A KITCHEN ACROSS THE *KHAL*

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A KITCHEN ACROSS THE *KHAL*

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Rosie brought me up on large glasses of Complan and a steady dosage of warnings: Don't leave your hair open in the evening, it attracts evil attention. But I did it anyway. Don't eat from the pot while you are cooking, you will cause harm to everyone. But I did it anyway. Don't fall in love. Don't talk to boys at college, they are like that only. But I did it anyway. What I say is for your good, if you write it in a diary, God will read it and punish you. But I did it anyway. You will not do well in studies unless you read for eight hours daily. You will be a failure. I did well simply because I wanted to get away from her.

It was hard not to hate living under her roof as a child, but it was easy to promise never to become like her. In my adulthood, I realised a part of me had believed everything she said, and yet another part of me was just like her. My mother brought me up with rules, and I couldn't function without them in my adulthood. I rarely stayed out beyond 6 in the evening when at home, I never went out on consecutive days, and I never left home without doing the chores to avoid upsetting her. My mother was an odd woman. She was not tall and had a boney face.

She had black curly hair and a faint hint of a moustache. She regularly brewed potions and lotions in her kitchen to keep her youthful. On Mondays she used the fat from milk, on Wednesdays she used gram flour and curd, on Fridays it was ground pulses, and on Sundays she resorted to a ripe banana. Every year around her birthday a new mole magically appeared on her face, and I desperately wondered at the shapes that would be revealed if she let me join the dots. She wore a lot of rings, one to improve her blood circulation, one to keep her husband alive, one to help her children succeed in life, and one to ensure no one in her family died in a car accident. Her motto in life, of which she informed everyone, was 'to see her children established and happy'. Her children did not always have to contribute to housework, they did not always have to talk to her relatives, and they never had to talk to her husband's relatives. All they had to do was keep their noses close to their books and study. There was no end to studying and getting good marks in her household, and that is precisely where I came in and made her unhappy with my constant desire to go out. I was never allowed to play outside, the *cheledhora* (child-lifter) would take me, she said. And I was rarely allowed to play inside, because math was all the play I would ever need. When she flew into a rage she would wonder aloud why I, her ungrateful child, would not die. I was to listen to her at all times and live my life to change the circumstances of hers. I was not to have aspirations of my own, except those that helped her realise hers. She was unpredictable in that there was no way of guessing what she was feeling, except her constant anger towards me. To her I was the *aapod* (enemy) she had birthed and one day hoped to end.

'She really messed me up, you know,' I told Rani once, wondering if she got it.

'She was too orthodox to manage a free spirit like me.'

Rani, whom I met a few months after moving to Delhi, who loved me too dearly to disagree with me, would nod her head in what felt to me like a mix of agreement and encouragement whenever I spoke of Rosie.

Rani's mother was very different. The kind you envy. She wore jeans and spoke to me in fluent English when I visited, unlike mine who would embarrass me in her broken Hindi before switching to some variant of Sylheti. Rani was different too. She was tall, beautiful, with short hair and pockmarked skin. She wore beautiful clothes to college everyday and sat next to me in class. On the odd occasion that we cut class to 'eat out' she would pay for the auto rides and never ask me to pay her back.

It is not that I regretted the twisted nature of my mother's love. To me we were condemned to each other, and I lived my life in secret, hoping she would never notice what I was thinking or doing. I would sometimes fear my mother would come to know of the things I did in Delhi, even though no one in this city knew her, and would make me go back home. She hated it when I went out or was happy when she was not. But my 'zeal to live was way more than hers', Rani would remind me, and I would nod, not really knowing what the 'zeal to live was'. In the initial days, I would shower incessantly and stay awake at night if I did things my mother would disapprove. She could disapprove of anything, like eating milk powder for breakfast, eating more than one egg in a day, smoking, riding in cars with boys or loving them. It was a horrible thing to do outside marriage, Rosie frequently reminded me.

'Horrible things happen,' she would say.

'Haath faao poicha morbey' (you will die as your hands and feet rot), and it was hard not to believe her. She told us things she said would come true because she had 34 teeth, and I spent a long time trying to verify this before resigning myself to her predictions. If it was to be, I would let it be. She told me she could smell it when someone lied. But her 34 teeth never kept her from censoring herself, and so I developed a habit of continuously washing my hands so she'd never be able to smell the lies I told.

Rosie spoke in a shrill, ringing voice that you could hear from a distance. She liked to warn people of things. She warned my friends that they would be unhappy if they spent time with me. She warned her neighbours of the dangers of eating a particular type of fish on full

moon nights. She warned me of the many ways I was going to fail in life. She warned me of my aunt Shipra who entertained a man while alone at home when she started working. According to Rosie, I was a lot like Shipra; we both had a 'bad character' and a wandering eye. Shipra and her husband are both bankers and live in a beautiful house with a beautiful dog and take beautiful vacations together. But Rosie told me that deep down Shipra was lonely, and she had no happy family, and her children never got to be cultured and were not raised the right way.

'This is why we avoid her at family functions,' she would say.

'No one wants her to influence their daughters.' And yet every time we needed some help with our finances, which were never stable, we invariably called Shipra *Pishi* (paternal aunt), and she complied.

When I was younger I often wondered if Rosie knew how people felt about her at home. She was always too consumed by her own feelings to take note of those around her. As I grew older I realised that there was immense privilege in being able to 'belong' in the family of your birth. You must adhere to all the 'rules' and never ask questions, let alone break them. You must make sure that you uphold these rules every day to ensure continuity and your own likeability. And neither Rosie nor I had the privilege to belong. Families exist to ensure that the order is not broken. This order has been in place from a time before your mother and your grandmother and her mother, and little will ever come in the way of change.

My grandmother attended school for three years and learnt to read, my mother completed school and even took tuitions, I went way beyond school and college and even left home, and as much as these women were uncomfortable with my lifestyle, they were also the ones who ensured that I was never bogged down by housework to the extent that my studies were affected. I had older cousins who went from school to college to their husbands' houses before finishing college because their fathers died, and paying for the rest of their education was difficult without an earning member. In my case, luckily, I had the wage earner alive as well as a mother dedicated to my academic

pursuits, so much so that I stopped having play time and TV time in the 8th grade, and was not allowed to go out with my friends till the end of 12th grade, by when I was long past the age of play time. I also lived far away from Silchar, in a single parent household, so the *allad* (love that spoils)of a mostly illiterate joint family wouldn't spoil me. From my mother we always got examples of her brothers—the professor, the doctor, the engineer. My father's siblings couldn't be examples because none of them had respectable jobs or were as rich as my mother's family. And thus, we developed a complicated relationship with Silchar very early. With my mother's brothers, however, it was easy to form a relationship of spite, for all they cared about was coming up with new ways of putting you down every time you met them.

'Oh, you scored only 75 in Math? Baba thakey na toh,' (your father doesn't live here) exclaimed the Professor.

'There is no point in learning art, go study, otherwise come work in our house,' said the Doctor.

'Girls from good families don't sit like you and wear such dresses outside,' observed the Engineer.

All this was over the span of the one weekend we had to spend at the Doctor's house for his son's marriage.

While Rosie continued to yearn for her brothers' love and approval, they continued to question her capability as a mother and as a woman. And she channelled all her energy into raising me, the child who would deliver her from her painful existence. Every year around the festive season my uncles would come with their wives' bearing huge bags of gifts, clocks, bowls, spoons, forks, knives, bottles, bed sheets, salt and pepper shakers, and everything else they had got over the year that they did not like and generously bestow them on our humble household. Such is the representation of their generosity in our house that you cannot turn a corner without bumping into fixtures and decorations that they have imposed on us.

Rani's house, on the other hand, had handpicked furniture, with the most comfortable cushions and matching decor. Everything that was there was meant to be a visual delight, and I would spend hours sitting

on their chairs daydreaming. Even my grandmother's house was not burdened by symbols of unrequited love in the way that my mother's was. Everything in the house served a purpose and came with a story. My grandmother's bed was taken from a relative when she died. Her sewing box was fashioned out of a container of my favourite biscuits, her lanterns were purchased because Silchar did not care much for a constant supply of electricity as a town and the warmth of a lantern was the only way to while time.

Rani always wanted to visit Silchar.

'Photos mein kitna pyaara lagta hai' (it looks so beautiful in photos), she would say every few days, nudging me to invite her.

And she was right.

If you looked up, you only saw coconut and betel-nut trees, swaying wildly in the wind all the time, dotting the skyline, occupying the town, clouding your vision. You must never picture Silchar without the wind—its subtle charm lies in the wind leading the trees to swing as if in a trance and bringing with it the aroma of what is being cooked in the house next door. Silchar is an odd place for it belongs to both the past and the present. To understand time here, you need a calendar, a watch and a resourceful townsperson who remembers all the events that happened here, including those that weren't significant enough to make it to the newspapers. If you were not careful you would get stuck in the narrow lanes and the little shops that dot the streets bearing elaborate names. Each served a very specific purpose—Shananda, a rather pricey *gala-maal dukan* (grocery store) where you could find cheese; Dashakarma Bhandar from where you brought all your ritual needs; Jyoti Kutir, a dilapidated house with a moss covered verandah, used by the locals as a landmark, with a barren *math* (fallow land) opposite it where the *mera-meri'r ghor* (the ram and ewe's house) would be burnt every year on Sankranti; and finally a *khal*, across which stood Kalika Bhawan, popularly known as the *khalor parer ghor* (the house by the canal) that Champa, my grandmother, set up after her husband built a house named after his father, and where everyone in this story lived at one point or another.

There was nothing extraordinary about Champa's kitchen. It was deep inside the first house you came across when you crossed the khal, a canal originally meant to serve the dual purpose of an inland waterway and an irrigation system, but now reduced to a drain from the dumping of factory waste, excreta, and household garbage. The khal had a name at some point, but those who survive today neither care for that nor remember what it looked like in its youth. There was a time when the poorer people in the adjoining *basti* went fishing in it with their bamboo baskets, but now they can only waddle through the dirt and refuse but cannot catch any fish. Together, we killed it; its water was now black, and its stench carried far into places beyond the neighbourhood. Our interaction with the khal was always limited, so you must not spend time mourning it. We never bought fish from those that fished there, and if your cosco ball travelled too close to its banks, you didn't fetch it.

The khal was a remnant from a different era, and its only purpose today is to take in the waste of the entire city and flush it into the Barak. There was a time when attempts were made to clean it to prevent it from over-flowing in the rainy season. That was the time when the only means to get across it was a bamboo bridge, built at least twice a year and washed away as many times. Now with a tall and sturdy concrete bridge taking pride of place over it, the khal has become more insignificant as communication across it has become steady, continuous, and much less strenuous. You can go across it on a cycle, a scooter, and even a car! Champa's kitchen had a window angled right at the bridge over the khal, from where one could see who crossed it and who walked past it in the other direction. If one did not know the trajectory of history in Kanakpur Part II, Silchar, they would believe that the window was built in anticipation of the bridge that came later.

Champa's kitchen started off as an ordinary one but had grown into a fabled land when she left it. It had a *chulha* (mud oven) outside where water was boiled over firewood and cheap coal for everyone's baths. Inside was one side meant for *aamish* (non-vegetarian) and one for *niramish* (vegetarian) food and a kerosene stove that was the first

thing she brought when she arrived in this country and is now only brought out when there is too much to be cooked in too little time. On the left of the kitchen was a towering coconut tree as old as the house itself and a *choubachcha* (an open water storage tank) where water was stocked with copious amounts of alum for emergencies and for cleaning utensils. Beyond it was a bamboo fence, knit intricately with a hole in the centre, from where kitchen waste was flung into the khal, and a little beyond it was another opening in the fence, with a moss-covered slab, where the men and children urinated if the solitary bathroom in the house was occupied.

Champa's kitchen was bigger than the other rooms in the house, and a portion of it had been partitioned to make way for a small temple for her to pray. After years of empty floor space and eating on the floor, her youngest finally brought a six-seater dining table when he became a constable, and the table stood with pride at the centre of all activity. Over the years its legs grew wobbly, and the sunmica top started smelling like the *jhul* (a watery gravy) it had absorbed over the ages. Champa's family ate their meals there, first the children and the men, and at last the women. On one corner of the table, her husband, a man whose name she would not say out loud, kept his dentures in a steel bowl.

Champa woke up every morning to light the kerosene stove to make *lal cha* (black/red tea) and used the remaining hot water to clean her husband's dentures so he could wear them when breakfast was ready. These were quiet moments that she enjoyed with both her *bous* (daughters-in-law) before the hustle-bustle of the day started. In their profession, or the lack of it (as the men put it), there were no Sundays, so the three of them sat each day in silence munching on *muri* and *cha* till everyone woke up and all hell broke loose. By 9 they would be rolling out *rutis* (roti or flat bread) by the minute and serving them with *gur* (jaggery) or *aloo torkari* (slow cooked potatoes in gravy). By 10 they were chopping fish and the vegetables that would have arrived from the bazaar, and by 11 the cooking would commence.

Champa often commented on how men had a habit of buying vegetables and fish that were most difficult to peel and cut when they visited the market, but her anguish never reached her sons or her husband. In fact, not a lot reached the men in this house because they stayed far away from the kitchen, in the bedrooms, the living room, and the front verandah where they could talk about politics and entertain guests. It is not that they did not do any work; they squatted on the floor calling for tea every few hours, announced the day's visitors as they came, haggled with the *feriwala* (an everyday goods seller who either walks or comes on a cycle) as he passed by, discussed the weather loudly with their neighbours and also visited their offices for a few hours each day.

On one particular occasion, her husband brought a *chitol* (a type of fish) at 11 in the morning and demanded that it be turned into a *muitha* (fish balls) by lunch, a dish Champa was the sole custodian of in the household. Her absence from the kitchen that day to tend to her flower pots meant her bous had to dutifully oblige with what was 'requested'. They had skinned the fish and separated the *peeth* (back) and *pet* (belly) by the time Champa arrived in the kitchen to find them struggling to debone the flesh. On realising what was happening in her kitchen, Champa was furious. She took out her *paan-bata* as was customary when under stress and rolled everyone a *paan*, coated thick with *khoyer* (catechu) and *chun* (limestone) and sat down for work. She did not speak to anyone, she did not hum any tunes, and the only sounds in the kitchen were of them working.

It was then that her husband walked into the kitchen smiling sheepishly, probably at the thought of eating muitha. He stood by the door, watching for some time and then said in wonderment,

'Badalpur e ek baba thakoin, tain janoni, mantra poriya kata basi lain.' (There lives a magician in Badalpur who can debone chitol by chanting magical words.)

'Kita mantra?' (Which chant?) Champa hissed back.

Her husband stared back at her in astonishment not understanding the reason behind her sudden change in temperament. He had only requested muitha because it wasn't made regularly.

'Ota nobodhong kora lagtona'(Don't try your fanciful ways here), Champa said through gritted teeth.

'Mantra shikso ni matraye je?' (Have you learnt the magic that you speak of?)

Muthia was a part of her 'heritage'; she saw little purpose in preserving it. Champa made it only on special occasions to remind her household what it tasted like. Her bou had learnt it working in her kitchen, and while the jury was still out on the best way to cook muthia, they all agreed to never teach their daughters how to make it. It was a harmful skill, they concluded. Men did not understand the pain and sweat that went behind making it. They didn't how the bones you could not get rid of, punctured your skin as you kneaded the flesh before steaming it. They did not know how the fish would cause the oil to explode in splutters while frying nor did they know of the lingering pain they suffered as they went on with their day. This was something best lost to time.

Champa came from a time that necessitated the need to remember the past each day. Her nostalgia was fuelled by a sense of futility ensuring that she must recreate everyday rituals from the past on a daily basis to be able to belong somewhere. Over the years she had managed to do so in the different houses that she had occupied after Baniachong, first in Shillong and now in Silchar. Her *shada* (chewing tobacco) laced mouth told stories of people who weren't historical in any sense and yet were a part of history in the only way she knew it. She was a repository of people and the lives they lived. News of births and deaths reached her before the others, and she maintained a mental ledger of all people living or dead that she had crossed paths with at some point. She celebrated when Buri, her friend's daughter who now lived in Mumbai, had a child. She mourned when she came to know of the death of Indra Das, her next-door neighbour from many years ago on Jail Road, Shillong. His daughter called one morning, as Champa

was washing her paan, to tell her he had passed away two days ago due to a stroke. It is not that Das Babu, as she called him, was very close to her family. He wasn't a friend either. He was from Dakshinbagh near Moulvibazar, and when he had moved to Shillong, in the 1960s near her house, she helped his wife set up a kitchen as they had come with only the bare minimum and five mouths to feed.

Das Babu was unlettered, and Champa's husband had to write letters routinely on behalf of his family, listing their grievances to the Deputy Secretary of Assam, who then forwarded them to his counterpart in East Pakistan. He had owned a pawn shop in Dakshinbagh and had rented his house to a Muslim constable, Manjoor Elahi, to ensure that his house stayed safe while their world went through turmoil. And stay safe it did for a very long time, till one day the house caught fire, and nothing could be saved except its residents. The shop, the furniture, and the utensils were all engulfed in flames. Friends turned into strangers overnight, and Indra Das Babu left Dakshinbagh to arrive in Shillong via Tamabil and Dawki, to live a difficult life in the refugee camp for a few years before he found employment as a shopkeeper's apprentice and built a small hut. He continued writing letters to the Deputy Secretaries for as long as East Pakistan existed in the hope that he would be compensated for his house, and Elahi, who he believed had caused him the misfortune, would be punished. When the Deputy Secretary in Dhaka wrote back telling him how he had lost his house in an accidental fire and not one caused by Elahi, he was crushed. When Bangladesh was born, he started regretting his decision to move to India and longed to go back, but his family felt differently, and he was forced to stay on. He continued to live with regrets; Champa mentioned once that she wondered whether he had died with them.

'When we moved here, we got nothing. No one to give us a house to stay, no one to give us food,' Champa would say.

'Some people got Rs 50 a month as assistance, but we did not. The [Ramakrishna] Mission had started forwarding some of its land and money to clear the shrubs and for people to build huts, and that is how Indra Babu got a house.'

She would end with, 'Kintu shaanti toh paila na' (but he did not find peace), without ever telling anyone why. Champa had a habit of leaving her listeners with half a story. No amount of coaxing or cajoling would get her to talk. Perhaps she disliked laying all the facts bare, about anything or anyone.

For Champa the root of her loss lay in the Referendum in which her husband and elders had voted, and which had sealed her fate. She rarely spoke about it, but when she did she lay the blame on everyone—the Congress, the League, and the Communists, her neighbours, and life, all of whom got together to conspire against Sylhetis resulting in their losing a peaceful *desh*. For her Sylhet only existed in two parts, the pristine peaceful paradise, and later as a mangled carcass of a once beautiful country.

'The British never cared about Sylhetis, so they separated it from Bengal, and now we are here,' she said. The desperation and helplessness in her voice had transformed over time into acceptance, resignation, and bitterness.

'Paper o likse vote'e kunu ashaanti srishti hoisey na' (we read in the papers that there was no violence), she told Rosie once as I sat by them, fanning myself with a hand fan woven out of bamboo. It was during one of the many power cuts that punctuated our days and nights and came unannounced like guests, leaving us only after accepting our many silent prayers. She brought up the Referendum very rarely. It was one of those things we did not need to know about; her having lived through it was enough for her children, and for their children. It was perhaps the loss of her spouse that had reminded her of the loss of her country that noon.

'Amra dekhsi. Gramer por gram jolchey' (we saw village after village burn), she stressed, probably wondering if her listeners believed her. But then like she did with other stories, she ended abruptly, not wanting to continue further.

I have wondered what would it be like to live every day in uncertainty. Anticipating whose village would go to which side. Wondering what was the meaning of freedom if it came with the

specific stipulation of losing your home and hearth. I knew from Champa and Rosie that it was a time when news came in of communal mobs clashing every day, crowds being fired on, polling stations being set on fire, and people being killed in order to decide which Sylheti got to live where. That was probably why Champa and Rosie lost their patience. It was as if Champa's life itself had been divided by the Referendum, and she was at once two different people. Where Champa's grief had led her to use her words with great restraint, Rosie's anger meant that she would be restless unless allowed to speak.

Champa told two stories on the rare occasion that someone brought up the Referendum. The first was one of solidarity when all shopkeepers in her village Baniachong kept their shops closed from 5 July to 7 July while the votes were polled, to mourn what was to come. She spoke of her Muslim neighbours who often gave her their produce in exchange for eggs from her ducks. She spoke of the bamboo fence that separated their houses but not their worlds, and and of how her husband's aunt had eyes that resembled a *jaba phul* (hibiscus),which always reminded her of her father.

The other story was about how the Muslims misled Hindu voters by telling them the wrong date, because of which most Hindus couldn't cast their votes, and Sylhet went to Pakistan. She said they came on boats in the canals leading up to her house to tell her family to go a day after the polling was over. Like everyone else that mattered to her in Sylhet, she was hopeful that her village would be included on the Indian side. Her mother-in-law had planted a mango sapling brought all the way from Banaras, and it was to bear fruit that her children would relish in the coming years. Her husband being a government employee in Shillong had already opted to serve in India if Partition happened. The future seemed decided for the better if they got past the momentary days of unhappiness.

There was much tension in her household regarding her in-laws moving to Shillong to live with her and her husband. Her father-in-law had refused outright, to her relief. How could he not die in the house his ancestors had lived in, he reasoned with her? How could he leave

his desh (country), his desherbari (native/country house) to live in a new land for the rest of his life? No, irrespective of what happened, he would live in Baniachong and so would his grandchildren. His courtyard would always have the women of his family peel, chop, and dice the produce that was brought in, and the men would sit on the *madur* (woven bamboo mat for sitting on the floor) during meal times and wait to be served. His way of life could not be disturbed by frivolous concerns of nation-carving. They would worship their deities in the same corner and take care of the *kalibari* close by. The saint his village believed in also lived in Baniachong, and that was all the divine intervention he need to placate himself. 'Sanyasi [Shyamanada] Baba're toh Hindu-Muslim shobey maney (everyone, Hindu and Muslim, follows Shyamanada sanyasi); if he lives here then what misery could fall upon his followers?'

After a month of tension and squabbling in the household, when it was announced that Baniachong would go not go to India, their house was shrouded in grief. Champa's house never recovered from the silence that followed the announcement. She was in the last stage of her first pregnancy, and their village was the only safe place for her to be in. Everyone knew her after all. Her baby was to find a home and friends upon arrival. Her father-in-law would often say, 'Baniachong na hoiley amrao hoilam na ney' (we would not have been if not for Baniachong), and she wondered if any good would come out of denying her children their village.

She delivered her baby girl Bibha in October that year and left for Shillong with her husband soon after. There was no time to stop at Moulvibazar to say goodbye to her parents or get baby Bibha to meet them. 'Shobta hoibo ekey ekey' (everything will happen one by one), her husband promised when they arrived in Tamabil. As she stood across the river watching it flow, it was hard to imagine that they were on an international border. Nothing looked different, and yet the lines of people awaiting their turn to walk into India caused waves of pain to wash over her heart. So many others like her stood silently, in lines

with a bag or two and kids in tow, some realising that what was in their hands now would be their possessions to start the rest of their lives and others in varying degrees of denial. Champa, however, was sure that things would go back to normal soon, and her family would go back to Baniachong and live the only way they had known.

It was after this trip that she started recreating rituals to ensure there was a harmonious transition from the past to the present and not a hasty break. She woke up every morning with the first rays of the sun and set a saucepan on the kerosene stove to make her first cup of *lal cha*, which she drank alone in silence. As she grew older more of her family members joined her in this daily ritual of silence. After that she dusted and cleaned the wooden floors and set water to boil for everyone's bath. She cooked *shutki* (dry fish) the way she had learned with vegetable peels to ensure nothing was wasted in those hard times and dreamt of the day she could go back home and bathe and catch fish in their pond. She waited for news from Sylhet but letters were highly unreliable, and telegrams while very reliable were expensive and usually signalled bad news. She continued to make sense of her new life in a city where refugees kept coming and spent her time talking to the women in the locality. Every time she met someone from Sylhet she reminded herself how she was not a refugee, and it was merely a matter of a few years before everything would be normal again.

It was the winter of 1950 that radically altered her future. News had been coming in of Hindu homes being looted in her village. Her neighbour's wife Lata had heard the news first from a cousin whose family had just moved from a village near Baniachong.

'First they come and mark your house with an X as a warning signalling you to leave. If you did not leave, they would come again and rob you of all your belongings and urinate on your doorstep,' she said.

'No one knows who they are, mashima,' continued Lata, 'but no one from the neighbouring houses comes to help out of fear. Only when you are reduced to dust do they leave.' Champa looked at her, her face devoid of any emotion.

'If despite this one continued to stay, their cattle would be stolen, animal carcasses dropped into their wells, and the mischief would continue till they were gone.'

But Champa chose to ignore Lata's tales as sporadic instances of violence that would have no bearing on the future she had chalked out, till one day her husband returned from work in the middle of the day and asked her to hastily pack a bag. Kali Kumar, her husband's father, had died, and a telegram had just come bearing news of his demise.

Champa went back to Baniachong one last time with her husband and Bibha for the funeral and to bring back Kali Kumar's widow. It was a silent village now. A lot of families they knew had left, and many others were planning to leave soon. It was decided that her husband's brothers would follow soon after. They left hastily and decided that Champa's bell metal utensils, given to her as a wedding gift, would be buried under the ground along with other valuables, which would then be retrieved at a better time. She left this time with memories of a lost home, of familiar ponds infested with water hyacinth, of stories of her old neighbours leaving behind sewing machines, utensils, typewriters, and hookahs; and a sense of doom that seemed to press down on her chest, suffocating her. On nights when she would be relieved to lie in bed and cry remembering her old life, her hands and feet would grow cold and the bridge of her nose would hurt as she would wait in vain for tears to come. By the time she would want to sleep, it would be the start of a new day.

Champa and Rosie never travelled beyond their time or out of Assam for that matter. And yet they did, in the *shidol* chutney that I learnt from observing them. I was shocked one evening when I realised I could make it in my dingy flat in Ramesh Market, in far-away Delhi.

In the absence of Champa and Rosie, I came to recognise cooking shidol as a once sacrosanct ritual that I could now tamper with. I often found myself wondering what it would be like to make it differently, and yet when it was time to execute the ideas brewing in my head I would go with the simple method I was taught.

First I closed all the doors and windows, as Rosie's voice rang in my head, 'No wind must come in. No wind must go out.' Then I chopped onions, garlic, and green chillies as finely as I could. This was followed by soaking the shidol in a bowl of warm water. After this I set a *korai* (wok) on the flame and heated the mustard oil in it. Once it was hot, the onions, garlic, chillies, and dry spices all went in, in no particular order, and the wait for them to wilt began. As everything turned brown in the korai, I began to slowly mash the shidol I had left soaking.

'Use your index and middle finger and your thumb and be gentle with it,' Rosie's voice in my head would remind me.

Once I was done mashing I would carefully tip the bowl over, so that only the puree went into the korai and not the bones. As a rule, everything was to be cooked slowly till it was black in colour. The korai had to be cleaned soon after to prevent the stench from penetrating the metal.

Rosie said it was best to wash it in soap once and then quickly boil some water and soap in it, so no one after me could tell what had been cooked in it. 'After that you could go about your day as you please, but open the windows only when you are sure the smell has disappeared.'

A good shidol is one that makes you cry and drool at the same time and leaves your fingers stinking. The memories of this particular smell made me cook it for my friends. There on, I remained emboldened by my success at having gone undetected the first time, and I started cooking it once a week, as was the tradition back home and also tried to stuff it into capsicum, like my mother, when I felt particularly creative. When I fell in love and wanted to show it, I made shidol for my lover, and we both enjoyed a quiet meal before we went to bed. I began wondering how much Rosie and Champa would disapprove of the situtation. Champa was not one for love. The only man she knew was her husband, and she considered procreation a wifely duty. She stopped sleeping next to her husband at some point after my birth and slept next to me, humming songs in my ear and running her fingers through my hair to keep me calm, as Rosie slept in another room, safe

from the uncertain stormy seas that I had thrown her into. Over the years, Champa and I switched roles, and I started running my fingers through her hair when she had become old and frail. I often wondered how she slept when I wasn't around. My lover too ran his fingers through my hair and sang to me dutifully every time I was nervous, and I wondered how he was so similar to Champa without ever knowing of her.

I was Champa's favourite grandchild, but I withheld a lot about my life from her. I never felt the need to take a husband and was exactly what she would warn women not to become. In the past, her warnings had gone unheeded by Shipra, her niece, who was the only one from her sister's family to survive the poverty and sickness of Partition and who reached Shillong from Moulvibazar to live with her.

Shipra was the most hard-working of all the children. She woke up at dawn, cleaned the house, made breakfast, and then went to school, after which she came back and helped in the kitchen, all the while doing everything better than anyone else. As she grew older she started taking tuitions to be able to support herself and also to 'give' to her aunt's family as she knew what happened when you became a 'burden'. She attended college and joined a bank after graduating and managed to gather funds to bring her younger sister, who lived with a relative in Guwahati, to Shillong, where they rented a house nearby. For the first time in many years, Shipra had a family and a home.

She met a young manager at the same branch where she worked, and he started stopping by for tea in the evenings. Champa's husband too worked on the same street and went to the same bank for his financial dealings and was well acquainted with the manager. Sometimes they even ate lunch together at the paise-hotel nearby, shared cigarettes over tea in the evening, and even exchanged small talk. Hence, it was surprising that, when Shipra mentioned her friend to her mashi, she was met with resentment. She went from being Champa's favourite to the one no one wanted around in a matter of minutes. It did not matter that she had met someone who made her heart swell with happiness.

It did not matter that after years of not belonging in her aunt's house, Shipra had found a person to belong to. What mattered was that the boy was not a Sylheti or a Brahmin but a Khasi and a Christian. No amount of pleading and begging on Shipra's part could convince her aunt to appreciate the person that Kennedy was. So Shipra decided to convert and marry; no one attended her wedding.

Years later they still continued to talk in hushed tones of how unhappy Shipra was, and how she could no longer escape her bad marriage because she had nowhere to go. While Champa entertained Shipra and Kennedy when they visited, they could never be a part of the family for her. When Champa's children went on trips with Shipra and Kennedy they hid it from her lest she discovered that they were actually happy and content with their lives. When Champa's husband built a house in Silchar by the khal, it was Shipra and Kennedy who helped her pack her furniture and move from Shillong to Silchar. Both women wept silently, and Champa, for the first and last time, tried to acknowledge that Kennedy had a good heart, but failed to do so.

In Silchar, Champa, her husband, and her four kids built Kalika Bhawan, an ode to a man and a country that had never made its way to this side of the border. Just a few houses away stood Saraju Bhawan, built by Champa's brother-in-law in memory of his mother, who was to become the first of their family to be born in Sylhet and die outside it, an occurence that was to continue till Champa's own death many years later.

Kalika Bhawan wasn't a silent house in Champa's lifetime. It was always chaotic and full of activities. It told you of permanence, of activity, of possession, and of tiresome work. Its cement floors claimed their own place in the world with stains left over from the fabric paint *aplana* (floor designs traditionally drawn with rice paste) in the corners of the living room, a sharp hole in a front verandah where Champa's youngest had dropped the *shil bata* while lifting it as weights, a window with one of the vertical grills missing from when Champa's dog got stuck and needed rescuing, and a mango tree from Banaras at the

entrance planted when the house turned into a home. Despite their differences Champa's family gathered here for every festival to engage in a remarkable exhibition of religiosity.

This was the first home I knew, and while it offered more in the direction of discomfort and lack of privacy, it also stood for what Champa was, how Rosie brought me up, and a past that could only be remembered by involving the two. A house so completely possessed by Champa that in her absence it only felt cold and strange. It was in this house that multiple relatives were hosted over the years. It was here that Champa's husband let Sylheti boys from the Mission nearby stay, to help them receive an education and get a start in life. Later, this was the place where everyone gathered whenever they visited Silchar. It was here that Champa perfected her cakes and her puddings made over hot sand, which she had learned from her neighbours in Shillong. It was on this side of the border that, like many others, Champa managed to find fractions of her lost homeland in people and in the three and a half *thanas* that had been transferred from Sylhet, around which her life revolved. Everyone she knew lived here, and those who did not could write letters or phone her here.

Rosie, on the other hand, had spent all of her adult life in Champa's house adjusting to make space for herself and yet never belonged there. She rarely sat down, and when she did she would stare at her lap while her hands would fidget in an attempt to comfort herself. Rosie longed for a friend and wanted me desperately to be that friend. I wanted nothing except to be left alone. Rosie's loneliness often clouded her vision, and she forgot that I was her child. She had told me about her father who hummed while working. The next day as she sat with me bent over my math book, I too began humming. For me it was an attempt to stay awake through the dryness of division and subtraction, for her it signalled a breakdown of order. Rosie thought she was confined to one personality, but having spent the greatest amount of time with her, I can attest to the fact that she had the ability to effortlessly slide in and out of identities—the doting friend, the

furious mother, and the disgruntled daughter-in-law. She blended in and out of the shadows, and no one tried to keep up with her.

Champa and Rosie both liked to spend their evenings sitting on the bed, rolling paan leaves and watching re-runs of the same film every Sunday. Wherever they congregated, the paan-bata followed. Such was the inevitability of this occurrence that when the men wanted paan, instead of looking for the bata they looked for one of the women, who would then be obliged to roll them one while addressing the very many requests men come with. One the rare occasion that Champa was without her paan-bata she would summon me to run and fetch it. Since I was not allowed to eat paan and was to keep away from it at all times, I would be tempted to open the bata and sneak a peak. The paan-bata in this household was an old plastic lunch box with a broken hinge. On it was painted a faded picture of Barney the dinosaur, frozen mid dance. Inside it were containers from my childhood kitchen set, now used to store *chun, khoyer, supari, 120 Baba Zarda* for Rosie, *sada gura* for Champa, and a stack of paan leaves waiting to be rolled. As a rule, the bata would always be accompanied by a heavy black *shorta* (betel-nut cutter). For most of my childhood, I knew America's favourite purple dinosaur as Dino. It was only when I was in middle school that Rosie and I finally established our mystery Dinosaur as Barney, and I began humming 'I Love You' under my breath as I went about my day. As an adult I have found myself unsettlingly curious on the subject of Barney's position with regards to paan consumption.

Champa always made a huge show of folding paan. She set out by first de-veining the centre and only using half of a leaf, on which she then slapped a little chun and khoyer, some thinly sliced betel-nuts and zarda before folding it into a neat triangle with no loose edges. She claimed that it was the paan that gave her the stamina required to live in Kalika Bhawan. She often left rolled *khillis* in the baata for her bous. During festivities, Champa would roll a few khillis and arrange them along the circumference of a bell metal plate that was reserved only for such occasions. She could be seen beaming in a corner every time

someone admired her handiwork. It was the khoyer in the paan that gave Champa her bright red stained lips and the accompanying smell by which you could tell that she was approaching.

In Champa's household, confusion was not new. Speaking in riddles was common for everyone except Rosie. She hated the fact that people often didn't mean the things they said. It reminded her of her brothers who treated her as if she were invisible while she lived with them. While Rosie and Champa were always kind to each other, she knew that her husband's mother often took her presence for granted. When Champa inquired about Rosie's family, she did not care to wait for an answer.

Rosie longed for a place to call home. She had grown up in a tiresome household where there was never any respite. The youngest of seven siblings, she was often forgotten by everyone around her. Her neglect was a result of her very illustrious and intelligent brothers who always did well in school. Her only confidante was her older sister, Jaba. Together, they had invented their own language over play and celebrated each other's milestones. They had both grown up in a house where the best portions of food, new clothes and books were only for their brothers. The women were condemned to a lifetime of housework in the shadows. Jaba was the one who encouraged Rosie to give tuitions and save the money for herself. Together they had dreamt of a different life for Rosie where she would work in a bank. But their happiness was short lived as Jaba was married off suddenly, making the house unliveable for Rosie in her absence. Rosie couldn't go on to work in a bank, and her savings were forcibly taken by her brothers on the pretext of marrying her off, and that was how Rosie came to live in Champa's house.

Champa's kitchen was a graveyard of once robust dreams. It had obsolete items in every corner that had crossed the fine line from being saved to hoarded. It had the capacity to swallow everything that came to it, and Rosie and Champa had long given up trying to navigate their way out of it. If there was anyone who was not weighed down by this entity it was me. I did not have to escape Champa's kitchen because

Rosie and Champa made sure I never had to step into it in the ways they did. I was to be a visitor who stopped by for rest on my way to a better place.

One evening, over tea, Champa told Rosie of *akhep* (regrets) as the only constant in life. Rosie nodded and recounted the many regrets in her life, and I wondered if I too featured in the list somewhere. But there was no way to find out about it. Asking her would only send her into a flying rage, which would be followed by sorrow when she would sit in a corner and weep. Champa too would never hear of it. Motherhood was sacrosanct after all; mothers could never do wrong. When it came to parenthood, Champa and Rosie were always in agreement. They held it to be a divine cause that required distancing from all other material pursuits. The lack of stability in their lives had changed how they saw stability—if there was food on the table and a bed to sleep in, not much else was of any consequence.

Champa and her household were shrouded in mystery to me as child. In the absence of a hobby I spent a lot of time lurking in the shadows waiting to figure it out. I could not understand what world my grandmother had come from. I could not relate to the people who raised me. Champa could effortlessly slide out of Bangla and into Sylheti, speaking to both me and Rosie at once. I could barely make my feelings known to them in any language. Champa's love for her country and her language never manifested itself in any of us. Perhaps her having a desh to lose, where we had one to obtain, had something to do with it. While Champa had taken space in the house inch-by-inch, making it her own; Rosie, a welcome stranger, had never wanted anything to do with it. It is not that she disliked the place the moment she stepped in. Rather, she spent the initial months after her marriage adjusting to the place. Her husband, the constable, worked in a different city, and came home only on the weekends. There were other women to talk to in the household, but she blamed herself for not being able to build a rapport with them. She shared her interests with Champa; they both liked reading before going to bed and often

borrowed each other's magazines, but age and structure mandated that they did not air their opinions aloud.

Once every week, preferably on a Wednesday, Rosie would walk down to the market with me, where I would get icecream, and after that we would go stand inside a PCO where Rosie would call Jaba. They would speak for a few minutes sharing mundane details of their life, and then the speaker would be thrust into my ear. I would dutifully greet my aunt, tell her about school, and then we'd bid her goodbye. My mother would pay the owner of the PCO, a middle aged pot-bellied man with one front tooth missing, who sat surrounded by calendar cut-outs of Hindu gods and goddesses and burning incense. He wasn't a very friendly man, and we often joked about him being bitter from losing his tooth. He would get very irritated if someone mentioned to him that the incense irritated their eyes when they stepped into his shop. On the rare occasion when Champa came along with us to his shop, she would make a great event of entering his shop, coughing and frowning. Whoever she called, and mostly it was her younger brother, would be informed of her situation, and how she feared she would never stop coughing again. To me it was wildly amusing how mischievous Champa could be if she did not find a person agreeable.

Champa was a creature of habit. Every evening sharp at 7, Champa tied two khillis of paan and her house key to the *aanchal* of her saree and grabbed a big steel Eveready torch and set out for a walk that culminated at the Ashram. The Ashram was a place she often went to. This was where she met her friends, exchanged news and built a sense of community. After Partition, as communal tensions flared on both sides of the border, her family saint, Shyamanda Baba, had to leave Baniachong. Kali Kumar would have been horrified to know that the Sanyasi Baba had left his Muslim followers to fend for themselves as regards to their religious needs. The *kalibari* that her family had prayed at and taken care of following the lead of Sanyasi Baba, as he was fondly called, had to be left behind as in that moment life was deemed more important. When the Sanyasi and a handful of his followers crossed over to the Indian side, he took shelter in a

small forest where he built a thatched hut; his followers on the other side found him, and the small hut grew into an Ashram. His Muslim followers began to dwindle in numbers at the Ashram, but they continued to make annual visits while he was alive and later after his death. It grew from a thatched hut into a cement house with two rooms first, then four, and later many more as other disciples joined him. Champa looked forward to coming here every evening and meeting her friend Shasti. Together they sang hymns while enjoying a paan, after which she idled about and exchanged news of what was happening in the *para* (locality), and came home content at having been updated about the goings-on of those around her.

Because of Champa and her vigilant friends one had to be very careful about how they behaved in the colony. Champa's grandkids had to be careful about not being seen buying paan at the shops, getting into fights or doing anything that she would disapprove of. Her bous also had to be careful of not being seen gossiping idle like other colony women. Her sons, however, were an exception, and there was not much they could do to bring her wrath upon themselves. Thus, when one evening Champa came back from her evening outing with Shasti, and it seemed that she was upset and irritated with everyone in her household, they wondered what had caused it. Everyone waited with bated breath for her to reveal what was bothering her, but no one had the courage to ask her. That evening she sat in her room alone while everyone else watched TV. During dinner, she ate quietly and then took a long time to comb her hair, part it, oil it, and plait it before going to bed. That night she barely slept, tossing and turning continuously. When she mentioned nothing the morning after, everyone forgot the evening's event and went about with their lives as they did on other days, the women working in the kitchen and the men attempting to do everything but work because they worked in offices.

That whole week she stayed quiet and kept to herself, till at last, her sons got into a quarrel over when to re-do the bathroom, and she witnessed them fight for the first time. She had known for a while that her children did not get along. She had also known that Rosie

longed to live in a separate household because of how she was treated. But Champa had always assumed that the matters would resolve themselves without her intervention. Intervention after all meant confrontations and while it was not hidden that Champa enjoyed pontificating to others, she also knew that her sons were never going to take her words as an 'order'. That was not a value instilled in them at any point.

The rainy season was fast approaching, and both Champa and her husband were facing a lot of difficulty in moving beyond the *uthan* (yard) to the bathroom to squat in a painful position every time they needed to use it. Her younger son had wanted to build a new bathroom adjoining the house, and her older one wanted to install a western style seat in the existing bathroom. After much shouting and walking out over the course of the morning, which led to no breakfast being consumed by anyone except the kids, Champa wondered if it was time to intervene. Her elder son and his wife were of the opinion that since they had spent their lives taking care of the house and the household, their word would be the last. Her younger son contested their claim and felt that he was not being allowed his due in the household.

Champa's disappointment with both her sons was clear, but she spoke nothing of it. She simply requested them to come to a decision together. When they could not and decided that both of them would do as they wanted, she finally lost her calm and went to her bedroom and wept silently in its darkness. The week before, when she had come home wearing a desolate look, Shasti had told her of both her sons having a public spat at the paan shop where both of them had accused each other of vile things.

'Your wife only spends time at her father's house,' shouted the younger one.

'And yours is always complaining about everything,' spat back the elder one.

'Phutani baari gesi Constable Babu'r' (The Constable's show-off knows no bounds), he carried on, waving his hands in the air wildly.

'And without my job who would pay for your children's education?' asked the younger one, losing his calm.

Both had said that they would not want to live with the other if not for their parents being alive, before walking away. When Champa had heard this she had gone cold with anger and fear. Was the whole world to know that the home she had put together piece by piece was after all a mere house of cards? Was she to witness another division and separation in her lifetime? She had held her silence not knowing how best to address her fears and keep them from coming true. She wondered if her husband, who was frail and could barely intervene, understood what misery was to fall upon Kalika Bhawan. On most days he was childlike, throwing tantrums about taking his medicines, or reminiscing about his youth, and Champa decided that burdening him with news of the household, no matter how painstakingly built, was frivolous if not cruel.

Days passed in silence, and Champa had began thinking that all was behind them, when one day her youngest son came home and informed her that he had been transferred to a different city and had decided to take his family along with him this time.

'It is difficult to cook and clean all alone,' he told his mother.

'If she is there,' he continued, motioning to Rosie sitting nearby, 'things will be easier.'

Champa nodded in agreement. With his busy job, he would need someone to take care of him. And yet she suspected whether the transfer was entirely coincidental. What were the odds that only three months after an unpleasant argument her son had got a transfer?

She knew her sons very well. Her older one was a bull, adamant to the extent that he did not see reason, and her younger one was a non-confrontionalist and would keep a delicate balance of peace. Her older bou went from door to door selling cosmetics to supplement her husband's income, escape Champa and Rosie's constant company, and to rid herself of her frustration at being married to a man who made an income out of odd jobs. Rosie, on the other hand, stayed at home and

took care of all the children, making her displeasure felt through her actions and not words.

Champa therefore only told Rosie and her son to take care and to not forget to call her. A week later, when her son, my father, left with his wife and kids, she wept along with her husband. Her husband wept because he would miss his grandkids, and she wept because she knew for the first time what our going signified. Before we left Champa packed us a trunk with some utensils, some sarees—to be used as rags, to be turned into curtains, or sewn into frocks for us when required—a wall clock, a blanket, two deities from her family temple, and a calendar to ensure the move was not excessively difficult for us. Sitting down that day dividing some of the belongings of her household into two piles, one to be left behind and one to be taken, she remembered telling Rosie of akhep, the only constant in life. Her household was momentary like her life, and it would cease to exist after her life. On the day we left, Champa cooked us a breakfast of egg curry and rice to keep our bellies full for the journey. She mashed the potatoes into my rice and fed me, and in return I promised her that I would remember to visit every vacation.

Rosie woke up early on the day of our departure. She swept the house and mopped it as Champa cooked, and then bathed and joined us for breakfast. She had longed to build a different life for herself, and it was not hard to guess that after a long time Rosie felt hopeful that day and did not worry about what the future held. She had a task at hand now. In Champa's absence a new country was to be imagined and new rituals invented and borrowed, and for the first time in her life Rosie was not scared of not belonging anywhere.