Mother and Son

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In my family, nobody was especially mature. My mother, whom I loved very much and who had a kind heart, was a little bit like a child in that she was excitable and talkative and somewhat vain. I remember that when my brother and I were children and we still lived in India, my mother would sit at our dining table on Sunday afternoons and have my brother and me search her head for white hairs. Birju, my brother, was around twelve then and, in the irritated, put-upon way he had, he would warn, ‘One day I will pull out your last hair and then you will be bald.’

We left India in 1979, when I was eight. During the days before our departure, my mother, because she couldn’t help herself, dressed me and my brother in new clothes so that people would see us and think about our luck.
I liked America immediately. Among the things I liked most was the television show The Love Boat. I had never seen women in bikinis before. I also liked elevators. Elevators were rare in India and to me there was something thrilling about how my pressing a button meant the elevator would shut its doors and pull itself up floor by floor.

My brother Birju also liked America. ‘America is so clean,’ he said. ‘In India if anybody sees a clean spot, he thinks, let me spit there before somebody else gets a chance.’ Birju had a long face with a round fat chin and he was someone who could say a bad thing about almost any topic. Like my mother, though, Birju was kind. There was an Indian boy from Trinidad whom Birju got to know and Birju used to worry about him because the boy did not work hard and get good grades. ‘He is not from a good family,’ he used to explain to my mother. ‘He doesn’t know that you work now so you can work less hard later.’

In America we lived in Queens, New York. My father had come a year ahead of the rest of us and gotten an apartment and a job. My father was not much of a talker and he was the type of person who believed that no matter what one did, things would end badly. But he too liked America. What he liked most about America was money. ‘In India you can work as hard as you want, but it’s who you know that matters.’ He would say this and sigh in a disappointed way that suggested great satisfaction.

‘How do you know?’ my mother sometimes asked. ‘When did you work hard?’

During our early days in America, many things made no sense. We had never heard of hot dogs before and, after our first day of school, my brother and I came home and told my mother that we had seen children eating dogs. My mother and I and Birju sat at a round table in our kitchen alcove and discussed this. My mother thought eating meat was disgusting and she imagined meat eaters as depraved creatures capable of consuming anything. We three debated what part of a dog a hot dog could be made from. We talked about what a hot dog looked like and eventually decided they must be made from tails.

Birju got good grades in India and he did well in his classes in America. At the end of seventh grade he was ranked first. Near the end of eighth grade he took an exam to get into the Bronx High School of Science. This is very hard to get into and the exam
was held in a large school made of brown bricks. My mother, my father and I all went
with Birju on the day of the exam. It was a warm spring morning and we waited for
him on a sidewalk outside the school. I remember that there was a high chain-link
fence that separated the sidewalk from a basketball court that belonged to the school.

Birju got into the Bronx High School of Science and that summer we went to
Arlington, Virginia, to spend our vacation with my father’s older sister. We had done
this the previous summer also and, like last time, we spent our days lying on the sofa
watching television or going to the swimming pool of a nearby apartment building.
One afternoon, Birju went to the pool and dived in and hit his head on the pool’s
cement bottom. He became unconscious and he remained underwater for three
minutes.

When I first heard what had happened, I didn’t really understand. I was lying
on the sofa in the living room watching television. The phone rang and then
soon after my aunt came in and stood beside me. My aunt was short and had white
hair. ‘Birju has had an accident,’ she said. My aunt was probably five feet tall and had
a wrinkled face but she had dentures that gave her oddly young teeth. ‘Birju’s been
taken to the hospital. I have to go to the hospital.’ She said this and looked worried. I
didn’t know what my aunt meant. Perhaps Birju had had to go to the hospital to get
an injection.

My cousin Naveen was in the house. He was twenty-two and he had a round face and
a shy smile that often made him look like he wanted to please. He came and sat
beside me on the sofa. At first we kept the television off because it seemed bad
manners to watch TV when something serious might have happened. Then we got
bored and turned the TV on again.

My mother and I walked into Birju’s hospital room. The room had white walls
and I was holding the black duffel bag my mother had brought with her on
the bus from New York. We came into the room and stopped just past the door.
‘Don’t think I don’t blame you, Birju,’ my mother shouted. ‘Don’t think I don’t think
this is all your fault.’ My mother was wearing a yellow sari and the skin beneath her
eyes appeared singed and her mouth was twisted open. ‘What was at the bottom of
the pool? Was there gold? Was there treasure that you had to jump in before anybody
else got to it?’ My mother and I walked further into the room.
Birju was in a bed with railings. His eyes were wide open and almost panicked and he had a clear plastic mask over his nose and lips like fighter pilots wear in thin air. My mother took hold of the railings and, leaning over, said, ‘Look what you’ve done. Do you understand what you’ve done?’ My mother started sobbing and this scared me. To me Birju looked like he was staring up at some invisible thing and that thing was pressing down on his chest. I wondered whether the gas coming from the mask was what was keeping Birju still. I wondered whether, if the mask were removed, Birju would start talking.

My aunt and uncle were also in the room. They had been sitting before a dark window when we came in and they were now standing. My aunt walked towards us, swaying from side to side because of her arthritic knees. ‘God is there,’ she said, coming up to my mother. The top of her head reached my mother’s shoulder. ‘God is always there.’

My mother began sobbing even more loudly. I held the black duffel before me with both hands. Doing this made me feel like I was helping.

My mother leaned over the railings. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘I am here. If a doctor doesn’t act nice to you, I’ll slap him twice and ask him his name. If a nurse looks at you bad, I’ll tear her hair out.’

My aunt put her arm around my mother. ‘We should go home,’ she said. ‘There is an operation in the morning.’

It was a little after one in the morning when we left. I had never been up so late.

My brother and I had lived in a small room with a blue carpet and white walls. There was no furniture in the room and that first night my mother and my aunt built an altar in one corner of the room.

They brought a large cardboard box from the basement and covered it with a white sheet so that it was almost like a table. Then they taped postcards of various gods to the wall behind the altar, and on the altar itself they placed a spoon and in the spoon’s scoop a wick soaked in butter. All night my aunt and mother prayed before the altar. They kneeled or lay face down on the floor and sang and talked to God.
I slept in the room as they prayed. The lights were turned off and I slept on a sheet of foam with my back to the altar. Periodically I woke from the voices and saw the smoke’s shadows rippling over the walls. Once, I got irritated and thought that though it was proper to pray for Birju he would be all right and it would be better to be quiet and sleep.

In the morning, when we got to Birju’s hospital room, his bed was empty. He had already been taken for his operation. My aunt, my mother and I sat on chairs along the empty hospital bed and sang prayers. Without thinking about it, like how you automatically run faster and faster when you are going downhill, we began singing more and more loudly.

A few days later there was another operation, this time for a clot in Birju’s brain, perhaps from where he had hit his head against the pool’s cement bottom. Then, a week after, there was one more operation, this time to put a rubber tube into Birju’s stomach. The tube was a waxy yellow and it went in just below his right ribs. Normally the tube lay coiled and rubber-banded against his side but every few hours a nurse would come and feed Birju. She would remove the rubber band and hold the tube up in the air so it was its full two feet and insert a plastic syringe in the tube’s mouth so that she could pour a can of Isocal formula into the syringe. I remember that when I first saw the tube it seemed impossible and eerie, like there was a tulip growing out of Birju’s side.

Each day, every day, we went and prayed by Birju in his hospital room. First my aunt came along with us to Birju’s room and then it was just me and my mother. My mother and I would sit by Birju’s bed and read aloud from the Ramayana and sing. At night during the first few weeks, my mother got up every hour on the hour to pray before the altar. Then she stopped doing this and instead began fasting on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Before Birju’s accident, I had believed in God but never thought much about him. I had known that God existed and imagined him as being like the sky in that he watched everybody and everything but was not actually useful in a practical manner. Now, as we prayed first thing in the morning and even at night when we woke for some reason, God began to seem like a person. He began to seem like a person who
was far away. I started imagining that God must be like the president, very busy, difficult to get attention from, and probably hard to convince that he should change his mind.

Summer ended. School started. In the morning it was cold enough for jeans but by afternoon it was warm again. Often I thought about how Birju was not getting to go to the Bronx High School of Science and this used to make me very sad for him.

Right after the accident, we had only been able to pray in ordinary ways. With time, though, my mother was able to write letters to her parents and ask them to feed Brahmins or drive a nail into a wish-granting tree on Birju’s behalf. Some friend of my mother whom she had not heard from in years learned of Birju and sent us ashes from a fire that had been part of a great religious ceremony. The ashes came in a little plastic bag and my mother put them in a satchel and tied the satchel around Birju’s neck. I too wanted to do something like this.

On the way to school, there was an oak tree that stood half on the sidewalk and half on the road. Somehow I began to feel that it might help Birju if, whenever I passed the tree, I touched it five times and after each touch brought my hand to my forehead. I would do this and feel embarrassed at the possibility of being seen and would also wonder if maybe God minded my showing respect to a tree. I asked God about this.

God said, ‘I don’t care. I don’t get caught up in such small things.’

‘Really I want to show you respect,’ I said. ‘The tree is just a way of praying.’

‘People are strange,’ God said. ‘People will worship anything.’

He said this and laughed and shook his head. God looked like the Marlboro Man. It was night and I was lying on my foam sheet and God was sitting cross-legged beside me, wearing jeans and a cowboy hat that shadowed his face. ‘I know what’s in people’s hearts,’ he said.

Because I didn’t know how pure my heart was, I became nervous. ‘Good, you know I love you.’

‘I know everything,’ God said, and this felt like a warning.
I didn’t answer and stretched my legs. Usually when God and I talked, I would begin by acting humble and telling God how much I loved him. Then, after some time had passed, I would start trying to move the conversation to what I wanted to discuss most, which was what God was going to give me to make up for Birju’s accident.

I remained silent until it seemed okay to change topics. After a minute or two I asked, ‘How famous will I be?’

‘I can’t tell you the future.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I might change my mind.’

‘But if you tell me something will happen, then it might be harder for you to decide something else.’

God laughed again and I was glad I had pleased him.

Originally God and I had begun negotiating my future fame because I had felt that as long as God and I were doing this he couldn’t make a final decision on Birju. After some time, though, I had just begun enjoying talking about myself.

‘So tell me,’ I said, ‘how famous will I be?’

‘Don’t worry. You’ll be so famous that fame will be a problem.’

I liked hearing this. I tried not to smile. ‘I need to be rich too,’ I said. ‘I need money for Mummy and Daddy, and if you want to keep Birju sick, then I need money for doctors.’

‘You are very responsible.’

‘I can’t help it,’ I said. ‘Some people aren’t responsible at all but I am. It’s because I was raised properly.’

‘Don’t worry. You can hardly imagine the life ahead.’
And suddenly, just like that, I became frightened. These sudden frights used to happen often and now, even though God’s voice had promised something wonderful, the idea of the future scared me and I opened my eyes.

The only light was the glow coming through the window. I was lying with a blanket pulled up to my neck and my mother was sleeping nearby, snoring slightly. Outside I heard a car go by and I imagined Birju in his bed in the hospital. Sometimes the nurses forgot to turn the lights off in his room and he lay there all night with the fluorescent lights buzzing and blinking.

It was not that I did not understand the seriousness of what had happened to Birju. It was just that I believed in my own luck; that in the end God would have to protect me.

One thing I knew about God was that he was more likely to help good people than he was to help the wicked or the ordinary. It was important therefore to be very good.

My mother used to get angry and say mean things. Every afternoon when school ended, my cousin Naveen would pick me up and drive me to the hospital. There, in Birju’s hospital room, my mother once said, ‘Nobody can stand seeing an unlucky face. That’s why your aunt wants you here instead of letting you stay at home.’

‘No. Buaji loves me,’ I immediately said, and felt proud for being virtuous. ‘Naveen loves me. They just know you should have company.’

Whenever my mother said something bad and I said something good in response, I felt as if I had prayed, as if I had done a little bit of work.

I was being good myself and one other thing that made me hopeful about Birju was how my father had changed.

My father used to make me nervous. My father often ignored me and this was good and he did things that were strange and that my mother made fun of, things like going often to doctors and asking for his blood or urine to be tested or like bringing home brown-paper napkins from his cafeteria at work so we would not have to pay for napkins ourselves. But my father could also be mean and he was like Birju in that
it seemed easy for him to say bad things. Now, though, my father seemed a different person. It was like he had decided he could no longer be himself and he had decided to become someone completely different.

My father was short and stocky with close-cropped hair and sometimes I could see him deciding to be this different person. Naveen and I used to go meet him at the bus station on Friday nights, when he would arrive from Queens. Often he would come through the swinging doors into the waiting room and his face would be grim and then he would see us and his lips would twist into a wide, thin smile. This smile, fixed and sometimes straight and not even curving up at the ends, would remain on his face all weekend long, and while before he might have been impatient and irritable, now he joked and tried to make my mother calm.

There was a nurse who did not like us. I am not sure why, but this woman, Irene, a heavy woman with curly white hair, used to say that our insurance paid too little money and that it was people like us who caused hospitals to close. ‘Every place has a snake,’ my father sometimes said, and shrugged his shoulders like this was nothing to be excited about. Also when Irene was in Birju’s hospital room, my father would stand behind her and start flicking his tongue in and out like he was a snake.

My father behaving so nicely surprised me and it seemed worth pointing out to God. I tried mentioning it before the altar every morning during my prayers. I would be kneeling and my mother would be putting on a sweatshirt over her sari as she prepared to go to the hospital and I would say, ‘Isn’t it amazing how much Daddy has changed? It is like he has taken a knife and cut all the bad parts out from inside himself and thrown them away.’

I used to say all this before the altar because to me the altar was like an open microphone that broadcast whatever was said in front of it to wherever God might be in the universe.

Time kept passing, though. There was a day in November when it rained very hard and the trees lost all their leaves at once. Then Thanksgiving came and I thought, soon it will be Christmas and after that there will be New Year and in the coming year there won’t have been a single day in which Birju had walked or talked.

‘Are things getting worse?’ I asked. It was night and I was lying on my mattress and
God was sitting beside me, smoking a cigarette.

‘What do you think?’

‘They seem to be.’ God nodded, sighed. ‘At least the insurance company is paying the bills.’

‘Yes.’

Because of the cowboy hat, it wasn’t possible to see God’s face. God said, ‘You need to think of the good as well as the bad.’

‘I know.’

‘Your father is behaving well. He has become a good man because of the accident.’

I had not meant to ask this but I said, ‘Why don’t you make Birju better?’

God ignored the question. ‘There is some good in everything that happens.’

‘What are three minutes to you?’ I asked. ‘Just get rid of the three minutes Birju was in the pool.’

God sighed.

‘Three minutes,’ I said.

‘Presidents die in less time than that. Planes crash in less time than that.’

I didn’t speak.

‘I can’t tell you what good things will come because of the accident.’

This was usually the time to start speaking of my future fame. I opened my eyes. My mother was on her side, a blanket pulled up to her neck. She looked like an ordinary woman. It surprised me that you couldn’t tell, just by looking at her, that every day, from morning to evening, she sat in a hospital room beside a bed that held her brain-damaged son.

T
here were not many nursing homes which we could afford and which also took
patients like Birju. In December a space in one of these finally opened. The nursing
home was in New Jersey. We would be leaving Arlington. This frightened me. Leaving
Arlington felt like we were giving up; it felt like we were accepting what had
happened. I decided I had to pray; I decided I had to pray all the time.

Because Christmas season was a holy time, I thought prayers during this period
would be especially potent. Now if I were at school and sitting at my desk and
suddenly thought of God, I wouldn’t worry about embarrassing myself and instead
would close my eyes and ask God to help Birju. If I were watching television and
thought of God, I would press my hands together before me and whisper, ‘Hare
Rama, Hare Krishna.’ My mother wouldn’t let me fast but I began throwing away my
school lunch. I also tried holding my breath for a moment longer than necessary and
asking God to give the unused breaths to Birju.

The more I prayed, though, the more saying God’s names sounded strange. In the
mornings, I would lie face down before the altar and pray, but as I prayed I felt like I
was only acting.

We were going to be leaving Arlington in the first week of January and on
Christmas Eve my mother asked the hospital chaplain to come to Birju’s
room and pray with us. My mother and I kneeled with him beside Birju’s bed.
Afterwards, the chaplain asked my mother whether she would be attending
Christmas services. ‘Of course, Father,’ she said.

‘I’m also coming,’ I said.

The chaplain turned towards my father, who was sitting in a wheelchair with a book
in his lap.

‘I’ll wait for God at home,’ he said.

That night I lay on the sofa in the living room and watched It’s a Wonderful Life on
television. To me the movie meant that if you become unhappy enough, almost
anything can pass as happiness.
The next morning, when I arrived at the hospital with my parents, Birju was asleep on his bed while a nurse stood nearby and gave him a feeding. The nurse was holding the waxy yellow tube in her hand, a syringe in the tube’s mouth and a can of Isocal milk in one hand. Seeing Birju asleep and the tube stretched to its full length, I felt something heavy in my chest.

That day I did not want to be far from my parents and so, instead of going to the lounge with its big television, I sat with a book in a corner of Birju’s room. I sat there quietly but something felt wrong. My thoughts felt confused, like two sentences printed over each other, and periodically, for no reason, my heart would start racing.

It had been a cloudy morning and by afternoon the sky outside had grown dark. At some point my mother turned on the lights and not long after this I began crying. I tried to be quiet. I felt ashamed. I did not want my parents to notice my tears and think that I was weeping for Birju, because in reality I was crying for having to move to a new town and start in a new school.

My father was studying a thick red book in preparation for a civil-service exam and my mother was making a list of things that my father needed to buy for whatever apartment we moved to. I must have been crying for several minutes when my father noticed. ‘What’s the matter, hero?’

‘What happened?’ my mother shouted. She sounded so panicked, it was as if I were bleeding.

I didn’t know what to say and so I said, ‘I didn’t get any Christmas presents. I need a Christmas present. You didn’t buy me a Christmas present.’ And then, because I had revealed my selfishness, I began sobbing. ‘You have to give me something. I should get something for all this.’ I wiped my face with my hands. ‘Every day I come here, I should get something.’

My mother came and pulled me out of my chair and pressed me into her stomach. My father stood beside us. ‘What do you want?’ he asked.

‘What do you want?’ my mother said.

I had no answer for this and the only thing I could think was, ‘I want to eat pizza and I want candy.’
My mother stroked my hair and called me her little baby. She kept wiping my face with a fold of her sari. When I stopped crying, my parents decided that my father should take me back to my aunt and uncle’s.

On the way, my father and I stopped at a mini-mall. It was a little after five and the streetlights were on. First, my father and I went to a magazine shop and there we bought a bag of 3 Musketeers bars and a bag of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. Then we went next door to a pizza shop. The front of the shop was a glass wall and it was misted over. My father and I sat in a booth wearing our winter coats. Neither of us unzipped the coats as we ate. The pizzeria was staffed by Chinese people. On the counter, near the cash register, was a small television with a black VCR balanced on top. There were voices coming from the TV that sounded like cats. The cashier, a round-faced teenage girl, was watching the screen and smiling. Seeing her and her happiness, I thought, ‘There is something wrong with me. There is something wrong inside my head.’

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