

“Chairs”

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Appa still had all of his pulp novels when I was ten; half of them had their pages missing, none had their covers, but he kept them all. If I recall correctly that’s how he learned Hindi, though I don’t remember explicitly asking him that. I’ve never asked my parents about their lives before they had us and he spoke of it only when drunk. A Royal Stag sixty was enough for him to reminisce about his past or yell at his sisters for ruining his life over the phone. When I was fifteen, he had stopped his ritual of dipping his finger in the drink and flicking it as a libation to his dead father. Some property dispute, Amma had said, don’t ask. I didn’t. I wasn’t going to. He had discovered that cassettes would soon go out of fashion so he collected all of the old OP Nayyars and made me and my brothers rewind them with a ball pen and save all of them in a huge plastic bag. We lost our house a few years later, moved to a rented one-room-kitchen in a chawl where the roof leaked occasionally. The plastic bags of yellowed books and unwound cassettes had been tucked away under the bed in an unreachable corner. Appa and Amma slept on the mattress-less bed and the boys slept on the floor. I had begun working nights in a BPO by then – I couldn’t afford college and Appa had lost the paan shop after the owner sold the place to a bank who put up an ATM there – and was drinking every morning after work. I didn’t want to but my colleagues swore that it was the cure for the horrible accent that you’re meant to learn. Unwinds your tongue.

One day, as he was napping in the afternoon, the bed’s frame caved in – termites, we found later – and he fell awkwardly on top of his pile of pulp and cassettes; a lost treasure that saved his back, he claimed. He dusted off one book and placed it next to the Ganpati photo frame and began worshipping it while Geeta Dutt crooned ‘Hoon Abhi Main Jawan’ on loop on a walkman he somehow had managed to salvage. He used to turn it off whenever I was in the room. I never cared; I crashed on the floor as soon as I had entered.

I frequented the room less and less, preferring to bunk with one of the office guys. I sent home money every month for groceries, to pay the boys’ fees, medicines and once in a while, for a saree.

Amma was the only one who I talked to regularly. She had a dream of me taking them back to our old house. I had walked past it one day; they had torn it down and were constructing a Pizza Hut in its place.

It took some time but I did manage to move them out of that chawl to a much drier one-bedroom apartment. For the housewarming, we had the usual puja to cleanse the place of any bad energy. In the evening, I ordered pizza and coke for the boys and got a Jack Daniels for the old man. Amma gave a stern look but didn't say anything, busied herself with the cleaning up. Appa poured a sixty in one glass and a sixty in another and slid it towards me. I had never told him that I drank but never cared to hide the fact either. He dipped the tip of his finger in the drink and flicked it in the air and said a prayer to his father. We clinked glasses, he said 'Chairs!' and Geeta Dutt started to croon in the background.