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ON SEEKING

ANSWERS

BY SAYANTAMI DASGUPTA

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I was hungry that evening but the questions I asked my brother had nothing to do with food. It felt strange to be famished in an environment where food had been a constant reality. My brother must have been hungry too, perhaps even more than I was, but he buried it under his characteristic calmness. I asked him, "Where are so many tears coming from? How is it that they are not stopping? Do you know?" He shook his fourteen-year-old head at me, his twenty-two-year-old sister, and reached out to hold my hand.

We were lying side by side in one of the bedrooms of the house in which Dida, our maternal grandmother, had died only a day before. Primary and secondary sounds reached us every now and then from the world that lay outside the bedroom's walls. A concerned voice wanted to cook something and feed the children in the house, a tired-with-all-the-surrounding-despair voice wanted to make a list of things to buy for the worship ceremonies starting from the next day, and a third voice, obviously ignorant about Hindu cremation rites wanted to know if all the men of the family would have to shave their heads. I gripped my brother's fingers even more tightly. Our entwined hands were clammy, and the ceiling above us was black. It was a dark evening of March but switching on the lights wouldn't have made a difference.

My brother and I and our parents had flown in to Calcutta from New Delhi that very morning. Sundry relatives had picked us from the airport, and driven us to the death house. There, Dida's already cold body was being frozen and preserved before it could be offered to holy Hindu flames and reduced to ashes. In that one smoky process where our primordial fire-worshipping souls were going to come together and function as a community, we were going to burn all tangible evidence of a life that had once existed.

That had once breathed.

Laughed loudly.

Made inappropriate jokes – at all times and at everyone's expense. Even in front of children. I owe my stock of Bengali slangs to her.

Knitted the most disproportionate clothes for my dolls from scraps left over from bigger, more important stitching and sewing projects. All the clothes, thus, had mismatched sleeves.

Told the most unimaginative yet completely original fairy tales. There was once a story about an old man, his confused wife, and the ghost that lived in their house. It was awful, more so because Dida fell asleep in the middle of telling it.

Insisted on telling the whole neighborhood about her granddaughter's real and imagined

achievements.

Possessed able, slightly dry, yellow-stained hands from a lifetime of turmeric usage. Even her square-shaped nails were stained yellow. There was a game that Dida and I used to play. I would grab her hands playfully, look at her palms, turn them and study her nails, and then wrinkle my nose and say, "Dida, you have dirty hands!" And her response would be, "Fine, you will make your own fish curry from now on." Then I would launch a long stream of protests, and we would both collapse into a pile of laughter.

Dida's was also a life that adhered to its own, sometimes bizarre, composition of colors and conditions, and she could single-handedly have modeled for an exhibition based around the theme "it's my way or the highway." In spite of finding fault with it, I would have attended it. Unputdownable women are pure magic and hard to find.

My grandmother was born on April 8, 1928, in Dhaka, present day Bangladesh. The daughter of a physician, and the youngest of eight siblings, she was married off as soon as a "good boy" was found for her. She was fifteen, he was thirty, but good he certainly was. He had been unmarried all this while because as the eldest son of his traditional family, he had to first marry off all his younger sisters and settle his brothers. Only after that could he begin to think about his own personal life. In 1947, British India got partitioned into two—India and Pakistan—and that's when they moved to Calcutta for good. That's where Dida lived, had two of her three children and all her grandchildren, and that's where she died, in the year 2002.

The story of our joint lives began in 1979, and I am yet to find all the ways in which it continues to live on.

For the longest time that evening, as my brother and I lay side by side, no one came to interrupt our silence. The sounds from outside continued to reach us every now and then. Someone was making tea again. A tap opened somewhere. A spoon fell and clattered on the mosaic floor. Why did Bengalis drink so much tea? At some point, my mind vaporized those interruptions away, and instead, asked my brother more questions, "If it hurts so much now, how much will it hurt when it's Ma or Baba? Or one of us?" Again, he didn't answer. He just held my hand tighter. He was being his usual, stoic self. "Do all fourteen-year-old boys know how to deal with grief?" I asked him silently, "Do they know when to just keep quiet, listen to the questions, and not offer any answers because I am not really seeking them?"

When my brother and I were younger, summer vacations meant going to Calcutta, to visit everyone in the "hometown". Our parents assiduously drummed it into our heads that New Delhi, our current place of residence was only a temporary home. Calcutta had been their hometown and so it was ours as well. I don't think we protested much, simply because neither of us understood the fine differences between the two cities. In fact, both of us probably liked the idea because Calcutta equaled grandparents, aunts and uncles, new books, indulgence and affection, monsoons, mangoes, coconut and sugarcane juice, maybe weekend trips to the coast, with its accompanying boat rides and fried fish. So every year, when schools closed mid-May, Ma would bundle her two children and leave New Delhi, only to return sometime in the first week of July, just a few days before the schools reopened. Sometimes, our father would accompany us as well but only for a short period because offices of course don't feel the need for two-month long vacations. So he stayed on in New Delhi, while the three of us embraced Calcutta and its peculiarities.

My earliest and fondest memories of Dida start from about this time, and most of them revolve around food. Before we landed up at her house every summer vacation, Dida stocked up the fridge. Temptations ranged from fruits to fish and everything in between. There was *pataligurer payesh*, a rice-based pudding whose main flavoring came from jaggery, which lent it that typical shade of light brown. Then there was *malpoa* – rich, brown, flour dumplings in sugar syrup – and *patishapta*, slightly moist rice-milk cakes stuffed with jaggery and coconut. Dida also cooked some of the best fish curries. They were light because they had minimal oil, they were yellow because their main spice was turmeric, and they were sprinkled with black dots because of the asafetida seeds that swam in the gravy. But her grandest concoction was something she called *titar dal*, which translated means "bitter lentils". It was far from being bitter though. Soup-like in consistency, *titar dal's* main ingredients

were yellow lentils, vegetables such as bitter melon and green melon, and the seasonings included ginger paste, clarified butter, mustard seeds, green chillies, sugar, and salt. Dida insisted that it was the best thing to eat in a hot country. The “cool” vegetables and minimal spices kept the body free from toxins. I couldn’t have cared. It tasted great like everything else in her house, and that’s all that mattered.

Food also provided the background for showcasing Dida’s remarkable and often loud, sense of humor. She belonged to the generation where demureness was expected of a woman. But that wasn’t her. She loved passionately, loyally, and ferociously, but that didn’t mean that if you were wrong, you weren’t set straight. Affection, kindness, and generosity of spirit were not going to come in the way of the punishment. One time when she was visiting us in New Delhi, I happened to make fun of the senility that was going to set in her any day now owing to her old age. She laughed along with me, but also made up her mind about teaching me a lesson.

That very evening, Dida set about making *patishapta*. The initial batch was wonderful as expected. When she made the second batch, she set aside one from it and called me specially. “Eat it, Didun, this one is specially for you.” Greedily, I bit into it and found nothing. I looked at her quizzically and asked, “Are you sure this has some stuffing? I didn’t taste any.”

“Of course there is. You just have to bite deeper and bigger. I have crammed this one with raisins.” I took another bite, and then another. Nothing. Not a bite of stuffing anywhere. I looked at her again, absolutely puzzled. This time she started laughing. “Now who is senile, huh?” she asked.

Food defined Dida’s relationships, and right up to her last days, Dida believed that people who enjoy food and its aspects—be it cooking, eating, or feeding others—are essentially good people. In other words, a person’s worth and large-heartedness are both directly proportionate to the well-stockedness of her fridge, larder, kitchen counter, etc. I always knew my mother had inherited this peculiar belief system. Today, while maintaining an independent life and kitchen of my own I know that so have I.

Over the period of time, as one summer vacation merged into another, my brother and I grew up. Grandparents and indulgence stopped being enough. Life needed to be faster, quicker, smarter. Calcutta seemed decaying, dying, in fact, almost dead. New Delhi was comfortable, and summer vacations could be spent here with friends. Or we could go somewhere completely new. India was a big country after all. Where was the need to go to Calcutta every year? Why did we have to go every time? Why couldn’t *they* come instead? And so we began to protest: Calcutta was boring. It had fewer entertainment options as compared to New Delhi. All we did there was eat, and visit various relatives. Calcutta was hot, wet, and sweaty. My brother decided to start calling it “Ghaam-land”, or the Land of Sweat. And he and I both began to take offence every time our parents told others that our stay in New Delhi was temporary and some day, we were going to go back to Calcutta for sure. No, we protested, *this was our home*.

I think Dida was one person who knew instinctively when the change started. I wonder what gave it away. A disinterested voice on the telephone? Lackluster enthusiasm even at the sight of all the food? Or delayed response to her letters? Whatever it was, I know she understood, and tried to fit in.

One year, Dida decided to start writing her letters to me in English. While previously she had always written to me in Bengali, Dida decided it was time for a switch when she understood that Bengali had started to lose its appeal in favor of English. Her standard postcard arrived but with a difference. The handwriting was untidy as usual, but this time it was shakier and seemed far unsure. I did not see the effort that had gone into writing it. I did not understand the despair of an old woman, frustrated by the growing distance between her and her oldest grandchild, and worried that the paternal grandparents—with their exemplary writing skills in English—might score higher points. All I remember is laughing unkindly at the effort.

Another time, I decided to check Dida’s general knowledge. Therefore, one day completely out of the blue, I asked her, “You watch the news AND read the newspaper everyday, don’t you, Dida?”

“Yes,” she replied, unsure of where this conversation was going.

“Can you answer a quick question?”

“Sure.”

“Who is the president of America?”

“Isn’t it Kennedy?”

The year was 1998. It was Bill Clinton’s second term.

That time Dida had been visiting us in New Delhi. She was a guest, but after hearing her answer I had marched off to find my mother and complain, “Why didn’t your mother just say ‘I don’t know?’ Why did she have to lie, Ma? How could she not know something this simple? It’s downright embarrassing!”

Today when I remember that episode, I see the futility of that misplaced indignation. Why did she *have* to know the details of a president whose presence or absence really did not touch her existence in any which way? When John F. Kennedy became president in 1961, Dida was thirty-three-years old. Maybe some part of her responded to whatever Kennedy charm, good looks, or something else equally transient she saw on television, newspaper, magazines, etc. It captured a photograph of the frozen-in-time, forever-young Kennedy, and stayed with her forever.

Calcutta’s cremation grounds smell of death, chaos, rituals, and long lines of sweaty Hindus. They lack the sophistication that Hindu philosophy centers around: that Atman or our Individual Soul is never really ours. It is part of the Brahman or the Universal Soul. Atman never dies, it is only the body that does. Atman is a permanent participant in the crazy, Ferris wheel like-circle of birth, death, and rebirth based on the cumulative karma the person has gathered in this life. The Ferris wheel goes on and on until the time Atman reaches a stage of perfection, and then, it is emancipated. It attains moksha.

When we had reached the cremation grounds that afternoon, some of my family members had set about negotiating the price of cremation rites and its necessary articles. There were identical conversations and negotiations going on in lines parallel to our own. In an overcrowded country, even death is not a private affair. The air was thick and obtuse with sacred Sanskrit chants, fresh and wilted flowers, the aroma of incense sticks of various kinds—sandalwood, rose, jasmine—the heat of Calcutta in March, smug bargains and deals, and the salty smell of old age, sweat, and tears.

While watching the myriad proceedings, for a minute I had let my mind wander. I did not want my grandmother’s soul to be judged by some abstract reality up above and beyond my realm of understanding. I wanted something more tangible. I think left to me, I would have far more readily sanctioned an alien abduction of her soul than this karma judgment politburo. As I began to think about it even more, I grew convinced that surely not all alien encounters have to do with medical testing or sexual procedures. I remember at least one X-Files episode when the abductee came back looking quite refreshed and pleased with herself. The judgment of karma sounds harsh, cruel, unkind, and enormously subjective. Alien abduction on the other hand, has a ring of excitement, adventure, perhaps, even coolness to it. It seems like something Dida herself would choose for herself. If John Edward Mack, a professor at Harvard Medical School, could publicly investigate and publish his findings after a study of over 200 test cases of men and women who claimed to have been abducted by aliens, then why couldn’t I hold on to this theory? If some of Mack’s subjects could insist that they came back with heightened spiritual awareness and concern for the environment then why was it wrong for me to imagine that at this point of time, Dida’s soul was right outside the window alternating between certain dichotomous truths?

The first wanted her to get inside a body, either the old, wrinkled one that she had used all her life, or a new, tight thing that she picked up just few moments ago from the wardrobe section of the spacecraft. Once the body had been finalized, she would need body-appropriate clothing. What colors would she choose? I know she liked all shades of red, the color that Hinduism recognizes as representative of marriage, and therefore not permitted to widows. Dida’s husband, my grandfather, died a year before my birth, so I never saw her wear anything even remotely similar to red. She spent her life with whites, creams, and pastels, and occasional browns, blues, and purples, but I know her heart lay in red because she encouraged and indulged my own love for that color.

Dida’s new body, now draped in red, might ask her to let go of all the benefits that afterlife was dangling in front of her—eternal youth, freedom from pain and sickness, constant mobility and everything else that the last few years of her life in this world had managed to take away from her, although only after much negotiation—and instead be with her grandchildren one more time. Just for

the joy of hearing their laughter, of watching them eat a meal in whose preparation she had slaved for hours.

But the second version of this reality could be Dida moving on and enjoying the benefits of this brand new adventure, most of which would revolve around food, family, and laughter, the three components I think of when I see Dida in my mind's eye. It could be that right now, this very moment, Dida was with her new friends. Those aliens with tall, skinny frames, big, globular heads, tightly-pinched, waxy cheeks, sunken but sparkly, big eyes, and tiny rosebud-pink mouths. Will they wear any clothing? Maybe robes in opulent blues, blacks, silvers, and indigos—all colors of the universe. Maybe they will be sitting together in a circle, with Dida holding forth on a multitude of topics, most of which would have something to do with her family. Often, while recounting a joke or favorite memory or describing a grandchild's cherished toy, Dida will laugh, her usual loud, boisterous laughter. The aliens would be forced to join in, either out of respect for their guest, or because they would be too intimidated to say "no". I see them as being captivated by her quick efficiency, and being scared into submission by her no-nonsense dictatorship. But soon they would also discover the generosity of her spirit and see through her charade of aggressiveness.

Sometime towards the evening, Dida would proceed to win them over with her perfect pot of chai made with the right tea leaves and the right amount of milk, sugar, and brewing. Then Dida would teach them how to hold tea cups in their two-digit hands. Maybe they will also have to learn how to nibble on biscuits and acquire a taste for them. Not too many at a time. Just one for every cup.

Once done with tea—the good Bengali staple—Dida would move on to the next stage of their education. She would instruct them to land at the Gangetic Delta and pick up some of the choicest hilsas because, as everyone knows, life without good fish is simply unfortunate and not worth living. Even if it is extra-terrestrial.

So she would look around carefully, pick the one alien that could be bullied the most easily, and tell him to go and get some fish for her. Meekly, gathering up his robes, he would do so, and then he would come back to assist her in the spaceship's kitchen where he would have to spend the next few hours mastering the finest aspects of culinary sciences: how to distinguish between good and perfect turmeric, the right amount of salt needed for frying hilsa, and why mustard oil was the only kind that best brought out the flavor of this particular union of spices.

Throughout this entire exercise, Dida, I know, would make loud, dirty, inappropriate jokes, usually at the aliens' expense and right in front of them. Some of them would be filled with choicest Bengali slangs, yet others would be plain bawdy. She will thus safeguard her reputation of being extremely politically incorrect. Or should the term now be "Astronomically Incorrect?"

I come back to the only reality I know. The black room, the double bed, the cotton bedspread, and my brother's fingers entwined around mine. Our hands have taken on a unity of their own. It's as if one doesn't want to let go of the other, they have dealt with enough loss for one day. I toy with the idea of telling my brother what I am thinking. Aliens, spacecrafts, chais, hilsas...what will he say? Worse, what if in the midst of my monologue, one of our myriad family members walks in and hears this conversation? The house is right now stacked and shelved with relatives and cousins, most of whom I think of as inferior either because of their matchbox sized hearts, or severely compartmentalized brains. For my wonderful theories, will they not think of me as delusional? Will they not try and explain to me that the theory of alien abduction has no credibility?

But then, how will they tackle my counter claim, "Fine. There are no aliens. Let's talk again about karma, nirvana, moksha, shall we? Lend them your hundred per cent credibility. Make me believe that these things exist. That you know for sure that this is what we will all go through. Can you do that?"

My mind goes back to the other reality I saw today. The fire that consumed my grandmother's once beautiful hands, her steel and silver hair, the tired body where diseases had made permanent homes, and the feet that had stopped supporting the rest of her body. The same fire that has been considered a form of Divinity and been worshipped in India since 1500 B.C.E. because of multiple reasons: it is a piece of the Sun God, its upward shooting flames have the power of taking the devotee's prayers straight to the heavens, and its heat and light can dispel ignorance, darkness, and evil. But today, the holy flames did none of that. They did not make any allowance for Dida, in spite of all her cooking, all the large-heartedness, all the spunky humor, and all the negotiation that my brother and I would have gladly and persistently done with the powers that be on her behalf. Instead, the flames just devoured.

Perhaps they themselves were hungry.

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