

Ganpati's Garden

By Nikhil Wadhvani

“*Naana*, do you remember when you planted these?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Well, which tree is this?”

“Apple tree.”

“And this one?”

“I don’t,” he said, shaking his head.

My grandfather *Naana* purchased his first plot of land nearly half his lifetime ago. In the back of his home, he dug up the yard and laid fresh soil and grass. Using bricks and concrete, he shaped small plots of earth, about a foot wide and a foot deep. In each one, he dipped his fingers—thumb, middle, and fore—encircling a seed, inches deep into dirt. Together with his children, he planted roses, apples, oranges and figs.

I was told many stories of my *Naana*—a man, who, with one look, could turn his children cold and send them running; who, before he was retired, never washed a single dish after dinner. He was and is still the tallest in our family. Broad shouldered, fair skinned. You would not think he is Indian. When he lived in New York City, of the four of them—him, my mother, uncle, and grandmother—only he could take the subway from Queens to Manhattan and then to Brooklyn and stand next to the men at the sugar factory and blend in. During the early 70s, he grew out his sideburns, so no one was ever the wiser of where he was from, or where he lived, or how much he owned. Most thought he was from the south. Gold framed glasses, tanned skin, thin, graying mustache. For decades, he was the president of our Indian Association in California. He raised money to fully fund childrens’ educations back in Bombay. Many of them are now engineers, like he was. My *Naana* demanded respect with his presence. My uncle, an orthopedic specialist and trauma surgeon, when asked, “Why did you become a doctor,” always answers, “Because that man told me so,” and points his finger at my *Naana*.

But he also kept a birdbath in the corner of the garden and on afternoons sat in the sun and watched the sparrows and blue jays play. When I was young, he lifted me—when he could still lift me—to the top of the red fence to keep almonds for the squirrels to eat. Both my mother and grandmother remind me of these stories, perhaps so that I remember him for the man he was, instead of the man I stand over now.

Today, *Naana* is only half his height. I wheeled him into the front yard to get more sun. It was mid-day and the light was strong. He squinted his eyes, and I placed a red, Holden Caulfield hat snug over his ears. Just the right amount of shade, just the right amount of sun, I thought. We both stared out into the driveway and the empty cul-de-sac. In the front yard is another garden, this one made entirely of rock and gravel. Cross sections of a tree stump were cut and placed as stepping-stones. Dark brown against white. I rested my hands on his shoulders and wiped bits of food and crumbs from his shirt.

“Warm today,” I said.

At the edge of the garden stands a large sprawling juniper tree. It's been there for as long as I can remember, longer than the red porch *Naana* built for the backyard, or the gray ramp we had installed over the steps leading up to the front door. Its roots jut out beneath the sidewalk, raising the concrete slabs to a tilt. Its branches reach and arch over each other in odd and curious directions and its strange, unkempt form stands out against the hacienda, stucco facade of the house.

"*Naana*, which tree is this," I ask.

"*Ganpati*," he says.

"*Ganpati*?"

Like most Hindu families, mine has always worshipped *Ganesha*, the elephant-headed god, the inventor and remover of obstacles. He is commonly seen wearing gold and orange clothing, his four outstretched arms holding various items—sweets, lotus blossoms, an axe, an elephant goad, and sometimes a noose. His curled trunk is said to represent Om, the Hindu symbol of universal and worldly peace. Supposedly, he saved my life once. When I was a boy, while visiting my great-grandmother at her flat in India, a Hindu priest had told me, *Ganesha* saved me in a car accident in 1999—the only year I have ever been in a car accident. My *Naana* was driving that day. I asked if I could sit in the front seat. He said no, and I screamed and screamed. He grabbed me with his giant hand, wrapped around my tiny arm, and threw me in the back seat. A cold man, my *Naana*, I had thought then. Later, we were backing out of a driveway, and a girl in a red sports car smashed into our passenger door. Each day we worship *Ganpati* to ward off the obstacles of our lives, to protect us with courage and wisdom. Since I was a boy, I was taught to worship him to keep my thoughts free of fears.

"That's not a *Ganpati*," I laughed.

"It is *Ganpati*," he said, and coughed. "I planted it."

I applied *Naana*'s breaks and left to stand directly in front of the tree. How long has he lived here?

And then I saw it, in the branches, in the clumps of bristle and green. One branch twists and descends into a long curlicue in the center, with the grace of an Om; others bend and fold inward to form arms and legs; from the left, one extends forward like *Ganpati*'s relaxed foot, and others reach out and away and toward me in all directions; and one giant branch, made of many smaller ones twined together, budding tiny green needles, arcs over the entire body like an aura.

Eight years have passed since *Naana*'s stroke, and since then I have watched his body stiffen and petrify. I placed my hands on his shoulders.

"Do you remember when you planted that?"

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