

## **Meenakshi Jauhari Chawla**

### **House of Soul**

Half a century ago, I began life in a tiny room situated in the heart of this house. This is my grandfather's home. Far from the city where I now live. Far from a lot of the world. Today that room has only rusted boxes that have not been touched for decades by anything more substantial than dust and the heavy breath of monsoon. I was born in a moment of anguish, and the little room, its rough walls, lent a helping hand. The cool floor touched my mother's brow, comforted her on that humid September day in an era when India and Pakistan were getting into a war in the Indian subcontinent, and Beatles were releasing another hit album a long way off.

The room is now an old hunchback. The roof-beams cave in at the center, the walls hold it up. I pass through the low doorway. It groans at my footfall. The wrought iron chain in the middle of the rough-hewn wood is now stiff and rusted. It is an old faithful; it has secured the door, distracted weeping babies, and is a silent relic of an era that sank in my grandfather's grave.

“Dadi, Dadi, I want jalebis... give me jalebis.” The little girl danced before her harried grandma, and clung to the old woman’s crumpled housework sari.

“Wait!” Dadi scolded, “Wait just for an hour, little one! Soon, Baba will be back from his morning walk. Then he will bring jalebis for all the children.”

Baba, our grandfather, was a schoolteacher, and during vacation when his grandchildren came visiting, he was a frequent visitor at the corner sweet shop. An old-world disciplinarian, he was feared, and I’m sure, even secretly avoided in the marketplace by his students. To teach English to small-town schoolchildren in a tiny hamlet in North India must not have been easy, but my grandfather loved his job. Hanging participles, part perfect tenses and Shakespeare’s sonnets – all were granted their rightful share of attention or jaw-dropping awe in his classes. He expected fervent devotion from his students, for their English textbooks and his instructions on how to write it correctly. Sadly, most students did not measure up to his expectations, but that did not deter him from unfolding before them the wonders of the metaphor and oxymoron. That was grandpa for other children.

For us, he was our Baba, indulgent grandfather. I remember him in pieces today. His trousers, broad and flapping about his black shoes as he walked briskly from one task to the next; his thick glasses that he removed frequently to clean and put back on his nose, and that grew thicker with age; his soft Urdu syllables as he conversed with his friends, students and visitors and his

laughter. His laugh was distinctive – a thoughtful chuckle, almost, that hesitated at first, then gained momentum and filled his throat, pushing his head up and backwards in sheer lighthearted articulation. Like the stories he told his class, his laughter had a beginning, middle and end.

It was a time we, his grandchildren, loved jalebis, cylindrical spirals dipped in warm sugar syrup. They came fresh from the sweet shop, crunchy to begin with, and then, as you bit into them, the golden syrup within the tubules invaded all corners of your mouth and spread a glow within you that erupted into a sticky smile and a desire to have more.

All of us, eight or nine cousins, could devour jalebis by the score, any time of the day or night. Baba, indulgent and perhaps mindful that these were days on the run, was happy to keep up a steady supply, interspersed with rabri – fragrant thickened milk plumped with raisins, pistachios, cashews and the essence of addiction. It was food for the gods.

The courtyard floor has a pattern that scratches a memory. I have not forgotten it. Age has not marked its black stone even though the large white circular pattern has faded and completely disappeared in parts. But its life-force is spent. This daalaan (courtyard) had a huge marble-topped table that held cartons of daseri mangoes. I cannot remember many occasions when we actually ate on it. During our visits, it was inevitably crammed with things that were coming in or going out of the house. Amidst its various fragrant passages, it also served as an

emperor's throne from where a playfully cruel emperor threw errant courtiers and giggly prisoners to their death into the black dungeon below where deadly alligators crawled, always hungry and searching for prey. It was infinitely more adventurous to be the alligator than the wildly ecstatic emperor who needed to do a lot of shouting and waving for impact. The alligators could do a belly-crawl or twist sinewy child-bodies into the most creative of reptilian shapes, or emit fearful sounds aimed at striking terror in the hearts of one and all. It was a time of hope, endless possibilities.

In a few years' time we outgrew the horrible game. After that, when the (older and civilized) cousins met, we swapped stories. The jalebis still came, and we still converged at the marble table, still crammed with stuff and still rarely used to eat meals.

Today the daalaan is dry and the alligators have moved to the natural park - I suppose. The table is still there and has developed a wide crack in the center. My eyes wander to the wooden legs, sturdy still. How many times these wooden legs supported excited limbs that refused to stop moving, shaking, beating, thumping and rearing. The air still shakes with the faded echoes of remembered laughter, voices that fell silent, and went away.

Revisiting a much-loved home required preparation on my part. I was afraid I would see it in a different light. I was afraid I would find it bereft. I was afraid I would find it saturated with memory.

I found my old home a little of all of these. It was different. But somehow, through the grime of the years, it remembered me. The narrow lane from the main street to the house that we used to traverse in a tonga, relived old footfalls.

I had insisted upon a tonga at the station today.

“Bari bi, the tongas have all gone. There are only taxis and autos now.” I was told by an amused group of auto drivers.

“Where have they gone? Don’t the tonga-wallahs need to eat?” I asked.

Just then a tonga came miraculously by. The ride in the open horse-drawn carriage to the clipped rhythm of horses’ hoofs was a ride in the sky – fresh morning breeze, clean line of eucalyptus trees and a keen hunger. Suddenly there I was...

The house stands before me, gaunt and solemn, silent. Its windows beckon.

I remember a long ago evening. The sun had dipped and an indigo sheen lingered behind the trees, uncertain. I was about fifteen and had gone to visit my grandparents for only a day. A deep stillness stretched through the house. Even on the terrace where I stood and watched a kite impale itself on a tree, I felt the silence rising towards me. The indigo pallor persisted. A sick man refusing to let go. I could see the entire lane below, from end to end. It emptied suddenly. Except for the clamorous milkman whose milk tins did all the talking. And abruptly, the dark

flew in. Misshapen shadows appeared in unexpected places as if the ghouls of the night had emerged all at once at an invisible signal. I turned on the lone bulb and its yellow light tried to push back the shadows, creating new ones.

When I came downstairs, my grandparents were sitting on their cot, deep in prayer. It was a routine I was familiar with. They did their sandhya (evening prayer) at this hour and they always did it together, sitting side by side. Later after my Dadi died, to see my Baba sitting down at his sandhya by himself, was a poignant sight. He always seemed sad then. But right now, they both sat peacefully side by side, eyes shut, Baba slouched forward and Dadi, shorter but erect. I heard their prayer, part song, part recitation. A reassuring murmur restored the dark to its rightful dimension. As I gazed at them from a distance, they appeared old, lonely. The home where they had raised five children and many more grandchildren had an alien hue that evening. The children had grown up and left. The grandchildren came back, but like restless sparrows, they always flew off, all too soon. The house had grown old. Like old people, it had its moods. I suppose it disliked being empty. Perhaps my presence added to its surliness as it remembered other visits, noisier visits.

After that visit Dadi died. I did not visit the house for a long time. There was no need to; Baba stayed with his sons in various parts of the world, in turns, and we, his grandchildren, became busy with our lives. The house stood bereft.

This house has a soul. Every house has a soul. The soul of a house is the sum total of all the lives that passed through it; the dreams that lit up its night-time walls. The soul of a house is its accumulation of unseen cobwebs of memories. Mostly, it remains silent but once in a long while, somebody lucky is able to touch the soul of a house.

I took the train back to Delhi overwhelmed by the passage of things, time. Passing from one day to the next, we rarely touch passages. But one trip to a childhood home, passing through rooms that cradled a childhood, and I see the universe passing. A distant song is floating in the afternoon breeze and everything around is unfamiliar, irrelevant. As the train approaches the outskirts of the city, the air stings me.



**Meenakshi Jauhari Chawla** trained as a computer engineer but works now for an independent publishing house in New Delhi. Her fiction has been published in The Little Magazine and Sahitya Akademi's journal, Indian Literature. Her poems were part of a poetry volume entitled I, Me, Myself (Unisun, Bangalore, 2010) and the The Poetry Society (India) Journal (2010).

---

## **Get Your Book Reviewed**

If you have a book review on a book, send it to us. We will publish it free. We don't charge any fee for publishing. The quality of your article will decide whether your article will be published.

If you want us to review your book, we charge for this. We have a good number of review writers with us. We have different review writers for books of different genres. Our reviews are gaining recognition among the publishers, journals and academia for fair and high quality reviews.

Write to: [clrijournal\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:clrijournal@gmail.com)

[Contemporary Literary Review India](#)