

Prologue

Not us but them, not we but they.

And years later, when they look back at what they gave up,
when they turn back the pages of their books, when they reminisce, and
when the moments of sometimes good, many an awful, and the
downright horrible, appear again, their attempts at reconciliation
and forgiveness and peace of thought, the majority of those attempts
half-hearted and theoretical, their individual reflections
paint in entirety their stories.

This story.

This city.

This story is three different stories intertwined.

Their ideas of love, family and trust.

Their notions of freedom, culture and religion.

Their thoughts, their self-awareness and deprecation.

Choices and circumstances, evil and ill thought of here,
necessary and ill timed there.

And in their looking back,

in their desires to change,
to re-conjure a regret,

to re-imagine an anecdote,

turns and movements are explained,
secrets are discovered,
and intentions become known.

Theirs is a tale of falling short. And what could have been.
Comedic and tragic.

Theirs is also small town angst,
second tier ambitions,
second hand dreams.

And three different stories.
Three ways of looking back.

Love In the Age of Infatuation

We became infatuated with what we did not have, with what we saw on TV. And in our obsession with what was sold to us, we found common ground.

We found that we had this ever-growing need to imitate that. It countered the attachment to Indianess that any fondness of Hindi music and movies might have brought forth.

To be looked at as anything but this perfect embodiment of a Khasi male was blasphemous. And that idea of perfection was obviously cajoled and embarrassingly made up. Fictitious and fragmented, rickety and opaque, it mirrored what every patriotic, nationalistic, son of the soil was shouting- a singular society of closed borders and aspirations.

We saw everything and thought of them pure and authentic, free of any influence, current or bygone. We were original, our ideas, our methods, our way of living, our geography, our history.

The idea of being Indian was a frustrating matter of fact, a provoking fact of being. Belonging to something that we clearly had no semblance of connection with, no resemblance in like and culture, infuriated us.

Novice graffiti of Khasi pride adorned our walls.

“Khasi by Blood, Indian by Accident.” Never had a sentence been so apt, so perfect, so small, so exclusive. And we lapped it up. And we prioritized it. We put it above everything else.

We saw it as the definition of what we were trying to achieve. The tagline to our goals. Our goals of being on our own. That we were Khasis and not Indians.

That our Indianess came not from a sense of being but an accident of consequence. That, without our consent, we became part of a country that had neither respect for us nor understanding of our culture. That, without our approval, we were forced to have our resources and lands exploited and manipulated and transferred to the rest of India to build their highways and light their roads.

And in our daily rants we discovered purpose and our shared sense of achievement. We were mostly boys and men, aware of our standing in a world that paid little attention to us, in a society that placed bigger responsibility on the shoulders of our mothers and sisters.

Our exclamation of this perfect Khasi society was blurred by our exasperation of a community that shortchanged us, that transferred property to daughters, that was matrilineal.

But how do you blame your shortcomings on one of your own? You find a target, an easy target. One that will probably be too scared, too timid to fight back.

Maradona

Maradona Syiem, whose demeanour was mocked by
schoolmates, younger and elder, by cousins, first,
second and third, who

read all the Harry Potter books twice and wrote poetry
about belonging, unrequited love, fatherhood, Jesus, and
acceptance, who

preferred coffee to tea, vanilla ice-cream to
strawberry, Physics to History, who

could run fast, who

lost a best friend and a few more
to rumours, who

kept everyone's secret in the closet, who

hung posters of the American pop stars Britney Spears, Christina
Aguilera, N'SYNC, and the Backstreet Boys on
the walls of a bedroom that he shared with an elder
brother who

found him strange and girly
who picked out and colour-coordinated
clothes,
at him directly when they spoke
and disgust,

and called him sissy and *hijra*,
his mother's *jainsem* and work
who wished his father looked
and not in annoyance, shame
who

never leant to kick a football
uncles, and elder brother tried to teach,

no matter how hard his father,
who

was born after the 1986 World Cup
great Argentinian player,

and named after the
whom

schoolmates, younger and elder, cousins,
Maradona to tease and demean,

first, second, and third called
who

wanted to change, to be not what he was,
wouldn't look at in annoyance,
called out his father's name

to be something his father
shame and disgust
when

they beat him to a pulp and left him
Church on a rainy
after the congregation

to die outside St. Augustine's
and deserted Sunday evening
had returned home.

Not From Here

On the first floor of a house built in
transferred matrilineally,
colours and scents of
twenty nine states,

nineteen sixty three on land
dilapidated and a mismatch of
eighty seven spices from

fifty six year-old Shiningstar Bread Warjri
continues to bring bad luck
counting past the proverbial seven and
eighteen wrinkles, two light-brown eyes and seven dark spots.

looks at a broken mirror that
even in year eleven and
sees regret,

Regret from five sons and their mother
tense, and a *peon*'s salary wasted
quarter of daily Indian-made foreign liquor.

who speak of him in the past
on a half and a

Eighteen wrinkles that ages him six years
eleven under less than decent lighting.

and sometimes ten or

Two light-brown eyes
photographs he keeps hidden in a drawer,

from a father not from here,
from a father he'd never known,
from a father of two black and white
from a father of his imagination.

And seven dark spots from the tribal sun?

Shiningstar Bread Warjri's skin is freckled, almost foreign, and a
source
of intrigue, gossip and hearsay

in his town of too-many languages, stunted dreams, and seventy
five houses of Gods who compete for loyalty, gullibility,
and a tenth of your salary.

His skin is light, almost white, and the result of a brown half
Khasi half Muslim mother
who ran away from her father's house,

an arranged marriage,
and a share of ancestral property,

and a white English father who ran away from him and his
mother, responsibility and duty,
and a third-world country.

