditi looked back at the train with thankful relief, grabbing a moment to gain her breath back.

‘Thank you so much’, she began and turned around gratefully towards the stranger who seemed to be the only other person to have alighted here. But, hey, where was he? She turned to find curly headed little Mishti standing behind her alone, looking at her out of her great dark eyes in bewilderment, wondering what they were doing in a strange place in the dark when her tummy said that they should have been home drinking extra sweet cocoa milk with honey biscuits to munch on.

‘My word, he must have been in a tearing hurry to have disappeared that fast’, Aditi mused as she heaved Mishti into one arm while she wheeled her strolley with the other. ‘*Chalo*’, she told Mishti, seemingly more to reassure herself than Mishti, ‘we’re almost home. Homey-home...with warm food, and a cosy bed and cool water to drink, and ...a good start...’ Aditi secretly wondered how much of what she was telling Mishti would turn out true.

As the two of them came out of the station, Aditi was dismayed that there were no taxis to be got. Only a couple of handpulled rickshaws and one single three-wheeled autorickshaw was all she could see. Being really tired, she voted for the auto.

‘*Jabey?*’ she asked in Bengali wanting to know whether the sleepy looking driver had a mind to take a fare at all.

‘*kothayjetehobey, didi?*’ the driver wanted to know the destination as Aditi pulled out her purse, squinting at its untidy insides, and fished out a crumpled piece of paper and recited the address to the man.

‘*Boshun*’ said the driver, violently pulling up a handle to rev up his vehicle noisily, as Aditi ushered Mishti into its dark insides and squeezed in herself with the suitcase.

It was a full twenty five minutes’ jolting and bumping over disappointingly ill-maintained roads before the auto pulled up before a building. Aditi stepped out, painfully straightening an aching back and looked up at the four-storied building that she was going to call home for at least some time.

What she saw was not at all very heartening. Her heart sank as she took in the peeling plaster and seeping damp patches and small boxy balconies lit dimly with a lamp way too low to light up those twenty odd flats. To add to her misery, a band of dogs somewhere had set up a terrific cacophony of howls and barks punctuated by intermittent yaps that sounded like they were supplied obligingly by a somewhat younger member of the canine community.

Remembering that beggars can’t be choosers, she pulled herself up and paid up the auto driver his fare with a brave smile, and reached out inside to wake a sleeping Mishti up. Her heart leaped to her mouth in consternation as she felt the stinging heat in the child’s body. Mishti had quite a temperature, and Aditi cursed herself for not even realising that until now. As she carefully lifted the sick and tired child out of the auto, she was startled to see the same angelic stranger from the station, walking towards her.

‘You, here?’ she smiled in disbelief at him, wondering all the time how he could have reached home earlier than her. There must obviously be a short cut from the station. ‘I wanted to thank you then but you disappeared in such a jiffy!’

‘Oh I share a very long relationship with this building’ he gently smiled back. In the dim light, Aditi saw his kind face and had a queer gut feeling that this ageing gentleman had probably seen a lot of the rough side of life. His face had a far off look of poignancy about it that Aditi could not define, but it unsettled her all the same making room in her mind for. The Russians could call it a look that reflected *toska*, or the Portugese would probably call it *saudade*... a word that reflects an intolerable ‘feel’ of loss, an indescribable sense of longing... how do you say it in English... a conference in Kolkata where she had talked of words that are untranslatable into English flashed vaguely across her mind.

‘My daughter is running a temperature’ she said worriedly, handing Mishti over to the outstretched arms of the kind-hearted man who seemed to have grown a quiet fondness for the bonny little child. ‘I’m scared out of my wits every time she goes down with fever because her

temperature sends her into terribly dangerous convulsions. I need to give her her medicine right away’.

Together they found out number 11, which was Aditi’s flat. As Aditi opened the door with the key she had collected from the packers-and-movers earlier, she wrinkled up her nose at the musty smell of the interior as she groped about for the switches.

As she hit the right switch, a lone yellow bulb lighted up a room not more than ten feet square, with a horrid peely blue washing on the walls that made the room look even more dismal. Bracing herself for the long bouts of cleaning up she would have to do, Aditi turned to the stranger and produced her smile of bravery once again as she took a still sleeping Mishti from him. ‘This time let me thank you. You’ve been of immense help to me all through the evening.’ ‘Don’t you bother. And please don’t bother to cook tonight. I know you’re tiered out. My wife will be here with your dinner. You just look to the child. *She* needs you right now.’

Aditi watched him disappear slowly into the gloom as he climbed painstakingly down the stairs. As she pushed the door to with her foot and turned around with Mishti sleeping feverishly in her arms, she thankfully noted that the packers and movers had fixed up the bed with the mattress laid on top. She carefully laid Misti down on the unmade bed and crouched on the floor to get her medicine from the suitcase.

She didn’t know when she had dozed off. She had snuggled down beside Mishti, applying cold compresses to her burning little forehead and nestling as close to her as possible. She woke up with a jump as the door to her flat opened with an uncoiled creak and realised that in the flurry to tend to Mishti she had forgotten to bolt the door. She clambered up with her heart beating fast, staring at the opening door, not knowing what to expect. To her immense surprise, a fragile old lady with a covered plate in her hands, balancing a glass of something on top, looked around the door furtively.

‘Aditi?’ she asked cautiously.

‘Oh yes. You must be Mrs....’ Aditi realised that in the to do she had forgotten to ask the kind gentleman his name. How stupid of her, and how rude.

‘Mrs Banerjee. Mrs Parashar Banerjee. But you can call me Mashima...I’m more or less your mother’s age, don’t you think so?’ the white-haired woman smiled in sweet affection at Aditi. Aditi’s heart went out to the elderly lady as she smiled back gratefully: ‘Thank you, Mashima for the dinner. You’re really sweet. I couldn’t possibly have cooked today with none of my cooking things out and my child so sick’.

‘Don’t be silly’ elderly woman said with a wave of her left hand. ‘Here’s a little milk that you can give your child when she wakes up’ she added a tad shyly, eager to change the topic.

Aditi sat down at her little table and gobbled her food with almost uncouth voracity and pleasure, realising how hungry she was. The lady watched her in satisfied contemplation as she ate. Once she had eaten, Aditi worried aloud about how she would manage the next day when she would have to join her duty at her new workplace, with nobody to babysit the sick Misti. ‘The ayah who looks after Mistu will travel here the day after tomorrow.’ Said Aditi, worriedly chatty after the dinner. ‘But I don’t know how to fix up tomorrow. I had thought I’d take Mishtu along with me for the day while I completed the joining formalities tomorrow. But with her fever, I really am at a loss.’

‘Don’t you worry, dear’ said the kind old lady immediately. ‘I’ll look after your Mishtu tomorrow. I’d love to. It’s been ages now that we don’t really

have much to do—me and my husband. Your Mishtu could give us a lease of life for a while!’

Aditi wondered how she would ever repay the kindness of this elderly couple who had almost appeared out of the blue to help her in trouble. She stood up as the lady got up slowly to leave. In a sudden impulse of fondness, spurred partly by the kindness of this frail old person and partly by her loneliness in a strange place, she walked up to her as she neared the door: ‘You are an angel, Mashima’ she said in an almost childish burst of fervent gratitude. The lady stopped short, as if struck, and looked back at her. Aditi was taken aback at the stricken look on her face. She was puzzled. Once more she felt as she had when she had seen Parashar’s face under the dim light in front of the building—the same indefinable, baffling sense of loss across the lines of age on the face, a loss that really had no ostensible or reasonable explanation. The same feeling of indeterminable longing for no one knows what expectations out of life, a far-off look of anguish at who knows what thwarted wishes. Aditi felt a rush of commiseration for this age-slowed, life-weathered creature as she turned around and made her way out into the dimly lit passage outside. Aditi hurried forward to help her down the stairs. She was startled at the cold touch of the withered skin. ‘Are you sure you are all right, Mashima?’ she asked concernedly ‘you’re freezing.’

‘No, no.’ Said the old one, hurriedly pulling away from Aditi’s grasp and quickening her steps down the stairs. ‘I’ll be alright. You go back to your child. It’s been a while now that she’s been sleeping. She could wake up any minute now. She’ll want her mother...she’ll cry...’ her voice faded with her into the bowels of darkness pooled down the stairwell. Aditi stood flustered and baffled, feeling strangely wistful for a moment and then hurriedly headed inside as Mishti stirred on the bed, beginning to sniffle for her mother.

The next morning, Mishti’s temperature had gone down but had not completely left her drowsy body. The chubby little cheeks still felt hot to Aditi’s touch as she cuddled her, telling her how Mummy had to go somewhere today to begin her job so that they would have lots and lots of money to buy all the Teddies and all the Barbies in the world. There was a furtive knock and Aditi opened the door to find old Mr Banerjee and his wife standing outside: ‘How’s little Mishti now? Is the fever down?’

Welcoming the elderly couple into her untidy little flat, Aditi happily answered their concerned queries about Mishti as the child recognised *Dadu* from last night and put out two chubby little hands to be lifted up and cuddled. Aditi watched the three of them so connected, with the two elderly people doting over the now chirpily prattling Mishtu. ‘gosh, they look like they’ve known each other for ages!’ Aditi laughed to herself. She left home with a lot of peace in her mind to complete the joining formalities in her new college.

After a whole day of boring applications and tedious approvals and signatures, a very tired but contented Aditi headed back home, thinking about the kind old elderly couple happily. She realised with amusement that she was looking forward to seeing them again just as much as she was looking forward to Mishtu with her baby-powdery smell and soft round cheeks.

She was pleasantly surprised when she reached home to a sparsely furnished but clean flat. The elderly couple had taken the herculean trouble of cleaning up her flat and tidying up her belongings as much as they could. Her motherly heart brimmed over with joy as she saw a visibly happy and energetic Mishti toddling around, looking perfectly fit and healthy.

She thanked these two old people who had helped her out in her time of trouble, loneliness and helplessness profusely from the very bottom of her heart.

That evening, finding a fully recovered Mishtiget getting cranky indoors, she took her out for a little walk outside. She looked around her, hoping to catch sight of the elderly old people but did not see them anywhere. ‘Gosh!’ she exclaimed with exasperation, ‘I didn’t even ask for their flat number. Adity, you bad selfish girl...’ she scolded herself playfully, keeping an eye peeled for the couple. Instead, she found a small group of women hanging out together in the failing light of dusk. Noticing them looking at her curiously, she aimed a general, anticipating smile particularly at no one. The group returned her smile in various degrees as one of them asked in that extra-polite, ‘outside’ voice that people usually usually set aside for strangers, ‘New here, aren’t you?’ as a preamble to a lot of inquisitive ferreting of information to follow. Aditi sighed as she took a couple of tentative steps towards them in a bid to be social. She realised she had to join the public sphere to keep herself from being a loner branded as ‘Stuck-up’. After exchanging a few directionless niceties with them, Aditi thought of asking them about the old Banerjee couple. ‘Do you know old Mr Parashar Banerjee and his wife?’ she began amiably and then stopped short as she noticed the wary expressions on all their faces.

After a pause that riddled Aditi’s mind with questions, a mid-aged woman in the group volunteered to speak: ‘Yes, sad about them, isn’t it? Their only daughter dying in that horrid car accident—the little child and husband too never survived.’ She said to the murmur of sympathy from the others. ‘No wonder the old couple killed themselves in grief a year ago. They just couldn’t take the blow. I wonder how life can be so cruel to such good people...’ The woman kept on talking, looking at the others for approval. The other women nodded. They added words of their own. Aditi kept looking at them, as the moving hands and talking voices receded to a void that spiralled away goodness knows where. Aditi stood rooted to the spot, listening but not hearing what they said anymore...