

ONE LOVE
AND
THE
MANY LIVES OF OSIP B.

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*the victims
and their
victims*

*In essence, my father transferred me to a totally alien century,
and distant, although completely unjewish atmosphere.*

—Osip Mandelstam

It's not what happened in your life, but how you remember it.

—Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Osip Bala Krishnan, Outlaw

Weeks after she went missing, Elizabeth Hill called and said I had no future with her. I was out among the climbing woods at the back of the school, leaning on a rock and watching a pig-shaped cloud spill its guts.

‘No, don’t say, that,’ I said.

‘It’s wrong,’ Elizabeth said. ‘You understand wrong, don’t you?’ Elizabeth asked, her voice husky, almost conspiratorial.

‘No!’ I said into the phone.

‘Osip, Osip.’

Often one’s name is one’s fate. One had to respond to the particular challenge that it enjoined upon oneself. I was christened Osip Bala Krishnan after Osip Mandelstam, the Russian poet whom Joseph Stalin arrested and exiled, for the second time, to Siberia in 1938—a year that would prove somewhat consequential to me—where the paranoid poet, mercifully, died of the cold and starvation. Please do not take it amiss when I say that M. was a visitant—no, not a ghost—to my grandfather’s house in Thrissur, my hometown. As was the presence of the muse of mass murder, Joseph Stalin; also called Iosif or Osip (!), a Georgian variation

of Joseph. The poet and the persecutor, free-speech and force, the timeless two-in-one combination, the forked and yoked teamwork of the mind that informs our moment-to-moment metamorphosis and turns us victim, as well as the victor, in our daily lives. I might mention that Stalin, whom I met once in the backyard of my school in Thrissur, was a bit of a nature poet and church singer in his teens. He was briefly in the neighbourhood of god, then, having studied in a seminary before he realized his true vocation as a well-intentioned executioner and thought he was a victim of continual conspiracies. The easier evil is the one we locate outside ourselves; the great purges of Stalin, my grandfather would say, were acts in self-defence. My grandfather was a great Communist leader in Kerala—a state, as imaginary as it is real, where the Revolution was always about to happen, but did not, at the last minute, so it can happen—again. His wife, Gloria Innaley, thought, perhaps out of a necessity to believe her ever-green resentment of her husband was just, or from an instinct for the wronged woman's vengeance, that she was married not just to a Stalinist ideologue, but also a mass killer in his own right in his younger days, a champion of plots and purges; a proper *Vohzd*, a leader. But Gloria praised her husband in public—she had just written a best-selling hagiography of him—and thought the Revolution was an act of eternally delayed gratification, like the Resurrection, perhaps. Her husband is 96 now. Or maybe older. There are no official records of his date of birth. Gloria said he was pretending to be an Alzheimer's

patient. Calling me Osip, Gloria said, not without a tinge of hard, impersonal pity, was a painless act of expiation on his part. I did not believe her, of course. My grandfather and I shared a world where centuries fluctuated and flickered, dull one moment, dazzling the next, but never steady, like the filament in a bulb that would blow out at any moment. The air in his study transmitted the virus of other times. I will come to the details of my shared disorder with my grandfather in a moment.

‘Why wrong?’ I asked Elizabeth. Is feeding stolen sugar to hungry ants wrong? I have been told so when I was in an orphanage, whose recurring image inexplicably had to do with white baby mice and not, as it happened, ants. Kindness, they said, did not sanction theft. How long ago was that? 15 years? Like my grandfather, I too have no reliable birth records. I must have been three or four, then.

‘Oh, never mind,’ Elizabeth said.

‘I was thinking of you this morning.’

‘I knew you would. Don’t.’

‘It’s not easy *not* to think of a thing.’

‘I am not a thing.’

There was a pause. It seemed like Elizabeth had more on her mind than just severance of ties. I tried to pre-empt the bad news. It would *be* bad news.

‘I could come down and visit you.’

‘No,’ Elizabeth said.

‘It’s just a bus ride.’ I was aware my offer had begun to sound like a threat.

‘It’s not a question of ease of transport.’

‘I can hear the traffic. Are you in Delhi?’

‘Can you tell Delhi’s traffic from Bombay’s?’

‘I have been to Bombay.’ I thought of the narrow, packed lanes of the city suddenly opening out into the eternity of the sea. I disliked the city. Indeed, I disliked all cities. From a love of cities, came terror. ‘Think of the millions killed in the name of urbanization and development,’ my grandfather would say in his odd, penitent moment that gainsaid progress.

‘Are they saying anything about me in school?’

‘No. No one knows.’

‘No one knows what?’

‘About you and me.’

‘We did a stupid thing. Like everything was allowed.’

Surely, love is the most demanding word in any language? What wouldn’t people do for the realization of love? What war will they not wage? What seas will they not cross? I cleared my throat. ‘I miss you.’ I took a drink from my hip flask, a brown leather-and-steel gift from Arjun.

‘You are drinking. You should not be drinking. I should be drinking.’

‘I could come down to Delhi and we could stay together.’

Elizabeth laughed.

‘For a while, at least?’

‘And make headlines? We are potentially the stuff of hashtags,’ Elizabeth paused. ‘I am not sure why I called you. I shouldn’t have.’ Elizabeth paused. A horn blared. ‘This is not

a country, but a dusty, colourful chaos.' Last week, she had met a wandering child of five, on the verge of tears, bought him food and waited with him by the roadside for over two hours, panic rising in her, until his father, a construction worker covered in cement, had put in a guilty appearance, and she had felt like slapping him.

'Didn't we have a good time?'

'You are 18, a student. I am an adult and a teacher. And a foreigner. I must have been out of my senses.'

Students fell in love with their teachers all the time, didn't they? Consider your own life, Dear Reader. Look back: the seventh grade, the biology class. Wasn't what she said about genes a coded invitation to share her bed. No? Perhaps not. I am never quite sure of anything.

'Osip, I am carrying.'

The mountains looking down on me swayed a little, shaking off their mask of freak snow, showing the dark face beneath. I looked up at the sky. It was blue, clear. The pig-shaped cloud had disappeared without a trace. The mind is like the sky, Anand, my room-mate, would say in his more enlightened moments, and the clouds are thoughts, and it would occur to me that every time he said something grand, I had read or heard it all elsewhere. Elizabeth pregnant. I was fleetingly proud. And then felt vacant. Up. Down. Mood swings. One mind, two opposite moods. To sing and to fall silent. To be joyous and to cry. To step out of line. To fall back. I listened to Elizabeth's voice and thought of her golden hair, grey eyes, and the scar on her chin, like an extended

comma. And her low hips, a little wide for her slender body. To look at Elizabeth was to fall silent.

‘Hello,’ I said. But Elizabeth had gone offline. I tried to step back into a patch of clearing that had made our conversation possible. I could not find it. The earth had already travelled past it.

This morning, I had gone for a walk up the narrow road behind the school when Elizabeth’s call came. From where I stood, I could see most of St George’s. The school, all in red brick and glass, was set in the hills of Kasauli, six hours’ ride up north of Delhi. It was a quiet, well-maintained boarding school—on the face of it. But after Elizabeth’s call, the school looked different, estranged like a familiar building reflected in the windshield of a car; sharp, clear, and distorted. I looked around with momentarily renewed interest. The trees were pruned, and their Latin names crucified to their hearts. There was a neat lawn in front of the school and, round the year, the grass gleamed like knives. A sign in a corner asked you not to walk on it. Another requested you not to spit on it. A third said walking barefoot on grass was good for your eyes. At the back of the school was a well-tended garden. Beyond it was the hostel, built—again—of red bricks. And, after that, nature took over; the woods, wild and deep, to one side. On the other, the Himalayas rippled endless and foamy, like lather squeezed out of a giant tube. From where I stood, I could see the school flashing a coded message through the pine and alder where the sunlight hit the glass of the windows: I had better go in search of Elizabeth, then. I walked down

along the narrow track on the side of the kitchen and mess, toward the hostel, hoping Anand wouldn't be in the room.

The Saturday after Elizabeth's call, I picked up my overnight bag, my brittle copy of M.'s poems in Russian, and caught a seismic Uttarakhand State Transport bus to Delhi. I had access to Gloria's rarely used email account—I was the one who got her a gmail id (password: 17glorious1)—and it came in handy: I could put in a request for an Out-pass as and when required. I would also delete or play around with the adverse mails from the school administration to Gloria. I suppose I made her life a little easier.

Kasauli was a cantonment town up in the Himalayas. But little ran on time here. The bus I got on left the sunken, circular, shop-lined terminus late. No one minded. I watched the langurs play on top of parked vehicles, their human faces framed with mischief and fur. A few weeks ago, a driver had taken an unscheduled break, and he had left the engine running. A determined monkey slipped in behind the steering and eased the gear. The bus rammed into another parked vehicle and came to a stop, while his friends watched the driver with admiration at the explosion of character that turned him a man among monkeys.

The night rattled all the way down. I drank on the bus. Some passengers in the back smoked: beedi, cigarette, hash. The driver stopped the vehicle whenever anyone felt like tea.

The conductor's phone sang continuously, Hindu devotional songs. That would be religion. The window by my seat was jammed, so I could not close it. The cold air kept blasting in. I tightened my cap down over my ears. When we finally reached Delhi, it was not yet light, and I had a head-cold.

I checked into a small seedy hotel, Singh's Palace Empire Dx, near New Delhi Railway Station. If I had to extend my stay, I would shift to my elderly writer-friend Arjun Bedi's house in Whispering Woods, near Khan Market, or so I hoped. Singh's Palace was recommended by Anand: 'Cheap, centrally located, no questions asked.' They gave me a small room on the second floor. Behind the paint-peeling door hung a sign: 'Please Do Not Make Unnecessary Noises.' I looked out of the window. It was too early in the morning for the shops to open. Lit red, orange, and green, signs of other hotels lining the street shone weakly through the brown smog, like vague signals of hope to travelling salesmen. Autorickshaws and an odd, illegal *phut-phut* (an ancient Harley Davidson modified to carry about half a dozen passengers), emerged from the fog into a clearing, then disappeared back into it. A horse carriage slowly clacked its way past the hotel from yet another of Delhi's time zones. I switched on the TV, and listened to the popular Avlok Dutta, of the India Post channel, debating on the Kashmir issue, and addressing a young, bearded participant:

'Faizal Rashid, you are on the payroll of Pakistanis, and you are working to separate Kashmir from India. I have incontrovertible evidence you are working against the interests

of the nation, and I am,' Avlok Dutta suddenly thumped his chest, and shouted, 'a nationalist, a proud nationalist! I demand an apology and an explanation from you!'

'I am a patriot,' Faizal Rashid shouted back, 'a patriot! My grandfather died fighting the Chinese in 1962. I don't have to prove anything!'

'Faizal Rashid, you poor worm,' Avlok Dutta laughed, 'we are not talking about your grandfather, we are talking about you. Book him for sedition, right now!' Avlok Dutta shook a finger at Faizal Rashid.

Denunciatory violence emanated in waves from the TV. The air was dark and heavy, harbingering Armageddon, demanding nothing less than immediate apocalyptic resolutions. I switched off the TV and fell to the bed, feverish.

Late in the evening, I stepped out in search of Elizabeth. Before I was swallowed by the fog, I had something to eat in one of those quick, dirty, 'pure vegetarian' places down the road. The sign on the wall said, 'Spitting is strictly prohibited.' Rules everywhere.

F128, South Extension, was not hard to find. It was right opposite the main entrance of the community park in that area. From a white, marble-built gurdwara nearby, strains of *Shabd-kirtan* extolled the eternal. I promised to God never to eye my private parts again if Elizabeth opened her door to me, and took it back the next moment as it was an oath that defeated the entire purpose of my life, which was to marry Elizabeth and raise kids. I sat on a bench in the park and waited for the security guard to take a break.

For a long time, it seemed, he was there, rolling a lathi over his thighs, like a pin flattening the dough. What am I doing here? I looked around. Couples were making out. On a bench opposite, a man's hand was seeking a breast. Someone was laughing softly. From the eateries nearby, the smell of kebabs skewered the night. My head throbbed. My heart raced. The fever poured sweat down my face. My eyes came back to the guard. Ah, he was not there. There was god after all.

Thief, thief. I went up three dim-lit flights of stairs. The overhead bulbs had wire cages around them and threw shadows on the roof. The light looked trapped. I listened to my breathing, the unremarkable exercise out of which triumphs and disasters emerged in their full regalia and marched on the world. I rang the bell. No answer. I knocked on the door softly so that it was heard only by Elizabeth and the baby and no other human ear. 'Hello, father is home.' I rang the bell again. Nothing. I waited. I turned around and went down the steps as carefully as I had come up. I counted the steps. 36. I might have missed a couple. I am never sure of these things. Which is probably why I do the same thing several times. I reached the gate, and there the security man was, flattening the invisible dough.

'Where did you go?'

'Upstairs.'

'Who?'

'Hill teacher.'

'It's late. Are you her student?'

‘Yes. Her favourite student,’ And lover, I announced to the world in utter silence.

‘Madam *gaya yahan se*,’ (has gone from here) he said, shifting the wad of tobacco to the other side of his mouth with his tongue, spreading cancer uniformly.

‘Where? Where has Madam gone? When?’

‘*Pata nahin*.’

He didn’t know. For him, not knowing where Elizabeth had gone was the end of the race. Mine began there, where he stopped; he touched me lightly with the lathi, now the baton of our relay race, as if to console me.

‘She came in-between once to pack up things. I am just a guard. Madam is English.’

Yes, Elizabeth could do anything. She was Elizabeth. Female. English. And white. Could it get more powerful than this? Besides, when you are in love, you cede so much territory to the other. Hate empowers you. Love emasculates. Thief, thief. I turned away from the guard and slowly walked towards the Metro. It was vast, cavernous, empty. I went up and down the escalators, moving between arrival and departure signs in red, until an elderly police officer stopped me.

‘Go home,’ he said kindly, ‘where do you want to go?’ I couldn’t first remember; then when I did, I couldn’t decide. Was I going back to Singh’s Palace, or Arjun’s? Somewhere else? I looked at the officer. He had receding, curly hair like my grandfather.

‘Go home,’ the officer said again.