ESSAY

Forget Him

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"Mooncake Brain" by Christina Mark

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“Look at this photograph, *ma*, look! How many men could pull off a white pinstripe suit? Doesn’t he look like a film star with that button rose in his lapel? Those directors from Pakistan were practically foaming at the mouth, badgering Abba to star in their films.

"They even wanted him in the ads, and it’s not like now when anyone can get cast in those things if they have a pretty face. They wanted him for a Pepsodent commercial once. Abba had those big, straight, white teeth like marble columns. Of course he said no to all of their offers. He was a serious man. He had a future in the country’s politics. Abba had no time for those frivolous things.

“And this one! This is my favorite photo of him. Really, it is! Look how regal he looks in his crisp white shirt, hands on his hips, like a *zomindar*. This was during one of his campaigns in Bikrampur. Oh, how the people loved him, bringing the house down with their applause and hurrahs when he got up on the podium.

“When you're older and I am gone, you will appreciate knowing the family stories. Maybe then you won’t be making such an annoyed face, hmm? Just look at this one, *ma*. Here he is standing next to President Yahya Khan. See how he is the only one standing next to the President while everyone else sits at their feet? Look at the garlands of marigold around both their necks! Abba was one of the big shots at the Muslim League party. Did I ever tell you Yahya Khan was supposed to be at your aunt’s naming ceremony? Yes, the President himself. He would have come too if he hadn’t been on a diplomatic trip somewhere in Europe. And the men at their feet in the photo? All of them are cabinet ministers now, since after Independence. If only Abba had been alive when the new country was forming... only Allah knows what could have been.”

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I look as your fingers touch the grainy black and white face of the man in our old family photo album, and I want to swat your hand away. I want to shake you by the shoulders and wake you up from this reverie. The photographs in the old album that spans across our laps, resting on our knees bundled together on the living room couch, are hazy to me at best even though they’re only inches away from my face. The sharper images are the ones that I keep in the photo album in my mind. Mine, unlike yours, are not black and white. They are in full color. They don’t fade, yellow, or streak with age. They are crisp because, Amma, you’ve painted them in my mind, stroke by descriptive stroke.

Amma, while you gush about your father, this is the image I want to pluck from my mind and show you: your Abba, my grandfather, folded up on the bed in your childhood home with his knees pressed against his chest like a fetus. His face is twisted from the pain of the

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ulcers that tear apart his stomach. Then, another image: your Abba sitting up now on that same bed with his pant leg rolled up to expose the soft white of his thigh as the doctor teaches him how to inject pethidine to numb the pain. This is how it began, you said. Why can't you recall it now?

Why can't you recall the scars that began to mar the skin of his thighs beneath the cover of his slim, ironed dress pants? In college, when I am writing a paper on the opioid epidemic, I learn that this is called skin popping. There are other photos in my mind, ones that you've put there: my grandfather's white kurta translucent with sweat and clinging to his back, the edges of him blurry with the shaking that comes with the withdrawals. These are the images we keep hidden and barely ever talk about: the bruise that blooms on my grandmother's back hidden under the folds of her sari, the empty safe purged of her jewellery and heirlooms in the dead of night, the meals on your plate shrinking to near nothing when the money is running out, even though your father still wears his expensive silk shirts and drives his Mercedes top down. It is always this that matters to us, the fine, polished exterior for the world to see, even when the foundations are infested and crumbling.

I thumb the edge of the final photograph in my mind's eye, afraid to turn it over, bring it into focus. I wish I could erase it, Amma, from your eyes which have witnessed it and from my mind where I've inherited it, but I want you to look at it now even when the truth of it will burn like looking directly into the heart of the Sun. It is your father's body on the floor, blood pooling around his head like a halo, his fingers wrapped around the gun that glints menacingly. His eyes are glassy and still like the eyes of a fish, but peer into them. Do you see the cowardice? The brutality? The selfishness? Do you see your inheritance of the debts he left behind? Do you see the fate of my grandmother, the bravest woman I know, sacrificing everything to raise two daughters on her own? Tell me, why do you love him still?

When you turn the page of that photo album on our laps, I snap back to reality. I look at you, Amma, and I see your eyes flood with joy as your fingers trace the outline of your father's hands holding you, a toddler, against his chest in this photo. I want to dive headfirst into the black and white world of the photograph and snatch you from my grandfather's grasp. I want to rock you to sleep in my arms and the words of my lullaby will say, "Forget him, forget him, forget him."

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