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205 Lower Circular Road  
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Source: *Harvard Review*, No. 37 (2009), pp. 178-188  
Published by: Harvard Review  
Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25703292>  
Accessed: 24-05-2024 00:58 +00:00

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**AMIN AHMAD**

## *205 Lower Circular Road*

### *Return*

WHEN I WAS NINETEEN, RUMORS REACHED my family that my grandmother's house in Calcutta was falling apart. Someone had to check up on Dadi, my grandmother. I had the summer off from college and I wanted to go; I remembered childhood vacations in Dadi's cream-colored house with its sky blue shutters, hot days spent reading and eating raw green mangoes. Guilt at having forgotten about Dadi mixed with a homesickness so strong I could taste those mangoes, the way their sour flesh burnt my tongue.

The plane from New York arrived late at night, and Dadi was waiting for me outside the airport, her white widow's sari luminous in the darkness. When I hugged her, I felt how old and hollow she had become. All the way to Dadi's house I listened to her mumble complaints about the house, about the power shortages, about my youngest uncle, Zia, who hadn't worked for thirteen years. But after a while I stopped paying attention, overwhelmed by the smell of Calcutta that I had forgotten, a mixture of diesel fumes, unwashed bodies, and rice cooking. When we arrived at Dadi's house—a squat three-story concrete building at the end of a long, dark driveway—the power was out,

but even in the darkness I could see the outlines of the mango trees in the garden.

Inside Dadi's candle-lit apartment I found my uncle, Zia, ensconced in his leather armchair, exactly as I'd left him three years ago. His armchair was greasy with sweat, the leather on the arms torn by the incessant drumming of his fingers.

"This city is going to the dogs," Zia said by way of greeting. "Have you brought me any chocolates from America?"

I gave him a box of melted chocolates and stood in the darkness, breathing in the hot, musty air. Everything was as I remembered: Zia in his armchair, masticating caramels, the ticking of the pendulum clock, the sepia photograph of my dead Dada on the wall. Even the hum of mosquitoes meant *home*. That night I slept so heavily, it was like falling down a dark well.

The next morning I sat blearily drinking tea when I happened to glance out of the front window. An apparition was shambling down the driveway, a naked woman with blank eyes, her skin burnt black by the sun. Her ribs stood out in ridges, her breasts hung like empty flaps. The woman reached the lawn, squatted down, and quickly, effortlessly shat on the grass. Then she got up and walked out into the city.

I thought I'd hallucinated the whole thing, but the turds were real, as coiled and pointed as a dog's. In an incredulous voice, I told Dadi what I'd seen.

"Ah, the neighborhood madwoman." Dadi said, "Poor thing. If you see her again, you must shoo her away."

"Why don't we just lock the front gate?" I asked.

"Something is wrong with it. It just won't shut."

I pulled on my clothes from the night before, and walked out to the front gate. I tugged at it, but the gate wouldn't move; its hinges were rusted into solid blocks. Then I turned to walk back and saw in the daylight what had become of Dadi's building. All the copper

downspouts on the façade—forty-foot lengths of piping—were missing. Monsoon rains had overflowed from the roof, leaving brown water stains on the face of the building. The once-blue window shutters had swollen and blistered, their outlines softened by water. Even the concrete canopy over the entry had eroded, leaving iron reinforcing bars protruding like bony fingers.

And worse was to follow. It turned out that Zia, unemployed and desperate for money, had rented out the lawn for parking. All throughout the day round-bonneted Ambassador cars drove down the driveway and parked on the lawn, destroying the flower beds. And though it was mango season, the trees were bare of fruit, raided by slum children who ran unchecked down the driveway.

Then I began to notice changes inside Dadi's apartment. Her elaborately carved mahogany four-poster bed had been replaced by a stark modern one. My Dada's old felt-covered desk had vanished. When I looked for Dada's old leather album—each British Empire stamp mounted like a butterfly—it, too, was gone.

When I asked Zia about these losses, he screwed up his eyes in concentration. Then he looked baffled and said, "I really don't know. Perhaps the sweeper man has stolen them."

But the sweeper man, whose job it was to clean the driveway, didn't come anymore. It was just Dadi and Zia, and the crumbling concrete building. Dadi did her best, collecting rents from the tenants and feuding with the top-floor tenant, who had started illegally making leather handbags in his flat. Biting her tongue in concentration, Dadi laboriously wrote him letters of complaint. When that failed, she kept a vigil at the front window and reported the tenant's comings and goings to Zia, who sat dozing in his chair. But though Dadi's mind was sharp, Zia's mind was trapped within his obsessions: the Mutiny of 1857, the plight of Muslims in Bengal, the rising price of onions.

When my father telephoned me, I had to tell him what had happened. As the eldest son, Papa had left India years ago to work in the Middle East and sent Dadi money every month.

“Do something. Get a grip on the place,” Papa said sternly. But I didn’t know where to start, or what to do. Dadi’s rent books were a rat’s nest of barely legible notes, and when I told Zia that cars shouldn’t park on the lawn, he screamed at me hysterically.

Instead, I escaped into the city. Re-creating the patterns of childhood, I walked down Park Street till I reached the cupboard-sized bookstalls that lined Chowringhee. Armed with a battered Penguin paperback, I proceeded to Flury’s cake shop to drink coffee. Flury’s looked the same at first glance, but there were cobwebs in the pastry cases, and the uniforms of the waiters were stained with food. The older waiters looked sharply at my face when they served me; I waited to be recognized, but their eyes eventually wandered away. Soon I started to behave like a tourist. The only way to survive Calcutta was to pretend that it had nothing to do with me.

Eventually, my month-long visit came to an end. As I walked out into the driveway to wait for my taxi I saw that the madwoman’s excreta still lay there, joined by other fresh lumps. I knew then that all hope had been lost. The detritus sea that was Calcutta was rolling unchecked through the front gates, breaking in waves against Dadi’s old building. I’d seen the process happen to many old family properties in Calcutta. I knew what would happen.

As Dadi grew older and older, the city would sniff out her weakness and move in. Somebody would notice the open gates, steal them, and sell them for scrap. Hoodlums would start repairing their motorcycles on the lawn. The tenants would sublet their rooms to other families, who’d bring charcoal stoves and cook in the bedrooms. Soaked by the rains, the wooden window shutters would slip askew, like distress flags. Plaster would flake off the exterior, exposing naked,

grinning brick. Crow shit would drop seeds in the cracks and cran-  
nies. Bushes, then entire trees would blossom from the rooftop, their  
muscular roots digging deep into the soft, crumbling concrete.

Soon the outlines of 205 Lower Circular Road would disappear.  
The building would be reduced to a fractured landscape, a fetid tide  
of humanity, as intricate as nature.

*Delusions of Grandeur*

Eight years later, it was the gleam of pink tile that drew me into a  
South Calcutta warehouse full of old furniture. The furniture seller  
was watching me like a hawk.

“You like?” he asked, pointing to an old dressing table. Its mirror  
was flanked by porcelain tiles decorated with raised pink roses. My  
fingers traced the cool porcelain swell of each petal, felt the thrusting  
fullness of each rose. The tiles were old, early nineteenth century; I’d  
seen similar tiles on the walls of North Calcutta mansions.

“It’s all right,” I said to the furniture seller, but I’m a bad liar.  
“And there is also a bed,” he said. “It came from the same house. One  
hundred years old, good condition.”

Brushing away cobwebs, he showed me the headboards of the bed,  
carved mahogany at least ten feet tall. Elaborate rows of spindles were  
topped with finials, as though flags could fly from each corner.

I bought both pieces, spending a large portion of the money my  
new wife and I had received as wedding presents. I’d been in Calcutta  
a month, having returned from America to marry a Calcutta girl. We  
were living in Dadi’s building while we waited for my wife’s visa to be  
processed.

In the years that I’d been away, Dadi had died. The word had  
spread—through the slums, through the bazaar, through the cinema  
houses where the local hoodlums gathered—that the building was now

in the hands of my poor, mad Uncle Zia. The fate I had imagined had come true. The façade of the building had turned mud-brown with neglect, scarred and pitted with water damage. The lawn was reduced to a patch of dust. Greasy auto mechanics from the neighborhood sauntered to bathe from the tap in our garage. The mango trees were reduced to sooty sticks, their leaves hanging from them like rags.

But miraculously, after a court case that lasted twenty years, my father had managed to evict the renegade top-floor tenant. The flat was now ours, an empty warren of rooms with chipped mosaic floors and light switches that sent out violet sparks. My new wife and I decided to stay in this flat, furnishing it with a borrowed bed and battered wicker sofa set. We understood it was a temporary arrangement, but something about the shabby emptiness galled me. Flush with money from the wedding, I decided to buy some old furniture, replacing the heirlooms that Zia had squandered. When my father retired a few years later and moved into this flat, he'd be proud of me.

A few days later, half-naked coolies delivered the furniture, wrestling it up the stairs and leaving sweaty palm-prints on the walls. Awakened by the commotion, Zia ventured out from his armchair and stood blinking in the sunlight.

"Why are you buying all this old rubbish," he said. "It'll just collect dust."

"They're antiques," I said, watching his face closely. But all he did was grimace and go back inside.

The pink-tiled dressing table fitted exactly between two bedroom windows, as though it had been made for that spot. The tall headboards of the bed were leaned against the walls; the wooden slats that formed the base were deposited in a separate pile. I tried to assemble the bed by connecting the slats to the headboards, but each slat was hand-carved, differently shaped, and would fit only in a particular slot. It seemed like a trial and error process, one that could take hours.

Seeing my frustration, a very old coolie squatted among the slats, scratched his head, and in a matter of minutes assembled the entire bed. Amazed, I asked him how his eye was so accurate.

“*Aaare, Babu*, it’s simple, I just matched the markings,” he said. He showed me how each slat, and its corresponding slot in the headboard, had been engraved with a tiny, precise symbol: a star, a fish, a hand, a square. There were no numbers or letters. The carpenter who had made this bed was illiterate, like the coolie who assembled it; yet, a hundred years later, the two minds had communicated across the gulf of time.

That night, my wife and I slept in the bed. She was tired and fell asleep quickly, but I lay awake for a long time. Being in the bed was like being inside a small room, the tall, elaborately carved headboards casting a tracery of shadow over the covers. Tomorrow I would call my father in the Middle East and tell him about the bed; I fell asleep with the thought that our family’s fortunes had come full circle.

I awoke into moonlight so bright that I could see every carved spindle of the headboard. A full moon shone in through the open window, disturbing my sleep. Barefoot, I crossed the room to close the shutters and looked back at the looming bed. The tall headboards were edged with crisp moonlight, hiding the scratches and wear of a century. This is what the bed looked like when it was new. God knows how many years it had lain in the darkness of the warehouse, waiting to be resurrected.

The sale of this furniture could mean only one thing: the disintegration of a family, death and poverty. I knew that the furniture buyers of Calcutta traveled the *moffusil*, the hinterland. They listened for misfortunes among the rural landowning gentry who lived in their crumbling neoclassical mansions, among their shrinking estates. When all their wealth and jewelry was gone, these bankrupt families had nothing left to sell but their furniture. Where this bed and dressing table

once stood, I imagined dusty, empty outlines, a family sleeping on the floor of their once grand rooms.

No doubt there had been deaths in this bed, of malaria and cholera. No doubt babies had been born in it, arriving bloody and exhausted. This bed must have seen news of the 1857 mutiny, the ebb and flow of the British empire, the Partition of India in 1947.

“What are you doing?” My wife had awoken and was looking at me in confusion.

“Nothing,” I said. “Go back to sleep.”

All the satisfaction I had felt after buying the bed ebbed away. I returned to bed but could not sleep for a very long time. When I did fall asleep, my dreams had an archaic quality, as if they were not mine but belonged to someone else.

### *Resurrection*

Ten years later, my father returned for good to Calcutta, to a city and a house he had not lived in since he was a young man. On the crackling telephone line he told me, “I’m having a bloody awful time fixing up the top-floor flat. The workmen are using hand drills and splitting apart all my fancy bathroom tiles. But we’re making some progress. You should come home and see.”

Having barely survived a harrowing divorce, I was aching for the balm of Calcutta and flew back for a visit. When my father picked me up at the airport, he was completely gray-haired, and smaller, as though shrunk by the Calcutta heat. It was late afternoon by the time we reached the house, and the car had to idle outside while a watchman unbolted the front gate. The iron bars had been freshly painted black, with sheets of steel welded across them, like shields to keep the city out. When the gate opened, I was stunned.

The winter sun shone down like a benediction. The building glowed in the late afternoon sun, repainted a cream color, the shutters a deep blue. The rectangle of lawn had been reseeded, and even the mango trees had been washed down, to rid them of their crust of soot. For the first time in years, they were heavy with shiny, green fruit.

Inside, the top-floor flat was unrecognizable. There were carpets on the floors, furniture upholstered in chintz, glass shelves holding a collection of Delft figurines, and even a large-screen TV in the corner.

When I walked into my bedroom, the dressing table with the pink tiles was still by the windows, but the old bed was gone, replaced by a slab of thick foam. I wanted to know where my bed was, but it seemed rude to question my father. After all, I was seeing him after two years' absence, and this was his house now, not mine.

Zia huffed and panted upstairs to meet me. Unlike my father, Zia had hardly aged at all, except that his two front teeth had fallen out, giving him a comical appearance. But with my father back, Zia was calmer, less obsessed with money. Sitting across from my father, slurping his coffee, Zia began to take on my father's measured tones, like a child imitating a parent.

In this tiny patch of Calcutta, years of neglect had been rolled back, but outside the gates, the city of my childhood had disappeared. Walking down the streets, looking for the old familiar patterns of light and shade, for a carved gateway, a particular arrangement of balconies, I found only concrete high-rises that climbed into the sky.

On Theater Road, the old Russian Consulate with its sinister gateposts—gone; the Nizam's baroque balconied palace—demolished; O. N. Mukherjee's store at the corner of Camac Street, where I bought Cadbury chocolates as a child—gone. On Wood Street, the estate of the nervy, inbred Lord Sinha family had been replaced by a shopping mall, its overgrown gardens, heavy with pink bougainvillea and tattered banana trees, paved over. The scent of Calcutta when it rained, of red wet earth and steaming trees, had vanished.

I tried to get used to it, but I couldn't. Instead, I took refuge in the unchanged rhythms of life. I woke up early and drank tea by the front windows, listening to the raucous cawing of the crows. I bathed from a bucket of hot water, and ate a large lunch of rice and fish cooked in mustard. My father started treating me as though I were a child, fussing over me and bossing me around. It gave me a strange comfort.

In the afternoons I'd sit cross-legged on the bed with my father, going through his files. He explained to me that the house had been turned into a *wakf*, a trust under Muslim law, and that when he died I would become the *muttawali*, the trustee of the property. The building, with its lawn and driveway, with Zia sitting in his downstairs flat, would become my problem.

"You have to come back more often," my father said. "Not every five or six years. Otherwise your cousins will think you're not interested in the property. They'll file cases to take it away. After all I've done to fix the place up, you can't just let it go."

I was too sated with fish and rice, too tired to explain to my father what my life was like in America. I couldn't imagine coming back to Calcutta after my parents were dead, living in this strange, transformed city. Instead I took the easy way out. I just nodded my head and said, "Yes, Papa, I'll try. I'll try to come back."

Like all visits, this one drew to an end. Going through the security check at the airport, all I could see was the top of my father's gray head. He stood there waiting, as though I might change my mind and turn back.

It was only when I returned to America that I had the nerve to ask my father where my old bed was.

There was a dead silence on the phone. Then my father cleared his throat.

"Rather embarrassing really," he said. "That bed was far too big—and bloody uncomfortable—so I stored it in the garage. Some wretched hooligans broke in and stole it. So that is that."

We made conversation for a few minutes more, but I couldn't concentrate on what Papa was saying. I thought of my bed abroad in the city. All I could hope was that it had not been broken up and sold for scrap. As we spoke, my father's voice grew fainter. It was Papa's habit to move the handset farther and farther away from his mouth, letting in inches of air. Eventually his voice faded away. All I could hear were the noises of Calcutta: the far-off shouts of street vendors, the rumble of buses on the road, the cawing of the crows.