

The Essay

ABSTRACT A found object might bring sorrow or delight, but a lost object presents a question mark. Its absence can feel like a cleave, a permanent one, in our memory. Absences inevitably lead us to quests. In this personal essay, which is linked with a larger writing project on family and material memory, I search for the contents of an “essay” written by me when I was ten years old, on the very day that India’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated. In searching for this lost object, I excavate and access childhood memories that were forgotten or, perhaps, lay dormant waiting to be awakened. The essay remains unfound (lost), but in looking for it, this essay that you are reading here, emerges, showing me why the object, the essay must remain lost, so that a forgotten moment of my childhood can live. **KEYWORDS** Objects, home, personal essay, lost

The day Indira Gandhi was assassinated I was at an essay competition. I was a ten-year-old sixth-grader attending Sacred Heart School. My English teacher was a middle-aged Sikh gentleman who had registered me for the event, and even escorted me to it. My parents probably gave him permission, but I don’t remember. I was excited to skip a few classes and ride in a rickshaw with Singh Sir, as we called him. His first name escapes me, but then we rarely knew our teachers’ first names.

We reached the school that was hosting the competition. I was sent into a room with other contestants, and we were given a topic. I completed the essay within the two-hour deadline. When I emerged from the room, Singh Sir looked frazzled and a little panicked. Instead of expecting a conversation about what I wrote and how I felt about the writing, he rushed me into a waiting rickshaw. Singh Sir explained the frenzy when we reached school. All schools in town had been ordered closed and children were being rushed home. The details emerged later. The town was under curfew. Indira Gandhi had been assassinated. It was October 31, 1984.

These were the years we lived in a small town called Moga, in the north Indian state of Punjab. Moga was unremarkable, but for two facts. It was home to the largest Nestlé manufacturing plant in India, where my father had been employed since 1977. A village adjacent to Moga, the name escapes me, was home to Jarnail Singh Bhindranwaleh, one of the key leaders of the Sikh separatist Akali Dal movement in early 1980s Punjab. He was said to be responsible for Indira Gandhi’s death. The group demanded a separate Sikh state called Khalistan. Indira Gandhi had been fighting the insurgency for several years, and that summer she ordered the Indian army into the Golden Temple in Amritsar, one of the holiest places of worship for Sikhs. This military operation was called Blue Star. Indira Gandhi’s two Sikh bodyguards, sympathetic to the separatist movement, assassinated her outside her state residence.

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For many years, I've seen this image in my head, of Singh Sir and me on a rickshaw on our way to the essay competition. Every time it emerges, I try to resurrect the day to remember the title of my essay, what I wrote, and how the day unfolded. All I have are ephemeral images, so fleeting that I sometimes wonder if I've imagined them. Then I call my mother, Amma, to ask if she remembers that day. She confirms that it happened: "You went to school, you went for the essay competition, and you came home early. It was the day Indira Gandhi was shot dead."

I can see the road right outside the school where we caught the rickshaw. The road was a long walk—or so it felt when we were children—from the main school building. We trekked through two large ramshackle playgrounds to get from the road to school every day. I see myself in the school uniform: a dark green skirt, a white shirt, and a green tie with white stripes. I know this only because I remember the uniform. But I don't remember my face. Was my hair long or short? What did I look like at ten? Of course, there are photographs from 1984 to show how I looked, but I have no embodied memory of that face. I do have a clear image of Singh Sir, who always wore untucked, cream-colored shirts. He was short, an anomaly among Sikh men, but he wore largish, sharp, and immaculately folded maroon turbans that gave him both height and stature. Curiously, I distinctly remember the tilt of his head and the quiet, almost gentle way in which he walked around the class. He also stood out because it was rare to have a Sikh male teacher, let alone one who taught English literature and language.

I was too immature to realize how difficult it must have been for him, a soft-spoken Sikh man probably in his forties who lived in Punjab, where masculinity is still associated with physical labor, soldiering, farming, and outdoor work. But here he was, teaching literature in a missionary school run by Tamil Christians, who were themselves migrants from south India. I am frustrated with my ten-year-old self for her lack of curiosity—why did she not ask him why he chose to become an English teacher? Why was she not interested in his life? Was he married? What did his family think of his choice of profession? Despite my rancor with my younger self, I understand that for a child my age, life is often just as it is and things are just as they are. I too was an outsider in the school, a girl whose family had no roots in Moga, and who was the only nonlocal among a handful of other Hindus in the class. Maybe this is why Singh Sir took an interest in me and pushed me to go to that essay competition.

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The assassination was a shock. Although we had lived surrounded by communal strife for more than four or five years, the idea that Sikh terrorists would kill Indira Gandhi in her Prime Ministerial state home in Delhi was unimaginable. As Hindus from Delhi, we were living in Punjab only because of my father's job with Nestlé. As a personnel executive in a company located in the middle of a state with a majority Sikh population, as a Hindu from Delhi, and as an employee whose main job was to handle personnel appointments and conflicts, my father was consistently on the receiving end of numerous

threats to his position by religious leaders around the state who wanted to ensure that young Sikh men were given preference over other applicants. My parents had numerous Sikh friends who disparaged the Indian Congress party, which had a secular nationalist agenda, but was largely run by Hindu leaders. Many of these friends were sympathetic to the separatist movement. The Chawlas, on the other hand, were long supporters of Jawahar Lal Nehru of the Congress party. Nehru was India's first Prime Minister, one of the leaders in the freedom struggle against the British. They were as loyal to his daughter, Indira Gandhi. Ironically, these were also the very Sikh friends who would drive with us all the way to Delhi (six hours away) to ensure our safety from the separatist violence. Years later, I learned that their sympathies shifted when Sikh separatist leaders started extorting money from their own, as in from families like theirs. I remember sensing tension during social gatherings, and as Amma tells me now, "We made a decision to stop talking politics with our Sikh friends in those years." Perhaps it was a prudent decision because those friendships weathered immense communal tensions, and many have survived over forty years.

As an adult I can only imagine the horror of this situation for my father and his parents, my paternal grandparents who stayed with us part of the year. Just over three decades earlier they had experienced India's Partition into the Islamic state of Pakistan and secular India. They fled Pakistan because they were Hindus and remade a life in India. And now my father found himself employed in a state that was experiencing communal and civil strife. This time it was the Sikhs who did not want us there. Although upper-caste Hindus have historically never been persecuted in India, somehow my family felt cursed because communal trouble seemed to follow us.

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Mrs. Gandhi's death unleashed a series of events, some short-lived and others that changed the course of our lives. My brother, Samarth, was already in a Catholic boarding school in Shimla, a hill station that used to be the summer capital of British India, in the state of Himachal Pradesh. It was not unusual for families who lived in small towns of Punjab to send their children to boarding schools in the Himalayan foothills, provided they could afford the tuition. In sending us, my parents were following that norm, although it significantly tightened their financial situation. The communal troubles simply hardened their resolve to send us out of Punjab. I was a religious minority in my class, and the occasional bullying I experienced was becoming more persistent as the troubles increased. Children bring their homes, their families, and therefore those ideologies into the classroom. My name was on a waitlist for an all-girls Catholic boarding school in Mussoorie, another Himalayan hill station. In that month after Indira Gandhi's murder, Amma made desperate calls to the Convent of Jesus and Mary, Waverly to check on the status of my admission. She wanted me out of Moga.

My brother returned home for a break because his school also closed down. In the aftermath of Gandhi's death, north India experienced the worst communal riots since the Partition of 1947, only this time it was with Hindus who were mercilessly killing

thousands of Sikhs in their homes and places of work. Shimla was not spared. Samarth's journey back home from Shimla to Moga was harrowing, and he traveled with a group of boys from his class. An army envoy followed them from the moment they entered the border of Punjab. Samarth rarely talks about it, even when prodded. I have only fragmented memories of those days of rioting. We were secluded and safe in the factory compound. All the executives lived adjacent to the factory, which was well guarded. Army tanks were stationed outside the compound, and we regularly watched combat soldiers walk around our streets. We lived under a state of perpetual curfew that was released for a few hours a day, windows of time when our mothers were escorted to the town market to buy essentials.

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Life in the compound, aside from the army presence, was mostly unchanged. For us kids, it was like another summer break. We were in awe of the soldiers and chatted with them any chance we had. Much to Amma's horror, they sometimes escorted us out of the compound and gave us a tour of their tanks. But mostly we were just bored. Amma used the opportunity to teach me to cook *chapatis* (rotis), because she believed north Indian girls needed to know how to make them. It was during this time that my brother and I adopted an injured baby parrot who fell off a tree in our backyard. We named him Mithoo (which translates in English to "something sweet"), the most predictable parrot pet name in the country. We nursed him back to health with the help of a local vet. Once Mithoo healed, Papa insisted that it was cruel to cage a bird at home, so he forced us to release Mithoo into the wild. For a few weeks, Mithoo returned home in the evenings, and then one day he didn't. We were desolate until one evening Papa pointed out a pandemonium of parrots; he was convinced Mithoo was among them. By then we had lost interest. Our new game was playing *kanchey* (marbles) in the dirt outside the house and winning marbles off each other and our friends. I think my brother won one hundred multicolored *kanchas* (marbles) by the end of that time. We left Moga a year later, and Amma refused to pack the marbles for Delhi. They were too heavy, she said. For many years, Samarth and I mourned this loss because most of the marbles were "winnings" and they had unusual patterns and colors.

I don't remember how long the curfew lasted. Schools in the hills closed in mid-November until March (owing to the snowfall), so my sense is that my brother probably returned to Shimla in March 1985. Schools in Moga, however, followed a regular cycle, and resumed in December. One day I came home from school in the late afternoon to a usual sight—Amma and Biji (my grandmother) sitting in the sun on the verandah knitting sweaters—a customary winter activity accompanied by fruits and, later, evening tea. After our grandfather died in 1982, Biji lived part of the year with us. Amma told me that there was news. Mildly curious, I asked what. She showed me a letter from the Convent of Jesus and Mary, Waverly, that noted I had been granted admission. I was expected to join school in March 1985. Amma said, "So, we have three months to prepare your wardrobe and to prepare you."

This might seem inconsequential, but Catholic boarding schools have complex and long lists of day, afternoon, and evening uniforms that are provided by parents for the nine-month school year. A long shopping list accompanied the admission letter. The list included, among many other things, three dozen undergarments, a dozen serviettes, wash cloths, hand towels, and bath towels. I also needed a black metal trunk with my name and address painted on it in white. All girls were expected to carry a specific canvas hold-all that would hold my bedding (a quilt, sheets, pillows). I needed name tags that would be stitched onto the back of all the clothes—the school had 350 boarders and labels were critical to keeping things in order. (We had these labels woven at the hosiery factory of a family friend, who misspelled my last name. In Waverly, I was “Chawala” until I graduated.)

As she began preparing, Amma jokingly declared that she felt as if she were gathering a trousseau for a bride, and that I would need another one when I married. Ironically, I never did get a traditional trousseau, because I married late (late for women in my family) at thirty-one and was living alone, as was the man I married, so we simply merged our places and had no need of new linens, utensils, our clothes. I remind Amma that in the end she really prepared only one trousseau.

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The next three months were a blur. Unfortunately, around this time I contracted jaundice and was forced to eat bland food and a daily dose of the ayurvedic tablet Liv 52 to rid myself of the disease. And there was another torturous addition to my daily routine. Waverly girls studied Sanskrit from grades 5 through 8; I was already in grade 6, and I'd never studied it. In Punjab, we studied the *gurmukhi* script (which forms Punjabi) as a part of our regional language requirement. I'd studied *gurmukhi* for three years and was fluent in reading and writing it. So, Amma arranged for a local priest to tutor me on basic Sanskrit every afternoon at home, for three months. This tutoring took place at the dining table, where I would recite Sanskrit tables, much like tables in Math, that I needed to know to pass the language requirement. I did reasonably well in my Sanskrit exams, mostly because I short-term memorized well. I cannot remember now a single table, and I am certain I cannot translate a single sentence in Sanskrit, but I remember *gurmukhi* and can read Punjabi despite thirty-five years having passed since I studied it in school in Moga.

I arrived in Waverly in early March 1985, at the age of ten, leaving my childhood home for the first time. It was the first of my home leavings. I returned in the summer of 1985 for the ten-day summer break. Things were still difficult in Punjab. I did not know it then, but my father had severe and steady threats to his life from the Sikh separatists, and there was additional tension at work with some corrupt colleagues. We came home to Moga in November 1985, went back to school in March 1986, after which I never saw Moga again. In the summer of 1986, during our ten-day summer break, we returned to the extended Chawla family home in Delhi, which was temporarily home for us at that time.

I have very ephemeral images of that summer break, of evenings spent chatting in the verandah because nights were the only times we could sit outside in the Delhi heat. One

night, Amma mentioned that before they left Moga, Singh Sir had contacted her. She asked me, “Do you remember the competition you took part in?” “Yes,” I replied. “On the day Indira Gandhi died. I remember.” “He told me you won. What did you write about?” she asked. Someone interjected, and conversation flowed in another direction. I wish I had replied because then I might have a memory of the essay, of what I wrote, and perhaps why.

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In early 2019, almost thirty-five years after the competition, an image of Singh Sir and myself on a rickshaw began appearing to me, in life and in my dreams. I wrote what I remembered, in fragments, in my diary. I was frustrated with myself, even berated myself for my poor childhood memories. I’ve been engrossed in writing about objects, memories, and my family history for a large part of the last decade, so such dreams were not unusual. Freud and Jung and others have said it best and better, but for me dreams are a continuation of my day, of my thinking and writing life. As a writer, I’ve had the surreal experience of waking up and writing a sentence that I recited in a dream and fallen back to sleep. So there is always a notebook by my bedside. Dreams are a membrane between the conscious and the unconscious, between the past and present, between the real and imagined, between what is, what was, and what we want things to be.

In sitting with the image of Singh Sir and myself, for months, almost a year now, I’m convinced that the essay is a lost object. The essay contains within it a childhood moment that I needed to remember. In searching for the essay, in searching my memories of that moment, I am taken into a part of my childhood that I rarely visit or address in my writing life. Five months after Indira Gandhi’s death, I left for boarding school, which, in a way, marked the end of an almost idyllic childhood. The few months that followed the assassination and led to my brother’s temporary return home were, in retrospect, an important and carefree time, a stark contrast to the communal violence that raged outside. It marks the last time my brother and I were together as children. We returned from boarding school in our late teens to go to college in Delhi, where my parents finally settled. For me, even this return was a hiatus, as I left India in 1997 only to return for brief visits over the years.

I’ve come to think of my growing up as before and after 1984. The before is an innocent space that I barely remember, the after is a life lived in different locations, among strangers. In the “after-space,” remembered moments are often vivid because doing things alone, away from home, exaggerates experiences. Isolation is after all a form of exaggeration. The “before-space” is a kind of innocent space where skipping school for a competition was the highlight of the day, the week. The “before-space” is why I’ve stopped wanting to or trying to remember what the essay contained. I’ve even begun asking myself why remembering the content even matters.

This is so because the essay has to remain lost. Its generativity lies in its lostness. The essay must remain lost so that I can access the memories around it, before it, beside it. The essay has to remain lost so that I can remember the first place that was home. Perhaps that

is the point, after all. Perhaps that is what objects are meant to do. Not to make us remember a moment, but to open up a world adjacent to it, a world that we can revisit, revise, even re-imagine. That essay, a lost object, must remain lost, so that this essay, this moment of my childhood, can live. ■

DEVIKA CHAWLA is professor in the school of communication studies at Ohio University. Her research focuses on communicative, performative, and narrative approaches to studying family, home, and its relationship to social identity. Her work explores how human beings transform themselves in the relationships that surround them, and the resources—social, political, economic, material—that are available to them. Most of Chawla’s research has taken place in the context of contemporary urban India. Her recent book project attended to cross-generational refugee identity in the iterations of home among families displaced by India’s Partition of 1947. Chawla is working on an experimental memoir on material objects, memory, migration, affect, and social identity. email: chawla@ohio.edu