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Like Fields, Like Snow

by Aryan Narayanswamy

AMBATTUR APT. - BALCONY.

"You should be grateful I'm out here sweating balls just to talk to you," I said to Yichen on the phone.

I'll go insane if I don't.

Nights in the Ambattur apartment – we called it the Ambattur apartment even though it was a little further, in Kallikuppam – I spent out on the balcony, not much more than an open closet in a crack between two buildings. I sat on a three-legged plastic stool, one shoulder pressed against the mop in the corner and the other hitting the railing. I could never lean my head too far forward, blocked in by the cement wall behind my sweat-slicked back and three rows of clotheslines strung up between the poles on either side of me.

I preferred the rooftop terrace. It was further away from everything. Unfortunately, that meant it was also further away from the router and there was often no wifi up there; and my sister hogged the AC room every evening, so I resigned myself to making my calls on the balcony.

“I can’t even move, there’s no space out here,” I complained. “And I bet the neighbours are listening. The buildings are so close together that one large step could get me across.”

A man walked the thin dirt road beneath the balcony, glancing up at the sound of my voice as if to prove my point.

Yichen laughed. “When we move out, we’ll have a bigger, better balcony.”

“With red railings,” I added, smiling at the thought.

“And we’d get a cheap shitty couch off Facebook Marketplace.”

“We could get everything off Facebook Marketplace. I’d kill to have a shelf in the living room for comics and records.”

“We don’t have records. Or a record player.”

“Yeah, not yet.”

I leaned as far back as the space would allow, tugging at my shirt in an effort to create airflow. I longed for the air-conditioned room, but I told myself there was a certain aesthetic to a late-night phone call on the balcony.

“We wouldn’t have to worry about beds, though,” I added, absently chewing my thumbnail. “I could drag my sister and I’s old twin mattresses and bedframes out of the basement.”

“It used to be a bunk bed, right? We could even try to rebuild that.”

It was my turn to laugh then, and I shook my head. “Nah, I wouldn’t settle for bottom bunk, and I know you wouldn’t either.”

“Yeah, you know I wouldn’t.”

I thought back to Yichen and I in tenth grade, skipping band practice to hide out in the little grey back stairwell and talk about our parents and the future. They had told me then, as though it were a shameful confession, that they would have liked to make movies if financial security could have been taken out of the equation. My own childish fantasy of becoming a writer had never quite dimmed in my mind, and we had allowed ourselves to dream together. We had never really stopped dreaming after that.

"You know…" I said, after a moment. "I think I'm only sixty percent joking these days. About the moving out stuff."

There was a moment of silence.

"Yeah. Me too."

MYLAPORE – ATHAI'S APT.

My grandmother ate on a silver plate. It was an old plate, older than me I'm sure, but it was as white as the moon and always stood in stark contrast to the other dishes, all stainless steel.

My grandmother (she is my great-aunt, on a technicality – she is my father's *athai,* and everyone calls her that, even those to whom she is not – but she and Uncle raised my father more than his parents ever did, so she is my grandmother too, in the ways that matter) ate on silver because silver was pure. It could not be tarnished by *eschchal.*

I watched her eat now, silently fascinated from across the room. Despite the precaution of the silver plate, she rolled her

rice into little balls and dropped it into her mouth from a foot above, so her fingertips would never meet her lips.

"Bring me the yogurt and the pickle, *kanna*," she said, snapping me out of my observations.

I stepped into the kitchen, reaching for the yogurt pot by the sink and scanning the room for the pickle, which was kept on the other side of the counter.

"Pickle first," Athai reminded from the living room, "And don't forget to wash your hands before touching the yogurt."

She had been considered a progressive woman in her time. She had had a job, a government job, back when Jayalalitha had been in office and had threatened to arrest all the workers who striked, and she had striked anyway and hidden out at a friend's house for a week. I could not reconcile that version of her with this one, the one that kept yogurt and pickle on opposite sides of the counter and refused to put leftovers in the fridge.

Her greatest regret was not having children, but I suppose she made up for it, having raised the children of all five of her brothers for them.

In the afternoon, I sat in the bedroom to avoid making conversation. I pretended I was not listening to what was being said outside, but it was difficult to concentrate on my reading when it was so hot and humid, and the mattress was rock solid.

I was reading a collection of poems by Edgar Allan Poe because I had just read *Sunrise on the Reaping* and hated it so much it

made me angry. It was a disgrace to the series, and it illustrated the point in many ways, but the girl was called Lenore, after the one in Poe's poems, and I was entranced by the verse interspersed within the novel.

I had read far past "The Raven" in the collection by that point, but I had memorized my favourite lines so I could repeat them to myself from time to time, the rhythm and music of the words so lovely to me; "But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only / That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour", or "What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore / Meant in croaking 'Nevermore.'"

Outside they were talking about Sundar, my uncle whom I never met and who died at the age of nineteen in a motorcycle accident. He was the son of my grandfather's youngest brother, my father's *chithappa*, and the elder brother of my uncle Karthik, whom we called *anna,* on account of him being far too young in our eyes to call *chithappa*.

I thought of Sundar's picture, framed in the hall, the one I had seen a million times growing up. It was the same picture in Athai's house and in Chithappa's, and in my aunt's phone. In it he was wearing a yellow t-shirt and grey cargo shorts, leaning back against a chain-link fence with one foot up, braced against it. He bore a striking resemblance to Karthi *anna* - or, rather, Karthi *anna* bore a striking resemblance to him - but his eyes were dull in a way Karthik's never were. He was not smiling.

MYLAPORE – CHITHAPPA'S APT.

My sister and I stayed at Sasi Apartments for a few nights because Chithappa and Chithi wanted to have their turn with the grandchildren.

The last time we had been in India, we had stayed the whole time there, eleven of us in the two-bedroom apartment. It had been much livelier then.

It was also the apartment my father had grown up in. The couch me and Chithappa were sitting on now was the same one my father had draped himself across on hot days when the power went out and the only hope of cool air came from the open front door next to it. The plastic chair across from the couch my sister had drawn up was the same one the old family dog, Daisy, had been lounging on when the only remaining picture of her had first been taken.

Chithappa was talking about Sundar, which he rarely did, but it was late, and Chithi and Karthik and Manasa were all out of the house, so he allowed himself to feel nostalgic.

Sundar was his favourite, he said. Sundar was *his* boy. Karthik had always favoured his mother, but Karthik was still only a kid back then. Sundar would be packed off to Athai's during the week, like all the other kids, and when he would get bad grades, he would come home to get a beating from Uncle; then he would go back to his parents' house on Saturday to get a second beating from his father. With closed fists, Chithappa said, demonstrating. He used to wear bigger rings back in the day, too. In the last year of his life, Sundar isolated himself, and he was angry all the time. No one knew why, Chithappa said. When Sundar died, he never laid hands on Karthik again. He had learned, he said.

The man told us this with tears in his eyes. I wanted to strangle him.

Later that night, after he had gone to sleep, we debriefed.

My sister was certain Sundar had crashed his bike on purpose.

AMBATTUR APT. – BALCONY.

"I'm so glad you're back in Chennai. I was going crazy without being able to call."

I didn't speak for a moment. There was so much to say about Shirdi, but it was still so fresh and I was drained just by the memory.

"Yeah, me too."

Yichen didn't let me off that easy. I had complained far too much the week before about having to fly to a different state just to go to yet another temple - one of the big ones we go to every time, and wait in line for hours just to catch a glimpse of a marble statue over someone's shoulder - to be silent now.

"So?"

"It was a mess. We had a fight."

I swatted a mosquito away from my face and wiped the sweat off my brow.

"We did the rounds of all the smaller shrines and then went straight to the donation office. My parents gave the temple twenty-five thousand rupees but couldn't spare a cent for any one of the dozens of people begging on those streets. It made me so angry. What kind of god would be grateful for that?"

Yichen stayed silent. There wasn't much to say to that anyway.

"Anyway, I didn't say anything. I didn't want to start shit. But then my mom started talking about coming in for a second *darshan* the next morning at five a.m. before heading to the airport, and really, I was so, so sick of it all, and then she had the audacity to complain about me looking annoyed, so I just snapped at her."

I exhaled slowly, running a hand through my hair.

"Was it bad?" Yichen finally asked. "The fallout?"

I watched a Royal Enfield drive down the dirt alley between buildings. I thought of my grandfather's scooter that I had learned to drive on a whim a few weeks prior. Back and forth through all the little residential streets, and when I had gotten far enough away that my parents could no longer see me, I had taken off the helmet too. The wind in my hair had been a welcome relief from the heat. The scooter wasn't quite a motorcycle, but it was halfway there. Karthi *anna* had promised to teach me how to ride his bike when we'd go stay at Sasi for a few days.

"I've never yelled at my mother like that before," I said after a long moment. "Or since. I crossed so many lines with her, I thought she might really kill me this time. We were all yelling at each other after a certain point, more than we ever had – and you know we fight a lot – but I didn't care because I was just so fucking *angry*."

I felt the sudden and inexplicable urge to cry, swallowing hard to suppress it.

"I guess I did care," I admitted quietly. "I was scared. That some irreparable damage had been done, you know? That we'd break for good this time."

“But you didn’t,” Yichen finished for me. “You never do.”

“Yeah. We never do.”

I sighed and kicked a pebble off the balcony.

“Maybe that’s what it was, maybe I just wanted to find it.”

“Find what?”

“The breaking point.”

I decided there was nothing more to say on that topic and so I stayed silent for a while. Yichen accepted it. They were merciful in that way.

“I don’t know what to do with all this anger,” I said finally. “I don’t want it anymore.”

“It’ll go away once you’re home.”

“Yeah, but it’s not just that, it’s this… emptiness. Hopelessness, or whatever. I know you know what I mean.”

Yichen paused for a moment, long enough that I thought the call might have dropped.

“Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.”

“It’ll get better,” I said then, perhaps because whatever I heard in their voice scared me. “It has to get better than this.”

I wasn’t sure I meant it, but of the two of us I had always been more the optimist, so I tried to.

AMBATTUR APT. – INT.

My mother’s mother still went to work every day. She was afraid, I thought, of having time to think. She had been “preparing

for retirement” for many years already. We all knew she would die at her desk. I hated her for how she had raised my mother, and for how my mother had raised me.

My mother’s mother thought she was more progressive than my father’s family. It was a point of pride for her. She felt we should be grateful for her willingness to loosen her traditions.

I did not feel particularly grateful as I laid on the bed, over the old saree that had been carefully laid out to cover every inch of the sheets, as I waited to be served dinner since I was not allowed to go into the kitchen or touch the communal dishes during my period. I was being treated as if I had the plague, and I was already so miserable because I was exhausted and in pain and it was so, so hot.

I put on my headphones and scrolled through Spotify, settling on my ever-growing playlist containing every Tamil song I knew. I played it on shuffle, and the first song was *Thene Thenpandi Meene*, a song that brought on vivid memories of road trips in the green 2008 Toyota Sienna where we’d blast old classics from the seventies and eighties as we drove down the 401. In a rare moment of weakness, I missed my mother.

பால் குடுத்த நெஞ்சிலே
ஈரம் இன்னும் காயலே
பால் மனத்தைப் பார்க்கிறேன்
பிள்ளை உந்தன் வாயிலே

She would have fought for me with her parents. She would have let me have the AC running even though it was only afternoon, she would have let me sleep in all day until I felt better, and she would have hugged me and stayed close.

பாதை கொஞ்சம் மாறிப் போனால்
பாசம் விட்டுப் போகுமா
தாழம் பூவை தூர வைத்தல்
வாசம் விட்டு போகுமா

I hated her for going home early and leaving me to deal with her parents, whom I hated more. She hated them too, but she always got so angry when *I* said it. When they had been trying to find her a husband, they hadn't told her about my father's heart surgery. He had been the one to reveal it to her the night before the engagement. She had never forgiven them.

How that had been the major betrayal when they had spent her entire childhood neglecting (mother) and abusing (father) her, I wasn't sure, but here we were.

ராஜா நீதான் நான் எடுத்த முத்துப் பிள்ளை

Around this same time two years ago, my mother had sat with me on this same bed and talked to me about Badhu *perimaa*'s son, Sathish, who was adopted but had never been told. He had already been grown by then, married with a child on the way. My heart had hurt for my cousin, whom I remembered from my childhood as the smiley one with all the parrots and the little white dog. I did

not know him nearly well enough to seek him out and reveal it all to him, but I had felt dirty for being in on this particular family secret.

We had gone to visit him this summer after many years. The dog had died and he had gotten new parrots. He had a fish tank now, and a full beard, too.

MYLAPORE - KABALISWARAR TEMPLE.

I stood in the back corner of the shrine, leaning somewhat obnoxiously against one of the intricately carved stone pillars. I had fought long and hard not to be here, and I was determined to show my disdain. My mind wandered to Etheridge Knight, whom I had fallen in love with after hearing "Feeling Fucked Up" recited in one of my classes.

fuck smack and pot
and red ripe tomatoes fuck joseph fuck mary fuck
god jesus and all the disciples

The actual poem was really quite romantic, but the sentiment in those lines felt appropriate for my current situation.

Kabaliswarar was our family deity, and his temple, which was at the centre of Mylapore and less than two streets down from Athai's house, was one we never failed to visit when we were in town.

The temple was built in the old-fashioned open style, not one building but multiple shrines delimited by stone pillars and large raised rectangles of marble flooring. The main shrine with the big

statue of Lord Muruga and the Sivalingam stood at the center, mounted by the *gopuram* that could be seen throughout Mylapore. In between each expanse of marble, the stones were always so hot that we would practically fly across them so as not to get burned.

The massive man-made pond surrounding the temple had once been the most famous in Chennai and a sight to behold, but it had dried up almost entirely over years of heatwaves and drought.

My father told me to do *namaskaram*. I did not move. I held his gaze silently, daring him to insist. We were in a public place and I knew he would not cause a scene. He clenched his jaw but didn't speak. I wanted to tell him that I would never again kneel for any stack of stone, and even if his gods were real, I would sooner spit at their feet than worship them, but I knew better than to push my luck. Small victories.

MYLAPORE – MARINA BEACH.

On a particularly hot afternoon, we all got together and hailed autos down to Marina Beach. A few years ago the ride would have cost twenty rupees. Now, no driver took less than forty.

I remembered the beach the way it had been a decade ago, all white sand and food stalls and tan horses. I remembered riding one years ago. It had been a cathartic experience, to gallop on sand. I had felt free and untamed. I could barely see the sand now under all the plastic litter. The horses looked slow, the stray dogs more starved. The food stalls had multiplied, though.

I waded out into the water with my parents. The waves were harsh, but I preferred them that way. We had not brought bathing suits. We just rolled up the cuffs of our pants, though that didn't really stop them getting soaked. My parents stood together facing the horizon, and I took a picture of them from behind. My mother had jasmine flowers in her hair. She had been getting fresh ones every other day since we had arrived in India. My father slipped an arm around her shoulders as the waves lapped at their shins. It was the closest thing to romance I had seen from them in a long time.

Later, my mother took me to get *soan papdi* from a travelling vendor. We watched the man spin it fresh in front of our eyes. It melted in my mouth, softer than any *soan papdi* I'd ever had before. We loved it so much we bought four more containers to bring home to Sasi. Even with eleven people in the house we were hardly able to finish it all.

AMBATTUR APT. – ROOFTOP TERRACE

"I paid my own OPUS this month," Yichen said on the other end of the line.

I sat close to the stairs leading down because the wifi didn't extend much further past them. There was a singular plastic chair on the other end of the terrace, but I preferred sitting on the floor. I leaned back against the wall even though I knew the chalky white paint job would stain my shirt.

"That was the only thing left, huh?" I said, clicking my tongue. "Your dad is insane."

"There's still tuition. Wouldn't be surprised if he started making me pay that too."

I clenched my jaw, that familiar anger that never quite rested while I was in this country slowly rising again.

"This is bullshit, you know that? Your parents should be supporting you, not absolving themselves of responsibility."

I could practically hear them shrug.

"Yeah, I don't know. You're angrier about this than I am."

"Then you're not angry enough."

I extended my legs out in front of me across the brick-red tiles. Fifty-seven (and a half, to fit); I had counted once when I had walked the length of the terrace back and forth, over and over, to avoid going back down.

"You know that collection I was telling you about?" I said after a minute. "By Philip Larkin?"

"Yeah?"

"I read a poem this morning. 'The Winter Palace.' Let me send it to you."

I took my headphones off for a moment, wiping the sweat off the pads. The sounds of the city never quite died down, here. There was never a corner that wasn't lit up, never a time where the streets were altogether devoid of life. Even at this hour, I watched as the street vendors called out to passers-by to buy a pound of mangoes, and the scent of jasmine filled my nostrils. Twenty-something year-olds, three at a time on their motorbikes, took up most of the main road, laughing and whistling.

"The Winter Palace" was not one of Larkin's best poems, not by far, but I had read it amidst all the anger and hopelessness that had defined the summer, so it had hurt me more than it had

had any right to. I thought it would hurt Yichen too. We had always been so much the same.

It will be worth it if in the end I manage
To blank out whatever it is that is doing the damage.

A crow landed on the banister in front of me and squawked. "*Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore!'*" I thought, fighting a laugh. I put my headphones back on.

Then there will be nothing I know
My mind will fold into itself, like fields, like snow.

"I'm done reading."

I glanced back down at my phone. "And?"

"Fuck."

"Yeah."

"You can't do this to me at ten a.m., man."

I realized with a start that it *would* be ten a.m. in Montreal.

"Huh. Yeah, these are definitely not daytime conversations."

"When my phone rings I close the door and draw the curtains to pretend it's night."

I snorted, leaning my head back against the wall and closing my eyes.

"Does it work?"

Yichen huffed out a laugh in response.

“Not really.”