

MADE IN JAPAN

In early 1984, when I was nine years old, Father gave me something that changed my life ...

‘Wow!’

Excitement trumped ignorance, even after I removed it from cardboard case and thoroughly inspected everything between the shiny plastic corners.

‘Walkman!’ he said.

‘It can walk?’ I screamed.

He schooled me; what buttons to push, how to load tapes, fix headphones; within moments, the world around me went silent, even Mother, despite her yelling.

‘So Expensive!’ she scolded her husband.

Father raised his fat hand, palm forward—like both a Buddhist and a dam. The question of whether or not he was spoiling me should not spill into argument; they’d been fighting for the last few months on other matters already.

Mother had her reasons to be cross; Father’s promotion the previous year had kept him out of our lives for extended periods.

‘They send me to Tokyo!’ he had justified and gloated together, defending his Firm’s decision, boasting need to be out for weeks, once even over a month at a stretch. ‘And it’s not like I don’t bring back anything for you.’

Which was true. Despite Father’s prolonged absences, our home had grown more crowded: with things. A television (the biggest in the neighborhood), porcelain tea set (the smallest), rice cooker (sizing not applicable; no one knew what it was). Hard to afford and attain duty paid trinkets from land of rising sun set like treasures in every room of our also recently moved into single-story bungalow (more Tokyo trips would be required for constructing additional floor).

I liked not just how the Walkman sounded, but felt, repeatedly bashing my thumb on + above Volume, thwarting mother’s onslaught by turning her into a mime.

Father was not so lucky; even formidable Madam Prime Minister—Indira Gandhi on Newspaper front page couldn’t shield him from Mother’s screams. And then it started to rain. Father set aside the drenched leader and hugged Mother; the usually reliable valve to turn off her tears—usually. My presence hampered recovery.

‘Shoo!’

Good thing he pointed toward the door, otherwise I’d have thought he was just whistling.

Uninterested (and unaware) of how my parents reconciled, I left with headphones intact; unaware (but interested) to learn more about this thing called a Virgin. Madonna was extolling its merits quite passionately.

At school, thanks to the Walkman, my popularity sprouted. Classmates lined up for

a listen.

But not without payment; Chemistry, Math, History, English; selected desperados created tailor made homework with my name on it for a whiff of a single mass produced track. Like a doctor, I carefully fitted the foam over their ears, operated the complicated machinery myself, providing each of them with shock therapy of music. And they all came back for more by turning in more homework.

Except for this one kid, Rajiv, the class flunky. A hamster could score higher grades. So, with no reciprocation on offer, I dismissed him from the listening line.

But I was wrong about designation; Rajiv turned out to be a rat.

Word spread—higher. I was summoned unceremoniously to the Vice Principal, Brother McCourt's office.

Frown mimicked creases on pristine white robe. He examined the Walkman. 'Gift from your father, you say?'

'Yes,' I gulped.

Brother McCourt weighed my *present* in his freckled palm, tolling future (imminent) punishment. Pupils of all faiths enrolled in our school, but discipline was exclusively Catholic; the haves weren't permitted to flaunt to the have-nots. Madam Prime Minister had tried something similar during India's National Emergency, but had failed to *convert*.

Homonyms were still six grades away, but Brother McCourt's cane was less than six paces afar.

'Bamboo! And he stuffs the hollow inside with mud, safety pins, holy water, blood,

cobras ...' so the rumors went.

The cane blinded my dreading eyes even before the Vice Principal planned to reach for it. And my hearing was affected too. That's why I had to ask him to repeat what he said; turning to him to be sure I had heard right the first time.

'Got any Frank Sinatra?'

Brother McCourt was from Ireland, but in matters of music, Italian ancestry voices got his rose beads tapping. In a sense, he was following the bible: Love Thy Neighbor.

Even though it wasn't my plan, it had gone *My Way*. I bypassed the cane by passing through his office everyday during second period. The Walkman was placed discreetly back in my bag during break time when the classroom was empty. Naturally, I had to give up my precocious entrepreneurial venture of selling rhyme for results. But I learnt about something even more valuable in turn: compromise.

Back home, with added age and gifts at her disposal, Mother too, compromised the position of visitors.

'Uff! So many things my husband keeps buying!' she complained, delicately handing her guests the delicately crafted teacups.

They sipped—smiled.

'He's never around to take me to Cinema even!' Mother pointed the remote at the gigantic TV, wherein the popular female news anchor's trademark flower in her hair, blossomed bigger than it did in anyone else's living room.

'Won't you stay for dinner?' Mother insisted. 'Really. No trouble. The rice cooks itself.'

She had finally learnt how to heat rice in the fancy cooker, but had forgotten how to temper folk.

It was a customary courtesy; her female friends visited our new home with food. Mother accepted the offerings, didn't send her guests back out empty handed, making sure their empty dishes were topped back with jealousy.

Mother had an odd way of enjoying her Japanese possessions; revived enthusiasm for outsiders. Her husband's absences made her sulk, and paying the pain forward purchased remedy.

I on the other hand, loved my bribe wholeheartedly. Father started staying out longer than seasons turned, but *The Byrds* attested that so did everything else. Of course I missed Father too, but that's the advantage of youth; memories are still formative. You're nearer to the start of the rolling tape, not the end, or worse, like Mother, in the middle, not sure if the best chorus is already over ... if you even like the song.

Upon each return, Father contracted more in size, just as his luggage of gifts inflated.

'So thin you become!' Mother shrieked.

'Healthy!'

'No!' she looked at me to back her up. 'Papa looking weak, yes?'

Father sprouted a clanking plastic bag containing a dozen new tapes.

'Healthy!' I concurred.

Within days, he was off again.

Later that year, I inherited Father's healthiness: vertically. During the annual class

photo, I was aghast at having been demoted to first row, where the shortest students posed. Despite Van Halen's *Jump* lessons, I remained stunted.

A growing boy requires parental care. Already left with only one for most of the time, I was short changed further by Mother's childish resolve. The Tokyo items were the only alternative to spousal company; became a perfunctory addiction. She watched the TV (not what was on), cleaned the teacups constantly (though only drank once a day), and made rice for every meal; despite knowing that wheat chapatis were my preferred staple. And numerous other deliveries from Japan filled her days. She hardly had time for me; playing catch up with the gifts, their time zone always ahead of her own.

Oh well. At least I wasn't in America; the music hadn't died.

But my class did shrink one day. Three Sikh students had been pulled out of school, on account of members in their family being pulled out of living. Her own Sikh bodyguards had assassinated Madam Prime Minister. Mourning their beloved, vengeful fundamentalists marched the streets, seeking Sikh prey, answering Tina Turner's question, *What's Love Got To Do With It?*

Everything and nothing, I guess.

Just like Brother McCourt had offered me a deal with hush-hush usage of the Walkman, so did he reach out to our Sikh students' parents—Evangelize. But most Sikhs declined the assistance of Saints. Faith is thicker than blood I read somewhere, maybe. I held a different theory: if everyone in the world had a Walkman, playing music all the time, there would be no violence. *Imagine*. But good sense had died with John Lennon already.

Regardless, the calamity eventually ran its course, and after the blots of blood finally dried off the streets, I noticed another red dot previously missed—on my Walkman. Like a holy symbol, right above the inscription: REC.

Father hadn't explained what that button on the far end did. No matter. I still had one tape to listen to before his next visit. The final one that I slid into the deck had a plain see through cover. No name, design, nothing. A blank that he must have gotten for free, I had thought, and that's why I hadn't played it so far.

Nothing could be said of musical ability, or any music at all: an unfamiliar voice, giggling, heavily accented English. And then, my ears vibrated with familiarity.

'Mummy! Mummy!' I ran up to her, excited.

Mother begrudgingly put away a poppy flower print lampshade that she was dusting for the fourth time that day, and complied.

Maybe the earphones headband was uncomfortable, tugged at her hair. Why else would she gnash her teeth? Especially after hearing Father's voice, that too, hilariously mimicking the foreign woman's on the tape ... *'I laav you ... I laav you...'* Soft, then baritone, laughter throughout. The joyous duet drummed inside Mother's ears, inexplicably spilling the opposite from her eyes ... tears.

Confused, and eager to switch her mood, I switched tapes. But even Cyndi Lauper couldn't convince Mother that *Girls Just Want To Have Fun*.

I couldn't figure out why the recording had been so baleful for her. I listened to it again myself, incessantly, till I grew exhausted, fell asleep while the tape played on, reels coiled up inside, messy ... like my parent's bed; static wrinkled sheets ... like creases on

Brother McCourt's robe ... like lipstick stamped letters Mother found in Father's locked dresser, and crushed ... like dismembered remains of every gift she smashed from Japan, including my Walkman (that's when I began crying too). Father had spent years filling our home. Mother emptied it in a day, including herself and me. She grabbed my hand and we walked for miles before locating a non-Suzuki taxi.

Now I'm older. Have a family of my own. Some things haven't changed; communal violence is still around, and, like Father, I too travel for work often. My company sources products from many places. The new music everywhere isn't much to my liking. But in this globally competitive economy, I'm at least glad most things today are made in China.

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