

MOVING TRUTH(S)

Queer and Transgender Writings on Family

with

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Flying Chickadee

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The Picture Beyond the Frame

Rajat Singh

This isn't a coming-out story. It's a "coming-in" story, an invitation within the frame, into new kinds of home and family.

The apartment I share with my boyfriend is decorated with photographs of the two of us, scattered across crowded bookshelves and walls painted elephant-grey. Our eyes in each picture hold the gaze of the onlooker: they stare back at those who celebrate the happiness we share in each photo. When family comes over, we can either put the photos away, or we can display them, and let the smiles in the photographs intimate to our dear ones stories of our sweet memories. Our smiles are material reminders that at that very moment of a camera flashing, we were happy. Perhaps because we were together, perhaps because we were surrounded with loved ones – or perhaps because, in our hearts, we knew that this

photograph would travel and reveal its subjects' happiness to anyone who looked upon it.

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My nerves were firing all over the place as I struggled to ready my home for their visit. I hadn't eaten breakfast that day, too nervous to get anything down and too worried about creating more work for me to clean up. I spent the morning scrubbing every surface of my one-bedroom apartment, and snapping at my boyfriend, Nikhil, not a few times to stay out of my way.

"You can't just leave your stuff there – are you going to pick that up – can you help – no, just don't bother." The tension was building and I had no place else to release it except onto the closest body that would take it.

My dad parked the car on my tree-lined block on West Seventy-Third Street, just as I was running out to pick up essentials from the bodega, like cereal, milk and flowers. And of course, there had to be wine on hand. My parents don't drink that much, but since I didn't know their preferences, I'd bought too much. I would end up drinking most of it.

My parents, who live in Boston, don't make me anxious, and I love them immensely. But this was their first visit to New York staying at my apartment that I shared with Nikhil. That weekend, they had been invited to a wedding in the city. Their decision to stay with me was financial, no doubt, but it had deeper, more emotional implications. As much as I was apprehensive about what might happen, I secretly wanted to go to that place of discomfort. I needed all of us to go there as a group, to break some of the *politesse*, and to enter a space from where it wouldn't be possible to turn around.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, or how to articulate what I wanted to happen. It's frustrating to think that some of us don't have the language to describe the pictures of family that we want to imagine, but that inevitably exist outside our experience. When words cannot be spoken, some feelings seem almost impossible. But this essay suggests new ways that, confronted with the limits of language, we can reframe the conventions of what we think of and accept as "family."

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My mother had broached the subject with me weeks earlier while visiting me on her own. We were sitting in my Nani's room at her nursing home in Flushing, the faint beep of a machine next to her bed making its presence rudely felt. I reflected nostalgically on the fact that, after my Nana passed and his apartment was rented to strangers, my parents' visits to New York had become fewer and more riddled with tension. My mother had been displaced in a very new way, and I felt helpless to ease her feelings of disconnection.

In many ways, I am the good Indian son, and yet I have disappointed my parents on many occasions. Since starting graduate work, my parents have been helping me financially, which has made me more conscious of what filial obligations mean and how they manifest themselves materially. "I couldn't turn away the very people who were paying for my place," I scoffed, imagining that an American would surely tell his parents to stay in a hotel.

Two years earlier, I had told my parents that Nikhil and I were living together, a fact that certainly took them time to come to terms with. And now, I welcomed my parents into Nikhil's and my apartment without a second thought. But a part of me also secretly wanted the four of us to

get closer, to share new experiences, and to engage with scary and uncomfortable emotions.

That Saturday in April, my parents arrived, bearing gifts and Tupperware filled with home-cooked Punjabi fare. My dad even contributed a bottle of red and one of white, and I blushed, thinking of how silly I had been, running errands and rushing to get everything that I thought we might need for a weekend of potential awkwardness. The secret joy (and misfortune) of parents is that sometimes they know what you need better than you do.

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I remember how, when I was a child, my mother had kept a drawer of old *dupattas*. These were the head-scarves that no longer belonged to a Punjabi *sabwar-kameez*, or had become frayed, or out of fashion. They weren't suitable for wearing out in public on Saturday evenings to fancy dinner-parties. But I gaily appropriated her cast-offs. Some were unfortunately garish in color or pattern, and I never played with those, but I certainly did have my favorites. The *dupattas* weren't for me, and yet I was given access to their mystical powers.

They were both fetish and fantasy, allowing me a way to materially explore a world that was denied to me. I danced to my favorite 90s Bollywood item-numbers, tying the *dupattas* into elaborate configurations across my body, mimicking the hip-thrusts and sultry moves that constituted my steady diet of Hindi movies.

In this private world created just for me, fantasies became animated, away from the judgmental *nazar* of strangers and aunties' raised eyebrows. I can't recall any photographs of "dress-up" time having been taken when I was young. Such a material reminder would have made guests, who took sight of them in my home's many photo albums, feel an

invasive pleasure in viewing my innermost Desires. And I would have been left with a hot burn of shame in my body, prickling my insides.

Some parents know you better than you know yourself. I can't imagine how painful it was for them to see those moments of playtime realized in their son, and I can't imagine how painful it was for them to make allowances for it.

Their son was so pretty.

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At the time of my parents' visit, Nikhil and I had been together for four years. This wasn't the first time they were meeting him. Nikhil was in his last months of medical school, and I was halfway through my Master's program. He was everything my parents envisioned I would be – handsome, respectful, intelligent. And a future doctor, no less. I thought that graduate school would in some way redeem me in their eyes for the fragile promise I implicitly broke when I told them I was gay.

Both of them immigrants from India, my parents met and married hastily. Sometimes I'm too afraid to ask them why they chose one another, or whether difficult circumstances and fears enjoined them to one another. My parents share a quiet closeness between them, something like what Mira Jacob calls a "karmic trade-off." Their marriage wasn't arranged, yet it has spoken to me as tinged with a quiet indifference. They have shown me what honest love looks like, as well as silent longing.

They settled in Boston, raising me and my younger sister Rachel to live humbly. Our apartment was small. My upbringing conditioned me to take up less space in the world than I feel I deserve. I wanted things. I still do. My parents pushed Rachel and me to pursue ambitious careers – professions they themselves couldn't pursue. For them, these careers

meant an entrée into worlds from which they didn't want us excluded. Growing up, we lived at the margins of our doctor-friends' lives, Indians who had left the *desh* for a piece of that cookie-cutter American dream: a chance at happiness and a big house in the suburbs.

Nayan Shah writes of the tension queer Indian-Americans have to reconcile between cultural and familial bonds, along with notions of dependence, as they butt against dominant Western notions that privilege the independence of the individual. But coming out means different things to everyone, and the constraints that bind each of us commit us to sometimes-contradictory political projects.

As I wrote earlier: this isn't a coming-out story. It's a "coming-in," an invitation within the frame, into new kinds of home and family.

I made the decision to tell my parents I was gay, several years earlier, in large part because Nikhil had become so important in my life. Inviting my parents to stay with us, in my imagination, would mean a new sense of homecoming. Our New York apartment that weekend wasn't just a place to stay, but the space in which an emerging family would grow together. Together, we would remember those bittersweet pasts that had brought us here, painful histories of 1947 and uneasy struggles to acclimate to strange and lonely new lands halfway around the world in the 1980s. And together we would imagine that our futures didn't seem so impossible when my parents saw their *beta* happy. Even his love, outside the constraints of their experience, wouldn't seem so impossible.

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Nikhil came home right around tea-time – a 5PM ritual never missed at my parents' home. Home now seemed to be anywhere they could have their quotidian traditions. Fully caffeinated, they dressed in the bedroom. Their Indian outfits were sophisticated and distinctly *not* showy.

My mother has never worn Designer *saris* (I've tried to encourage her into purchasing a few), her tastes always veering on the side of stylish but not flashy. Her mother, after all, is famous for having great taste. I won't inherit any of the gold jewelry for my demure, wheatish-complexioned wife. But I did manage to steal our family's aesthetic flair.

My mother's Soir de Paris perfume wafted across the room, stirring memories in me of my parents dressing for parties when I was a child. She hand-selected the gold jewelry that would match just right. My father poured himself a Scotch before leaving the house, which I never developed a taste for, but always appreciated its rich, amber warmth. This was a dance choreographed over years of intimate familiarity with one another.

Their stylized rituals girded them to face a roomful of shallow Indian-Americans, those with the big-shot careers, whose children lived in Manhattan, like me, but weren't scholars or queer: their sons were self-important investment bankers and their daughters were marriageable and ready to meet me.

My mother wore her characteristic giddiness (that masked an inner nervousness). Dad wore a naturally calm and collected air, but he was excitedly talking to Nikhil and getting directions from him – to dictate to the cab-driver, no less. My mother glided out of the bedroom in a marigold and magenta chiffon *sari*, her slender fingers reaching for a velvet clutch that matched my father's onyx-black silk *achhkan*.

Nikhil offered to take a picture of the both of them, and I could sense my mother's nerves flutter. An almost undetectable ripple of tension broke the fragilely constructed frame of our weekend. The intimacy of our weekend together, as four members of a delicately

budding family, would be made distinctly visible in the material reminder of a photograph. From that moment onward, nothing would be the same.

I didn't offer to shoot them – instead it was Nikhil. Maybe he was just being nice. Or maybe he was overstepping. But either way, he was part of a new family. Nikhil wasn't even in the picture, but in an unseen way, he *was* the picture.

Roland Barthes writes that the “blind field” is that which exists outside the frame, beyond the photograph's edges. The borders index “something already there,” yet unseen. What are the conditions that have allowed a photograph to be taken? Who captured the moment? What do we remember outside of the material reminder, and what was left out? What exists at the margins if you shift the lens slightly? This, to use Ann Stoler's words, demands “a different kind of attention to the familiar and the strange, to both what is singular and significant, and to what is intentionally askew and out of place.” And what within the frame pricks us? What about Nikhil's picture of my parents stays with me?

Taking someone's picture is a personal act, charged with intimacy and trust. Nikhil was let into a seemingly unremarkable moment, but his presence became an eruption. The material reminder of his intervention is the photograph that he subsequently retouched, printed, and framed for my parents' wedding anniversary gift a month later. The photograph captured their smiles at a moment when they were anticipating their night on the town, sure. But I like to imagine that they smiled thinking about the new forms of family they were coming to terms with.

Nikhil's photograph of Mom and Dad called on us all to rediscover the burgeoning articulations of a new family, of a new allyship. Characteristically unassuming and polite, Nikhil made little imposition, never asking me to tell my parents about him, and never asking for more

space in my life than he thought I would be comfortable sharing with him. This weekend just happened to be the one time I did ask for more space.

There was a silent acknowledgement that rippled through the room and clicked with the flash of the iPhone that evening.

It's a well-accepted notion that diasporic South Asian families don't talk. We sweep under the carpet those very uncomfortable or unthinkable admissions of personal struggle and interpersonal conflict, thereby perpetuating cultures of power that silence nonconforming voices, stories, and experiences. But what would it look like to question a culture of silence, and examine less visible forms of communication, openness, and allyship within Indian families, which may perhaps be couched in the shadows? At what point do faint glimmers of allyship emerge, and how do we know how and when to spot the inchoate?

Like some stubborn snail, I've burdened my body with a sedimentary and sentimental history of guilt and anxiety. I have had little success letting go of old pains, deep fears that my life has found paths so unimaginable to my parents' aspirations for me. That it has found expressions of happiness through languages so untranslatable to them. My wounded self tells me there are things in life that I don't have a right to claim for myself, and I continue to heed their prohibitions.

Perhaps my guilt stems from those inconvenient suspicions that the love I grew up with has been a challenged version of something else that I imagined my parents could have for one another. I carry with me the love my parents have shown my sister and me. I have been luckier than many queer people who are close to me. My parents have allowed

their children to create futures for themselves that are liberated from their own histories. New homes bring new loves.

I've never been told that I wasn't wanted, that I would be disowned, or that I didn't belong. Even still, I've internalized strong pressures to please my parents, hiding missteps and insecurities from them along the way. But my parents' coming to the U.S. has allowed them to imagine a future for a love that is not so impossible. I can live a life that I chose.

For I love freely.

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A Dent in the Universe

Sasha Duttchoudhury

Baba has always had a way of reminding me how special I am when I'm feeling discouraged or inadequate. "Do you know who you are?" he asks earnestly, excitedly and rhetorically. He reminds me what my name means; Aparajeeta, "*someone who cannot be defeated.*" He tells me I am the only Aparajeeta Duttchoudhury in the whole world, in the history of the world. The only "me" there ever was and ever will be. He recounts all the ways the universe had to conspire to give me life. He brings together science, philosophy and spirituality, to show me how slim chances came to fruition for me: life on Earth, the random collision of asteroids and the creation of the moon. It all happened for me. Baba says the space-time continuum exists for me! He says that I am the force that navigated the lives of my ancestors. Every moment in the lives of every one of my ancestors were magnetized to fall into place just for me. People had to be born, classes had to be skipped, exams had to be passed or failed, trains