

To avoid bursting into tears, my sister and I announce we are going for a walk. The rain begins to fall as soon as we step out from under the roof: in the chilly night, I wrap my arms around myself, but neither of us turn back.

Ahead, wet blades of grass glint under white lamps. The lamps, standing in a row, look like children in a school assembly. They illuminate a marble statue of Mother Mary, who regards the puddles of melted wax at her feet, the dregs of candles set down by hopeful visitors. Drops of water, still gentle, splatter on the cement around us, darkening the ground until it gleams.

I turn to Deeti: *"if our grandfather wasn't dying right here, I would truly believe we were in a hotel."*

A pool of brown water in our path distorts the white streaks of light.



I learnt the hard way, as a child, to never look around in a hospital. Curiously, I would peek into wards with open doors, kitchens, doctor's offices. On hospital beds, people lay crumpled like autumn leaves, groaning with pain. Their arms and legs pencil-thin, stabbed with tubes, chafed clean of any body hair; faces pinched, covered in oxygen masks as they gasped for breath; bed sheets stained yellow.

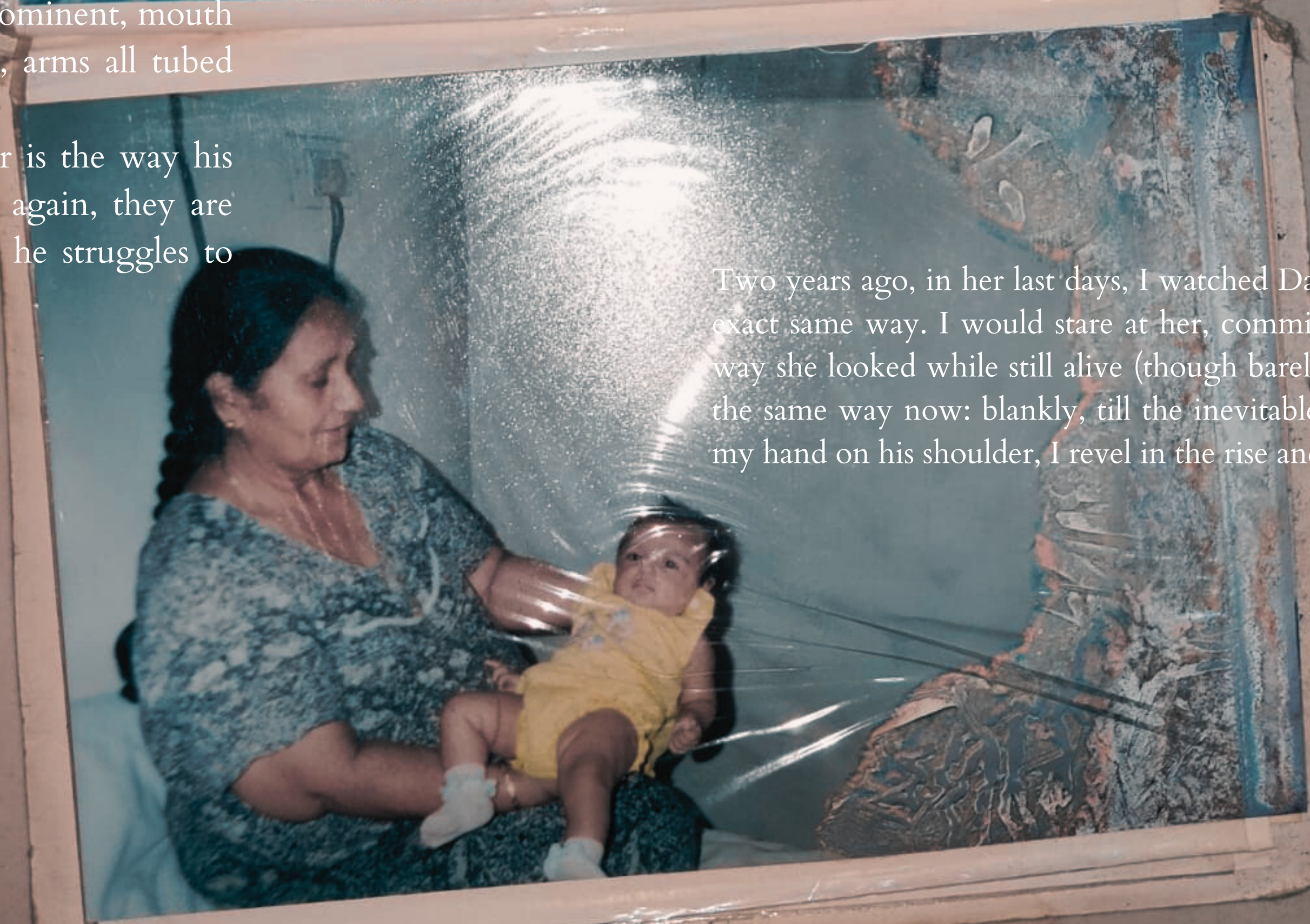
The images I saw wouldn't leave my mind for weeks after.



Now, marching through hospital passages, I make a point of looking straight ahead, like a horse wearing blinders.

I am prepared for everything I will see when I go to visit Nanu in the ICU (36, last room on the left). As an exercise to soften the blow, I try to visualise what he will look like: skin yellowish, veins prominent, mouth hidden by an oxygen mask, arms all tubed up.

What I am not prepared for is the way his white lips move: again and again, they are sucked in and thrust out as he struggles to breathe.



Two years ago, in her last days, I watched Dadi's mouth move the exact same way. I would stare at her, committing to memory the way she looked while still alive (though barely). I gaze at Nanu in the same way now: blankly, till the inevitable tears come. Placing my hand on his shoulder, I revel in the rise and fall of his chest.




Some weeks ago, I was recommended a YouTube short of Bella Hadid walking the runway for Versace. After clicking on it, I found my recommendations full of models walking the ramp.



Entranced by

SHALOM HARLOW

I watched and rewatched her walk at the Todd Oldham show. At the hospital, I make a game of cat walking across passages: long strides, legs crossing over, hands relaxed.



At 1:26am, my uncle calls to say he will reach our building in 15 minutes. I realize there is still time for me to change out of my pyjamas, and am immediately on my knees in front of the wardrobe, frantically flinging clothes out.

“ wear something Nanu would like.”

Deeti says, *“and something you’re not throwing away soon... so you can keep the clothes you see him in.”*

Looking through my clothes, I am specifically searching for items that don't mean anything to me, that I can throw away as soon as possible.

I don't ever wanna see the clothes I was wearing when my grandfather died.” Then, at the finality/reality of the statement: *“ what the fuck.”*



*MAMMA'S
OLD KURTI*



*BORING
BLACK
PANTS.*



By the time we reach, everyone is already there. Above the metal chairs where we are seated outdoors, the fan is too fast, and when I say I'm cold, I'm immediately handed two shawls. We are eleven people huddled together, recounting the past to avoid thinking of the inevitable future. In the seat next to us, a bald man in glasses wrapped in a rough blanket attempts to go to sleep. His eyes flutter open every time we speak.

“He must really regret choosing this seat,” I whisper to Deeti.



*Because none of us are willing to go home, Deeti suggests we sleep in the car:
“We can charge our phones there, too.”
“Good,” I say, “I started a new show I want to continue.”*





I have decided to finish

The Stranger

by

ALBERT CAMUS

before Nanu dies. It's 137 pages long, and Google tells me its main theme is the meaninglessness of life. *Everyone dies eventually, and their lives do not matter in the end*, fusfoo.com says, as I try to search for meaning in Nanu's life.

We spend the night distorted in the car, which is parked in the hospital's parking lot. Knees crooked, neck cramping, we can barely move.

Chhoti Nani lies in the backseat,

Mamma and Nani in the middle.

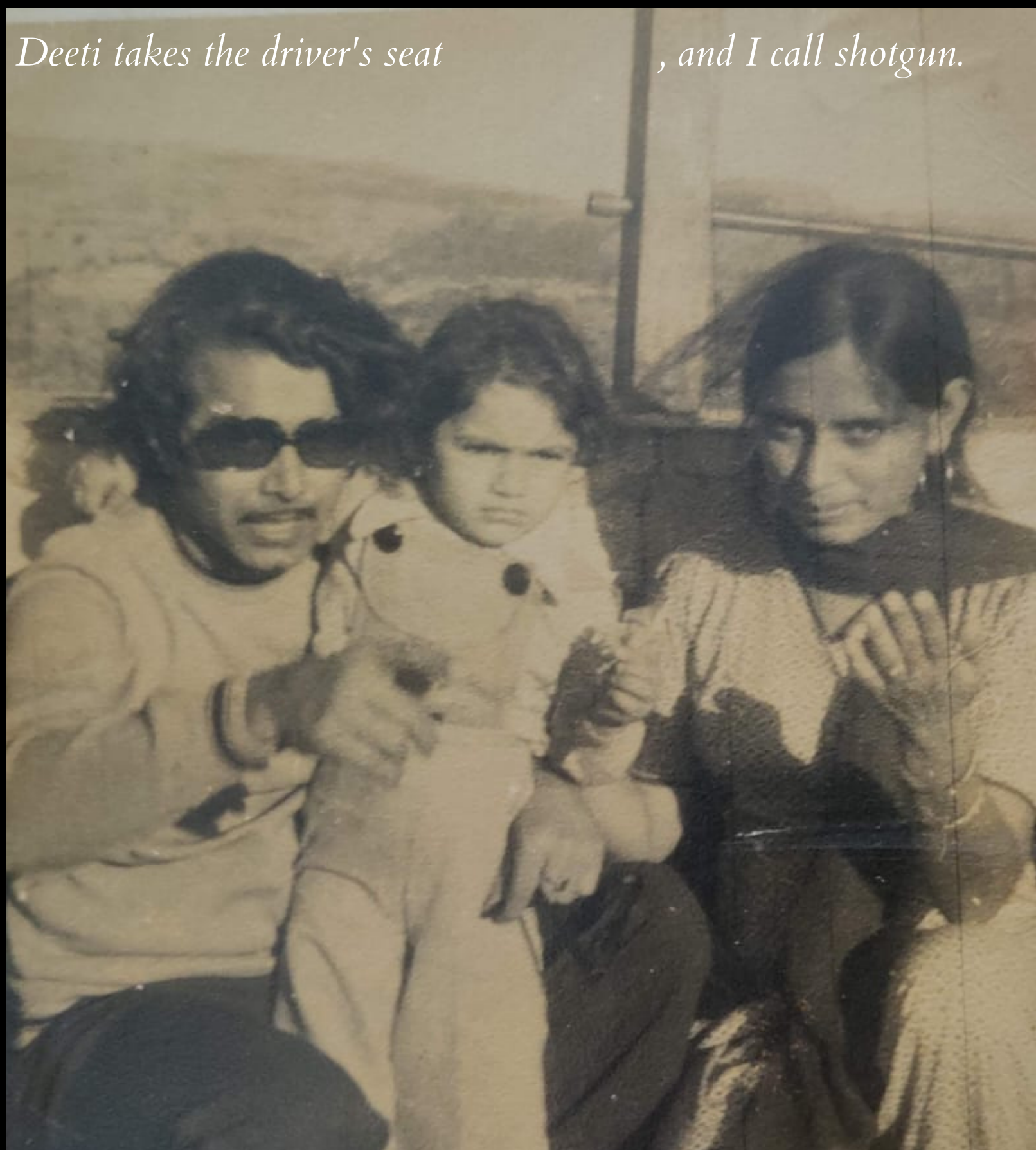
At one point, I keep my feet, covered in dry mud, up on the dashboard, and slide my body down. Because only one person is allowed to be inside the hospital, Papa is spending the night.

At around 3am, he texts: *open a window slightly for ventilation.*

The sound of the notification makes anxiety shoot through my chest. Every call, every text makes my heart drop.

(Days later, I will find out Nanu died through a text message *with profound grief and sorrow...* group:)

Deeti takes the driver's seat , *and I call shotgun.*

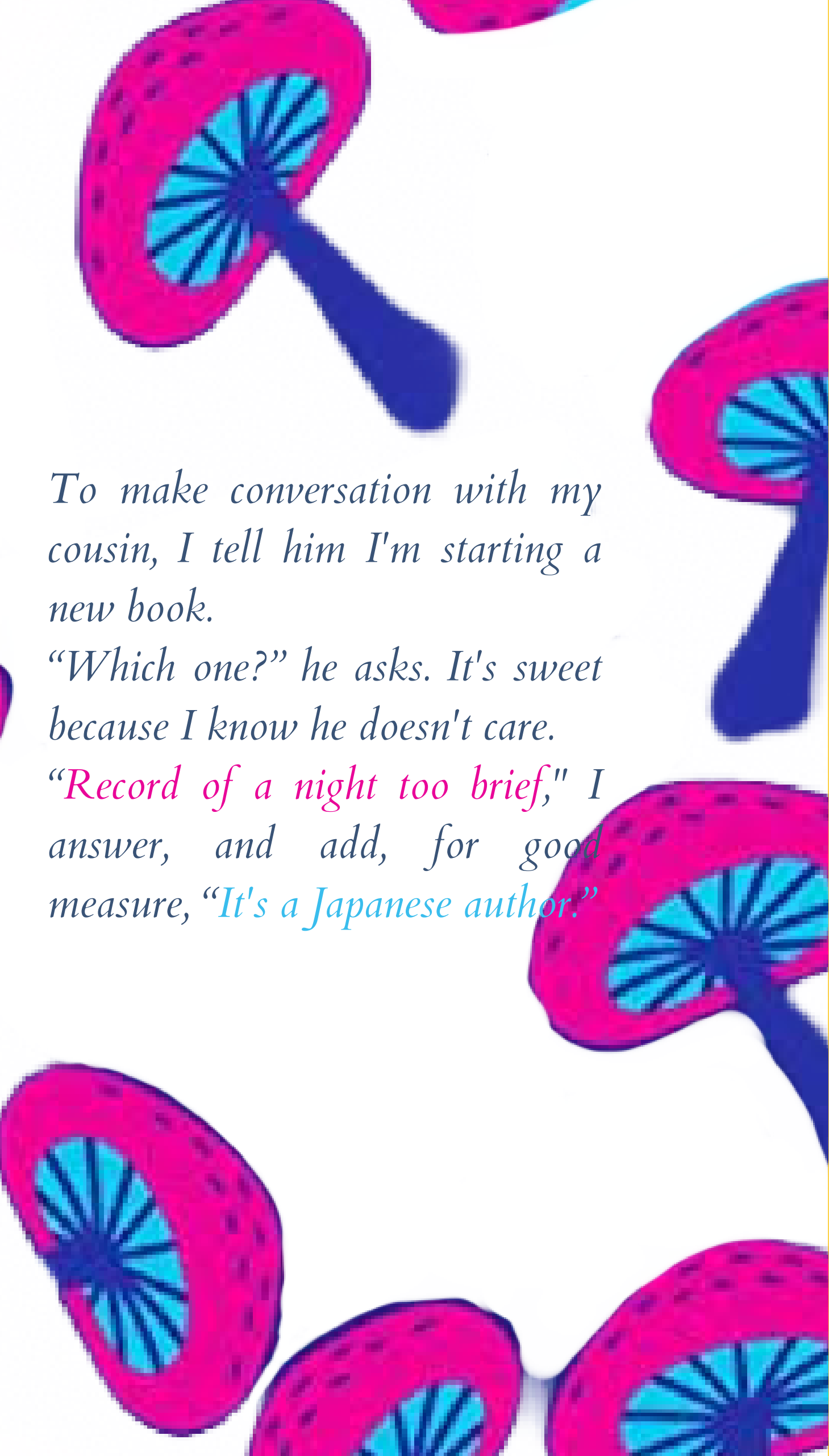


At eight in the morning, we walk right out of the car: stepping into the sun, hearing the birds chirp, I feel like a movie character who wakes up stunning.

“Well, it's morning,” Chhoti Nani says, and I feel a spike of warmth in my heart, “He made it through the night.”

Nani folds her hands, looks up at the sky, and prays.





To make conversation with my cousin, I tell him I'm starting a new book.

“Which one?” he asks. It's sweet because I know he doesn't care.

“Record of a night too brief,” I answer, and add, for good measure, “It's a Japanese author.”

In the car that afternoon, we are protected from the heat outside, cosied up in shawls with the AC on. I find a photo of Nanu from exactly one year ago. Wearing a yellow crocheted sweater, he is seated on his bed, smiling widely. I pass my phone around to everyone, say, “Look at this photo that came up!”



Nani and Chhoti Nani animatedly tell us how they saw newborn babies, wrapped in cloths, being carried down the stairs by nurses. “They were so cute, I just wanted to snatch them,” Nani says, passionately closing her hands around the air.

While my cousin is on a phone call, I see a girl about my age step out of a car. She's tall, wearing a salwar kameez, with black hair bunched into a ponytail that comes down to her waist. Banging the car door shut behind her, she walks over to the hospital gate swiftly. Dramatic scene: the wind is strong, rain pouring against her.

As she walks, I think about how she has the same energy as Shalom Harlow on the runway. Then, my eyes drift up to her face, just in time to see it crumple. When her hand reaches out for someone at the gate, I assume she is about to show the security guard her visiting pass: instead, she falls into a man's arms. Somehow, I know he is her father. Too many times, I have collapsed into my father's arms in the same way.

As she sobs bitterly, I well up: watching her is just the release I need for my own tears. Crying over Nanu makes everything too real, but crying over another girl is something I would normally do.

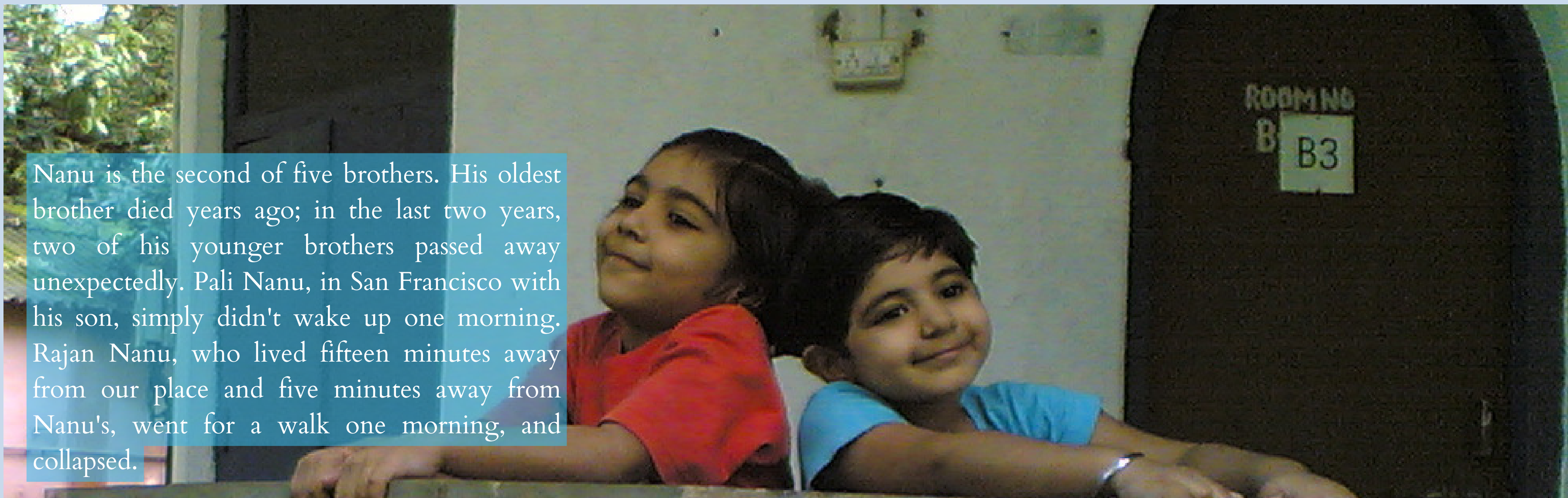
Later, I see the girl seated under a tree, and think of offering her a sip from my fresh lime soda. I imagine going up to her like a character from a movie, sitting next to her, and making her laugh. I imagine the forming of a new bond in an unexpected place as she opens up to me. I think of telling others the story of how we met, smiling sadly as we talk about new beginnings alongside endings. But she is surrounded by family, staring ahead into space, and I do not know how to approach her.

Viresh Masu comes to donate blood because apparently, when the blood bank gives you some, you are supposed to find someone who can replace it. Four years ago, I was deemed ineligible to donate blood due to being underweight, and I now take it upon myself to argue with Deeti over my current weight. “I can donate now,” I tell her proudly, “I don't weigh 45 kgs, anymore. I'm 55 kgs, at least.” “I will give you five hundred rupees if you really weigh 55 kgs,” Deeti says.


We spend at least half an hour arguing because we have nothing else to do. I am adamant I could simply walk into the blood bank and donate.

As I am making my point, Jaya Masi enters the car: “I tried to donate blood with Viresh, but they told me I can't,” she says, “My haemoglobin is only 11.5, and it's supposed to be 12.”

“Oh,” I say, “I forgot about that. Mine is 9.”

A photograph showing two children, a girl in a red shirt and a boy in a blue shirt, leaning on a balcony railing. They are looking towards the left. In the background, there is a dark door with a sign that reads "ROOM NO B3".

Nanu is the second of five brothers. His oldest brother died years ago; in the last two years, two of his younger brothers passed away unexpectedly. Pali Nanu, in San Francisco with his son, simply didn't wake up one morning. Rajan Nanu, who lived fifteen minutes away from our place and five minutes away from Nanu's, went for a walk one morning, and collapsed.

A photograph showing two children, a boy in a blue shirt and a girl in a red shirt, sitting on a balcony railing. They are looking towards the camera. In the background, there is a light-colored wall and a door with a sign that reads "ROOM NO B4".

For days after they died, I couldn't take my eyes off Nanu, terrified he would vanish right in front of my eyes. For months after, I could not forget the sorrow, the confusion on his face when he said, "He was younger than me..."
Now, Raghu Nanu visits Nanu in the hospital. "It's just us two brothers left now, Raghu," Nanu tells him mournfully, "Let's see which one us goes first."

As we walk towards the ICU, I complain to Deeti about the weather.

“It's so cold I could just die,”

“OH SHIT” I smile, sheepish, and Deeti laughs.



In the car, Mamma tells Masi how she had bought a new shirt for Nanu two weeks ago. Masi's father — our Chhote Nanu — passed away only three months ago, in April. She had also bought him a new shirt some days before he died.

It was the shirt he was cremated in.

“Everything we gave the hospital was new: shirt, pants, underwear, vest,” Masi tells her. “Should we go get it all now?” Mamma asks, “There's shops right outside the hospital.”

They step out of the car, and I realise that this is the last time Mamma is shopping for Nanu. I remember how she'd said, two weeks ago, that I can have the shirt if it doesn't fit Nanu properly. Ahead, the hospital building glints grey under the clouds, Mamma's feet browned by splashes of mud. I lie back in the car seat: what a waste of a perfectly good shirt.



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