

*Anish Majumdar*

**Bandal House**

Two decades away had not changed this: the pounding of his heart, the twisting in his stomach. Staring up at the crumbling parapets and twin spires of Bandal House, a lone citadel far from the town center, brought the past crashing back. Anand found it difficult to breathe, difficult to look the hollow eye of the second floor window, his father's study, straight on. Behind him stood the cricket pitch, at its periphery the rotted husk of a coconut tree, beneath which a few men sat watching him. That didn't matter. Knocking on the weathered front door, and receiving no answer, did.

Six days ago a lawyer named Ganguly had contacted Anand to inform him of his father's death. What should happen to the family house? Please take care of it, Anand had said. I'm sorry sir, but the will stipulates that it must to be you who decides.

As he pushed through the brambles and wild brush leading towards the back garden, the sickly sweet smell of jackfruit punctuating thorn pricks, he imagined his father's pleasure in forcing him to obey. All he'd wanted from the man was Absence. Instead there was this pathetic show of love, as hollow as his words, serving only to underscore his cowardice...nettles scraped his cheek. Anand swallowed back a yelp and kept on. No way would he give him that satisfaction. On, gaps of sunlight peeking through, on and out-

It was an obscenity.

So high it towered over him stood the remains of his father's funeral pyre. Burnt logs, stacked impossibly high, looked like the remnants of a grinning face. The fire had singed the nearest trees, the smoke of his father's cooking flesh caught amongst the boughs and water-heavy fruit. The whole scene was like something out of a museum display, untouched and unnoticed.

A scrap of color caught his eye. Anand reached his hand deep inside the pyre, flecks of ash sloughing off, and pried it free of the twig upon which

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it had become snagged. A buzz began in his hand as he brought it up, slowly creeping up his arm. Plain white cloth. A part of the robe his father had been wrapped in. So his body would burn faster. The words were slippery, unreal, so Anand said them over, slowly. So his body would burn faster.

A hand touched his shoulder. He spun around, chest clamping with fright, and saw an elderly woman, lustrous mane of black hair framing a careworn face. "What do you want?" she asked as their eyes met. He opened his mouth to answer, but it was as if a trapdoor had opened up beneath them. She frowned, setting a network of lines racing across her forehead. And in a flash, he realized who she was.

"Rasa?" he said, and the sound of his voice did something, changed the air between them.

"Ada?" she whispered, calling him by his childhood name, and before he could answer she was on him, rubbing his face clear of ash with a piece of her sari.

"Crazy child!" she said, laughing as he struggled to get away from his former nanny, "Where have you been?"

Rasa ushered him into the large, sunlit drawing room. The walls and shelves had been filled with mementos of his father's literary career: prizes, framed photos of luminaries and politicians. All gone. Even the bookcase running along the far wall had had a chunk of its contents removed in favor of a small black and white television set. It looked obscene squatting there amongst the leather-bound volumes, but perhaps that was only because his father would have considered it so.

"We expected you before this," she said.

"I came when I heard," Anand muttered.

"He tried you every night for the last weeks." Anand crossed over to the window overlooking the garden. The pyre stared back at him. "He was too weak to get out of bed so we brought a phone in. I watched him call,"

"What is that still doing out?"

"I'm...not family. I didn't know what you wanted to do,"

"Give the bums by the cricket pitch a few paisa and be done with it." He could feel her shock at these words, as clearly as though he'd hit her. But who was she, to judge him? Who was she to tell him anything?

She shook her head. "No one will do it in town."

"Why not?"

"Your father...stopped going out. I went for his papers, for food, everything,"

"Don't tell me this,"

"They said he was sick. That anyone who came here...." She looked directly in his eyes, blaming him. "He said nothing different."

"He never called me," Anand said, knowing full well the ringing that disturbed his sleep, the glowing red light at the edge of his nightstand beckoning over and over again...and him just laying there in the dark, suddenly petrified of who it could be, before turning away. Eventually, he had just disconnected the phone. "Not once, understand? I wouldn't know his voice if he did."

"You'd know," she said.

There was no arguing with the certainty of her words. So faced with it, Anand reached for what he held certain: forced half a world away with his mother to fend for themselves. So the rats could come out and play. "Still here, Rasa," he said, only to hurt, to wipe that damnable look of *knowing* off her face. "What's left for you now?"

"I'll leave you then,"

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"I don't care who you get," he said to her retreating back. "People are coming to look at the house. Get rid of it."

The next morning, after spending the night in the master bedroom, the only one not shuttered and emptied, Anand was introduced to Dev, Rasa's teenage son. Together they went out to the garden and began the work of dismantling the pyre. At times he'd stop and rest but Dev ploughed on, mindless of the grit and ash, tearing at the logs and dumping them into the wheelbarrow. The boy was skinny and hunched over, with too-large glasses hanging off the tip of his nose. His torso and pipe-stem arms were cut up, and his face in the rare moments that he looked up was marked by a puffy purple bruise. They cooperated instinctively upon reaching the larger logs, coaxing them out together. Finally it was done, and all that marked his father's passing was a scorched section of grass. Anand gripped the wheelbarrow handles and started pushing it towards the front of the house.

"It will be easier if we go through the garden," Dev said quietly.

"There's a gate back there?" Anand asked. "I don't remember one."

As they reached the tree line and the shadows overtook them, the only sounds their footsteps, the creaking of the wheelbarrow and the infrequent caw of birds overhead, Anand remembered what it had been like for him as a child in this private kingdom. His father would be in his study, his mother out "visiting", and Anand was free to stretch out beneath the boughs and read his Amar Chitra Katha comic books, with its tales of a prankster Krishna glowing radioactive blue, or his mother's Bollywood magazines, with its glossies of starlets that aroused tingly feelings if he stared at them for too long. After his mother had discovered the affair that had gone on beneath her very nose it had become a kind of refuge, the one place where the raised voices couldn't touch him. His father had a habit of periodically looking out the study window to keep an eye on him. Amidst the anguish of the final weeks, he still did, only his haggard face peered out more to confirm that some things never changed, as inside everything fell apart.

There was no gate: a part of the property wall had collapsed, looking as

though some giant's foot had crushed it. The trampled ground and bare fruit trees around it could mean only one thing: others had trespassed.

"Why hasn't this been fixed?" Dev just looked at him quizzically, face betraying nothing. "What's been happening here? Dead for a week and everything falls apart."

"He asked me to tear it down," Dev said.

Anand's eyes narrowed. "Ridiculous," he said coldly. "The garden was for family only."

"He wanted to open it to everyone. He was going to...," and here Dev shook his head slightly, as though even he were having trouble believing it, "build a kid's playground."

Anand couldn't help it: he burst out laughing. "Well, well," he said, "what a guy! Midnight calls, playground for the kids...tell me, did he give away his possessions too?"

"I don't understand," Dev said. Anand came closer. Dev stayed where he was, but wouldn't meet his eyes. Guilty, thought Anand, just like his mother.

"I've been gone for a while, but I don't remember the house being quite so...empty.

"Where are his things?" Anand asked.

"You think we stole from him," Dev said flatly. Anand waited for Dev to say otherwise. He didn't, simply grasped the handles of the wheelbarrow and pushed it through the wrecked opening in the gate. After a moment, Anand followed.

The canal was on the fringes of town, a steady knee-high stream composed mostly of run-off from the nearby Dunlop factory. Bathers drifted in the water, inches away from women swirling dirty clothes and laying them out on the nearby rocks to sun-dry. By the gravity with

which Dev stood on its banks, whispering what could have been a prayer, it may as well have been the Ganges. Finally, he grasped one of the pyre logs and, ever so gently, laid it upon the water. It bobbed, came back up to the surface, and slowly wound its way downstream. The rest they left on its banks.

"What was that you were saying, by the water?" Anand asked as they made their way back towards the town. Dev's mouth twitched, and he knew that he had encroached on something personal. It was troubling, the way the ghost of his father was living and present in Dev. Threatening somehow.

"It was....a Tagore poem. He made me memorize it, when I was small."

Anand stopped. "*Day after day I have kept watch for thee,*"

*"for thee have I borne the joys and pangs of life....you know it?"* Dev asked.

Anand nodded. "Gitanjali? Of course. It was one of his favorites." Dev was silent as they came to the first row of whitewashed shacks marking the town's edge. He thought the poetry had been something special between them, Anand realized.

As the boy turned to leave, Anand said, "You know, sometimes, when he'd ask me to recite it and I'd forget, he'd finish. Then he'd say Tagore should never be read, but lived and breathed. So it was a part of you."

Dev brought a hand to his eyes, quickly. His shaved scalp, the traditional act on the passing of a father, was burnt a deep maroon from the sun.

"Thanks," Anand said. "For helping me."

Evening found Rasa and Anand keeping their distance, neither sure of exactly what had happened, nor how to fix it. Anand half-watched television in the Drawing Room as she in turn dusted the furniture, fixed the floral arrangements and lit incense sticks. It was evasion through action, a tactic devised during the torturous final evenings when her parent's fighting had thrown the house into a state of siege. Nothing was

certain. Once Rasa had made the mistake of dropping a plate on the floor and Anand's mother had slapped her across the face. No one said a word as she bent down, cheek flaming scarlet, and retrieved it. As she served him dinner the flat thwack of a cricket ball hitting bat soundly came in through the window. Both glanced towards the sound, momentarily dropping their walls.

"In the old days they wouldn't start until your father arrived," she said.

He nodded. "Sure. The town celebrity!"

She gave him a strange look. "That field is part of the house. He gave it to them."

"Really?"

She smiled. "You never wondered why you spent so much time with him out there?"

"I thought he liked cricket."

"He liked Kipling and Tolstoy. Cricket...not so much." They laughed.

"No, it's the town layabouts who live for cricket. And they used to remember the gift."

"And they don't anymore?" Rasa shot him a reproving look. "What?"

"Go on and say it. After what happened between your father and me, they chose to forget. Instead of going out to meet them, your father found it better, *safer*, to stay indoors."

"This is India? What did he expect?" She didn't answer. A thought occurred to Anand.

"Is that why...the back garden?" he asked, and a weary frustration, mingled with regret crossed her face. She nodded.

"He thought he could turn the trick twice," Anand said.

"No," she said, "that was all he had left to give. Eat, eat," she said briskly, ripping a piece of naan bread into thin strips to dip into the lentil soup. "You know he never stopped talking about you. Following everything you did."

"Please,"

"He got your book special order," Anand rose from the table. Anything else, but not the subject of his first book. After a life spent trying to get away from the man, all the critics could think to compare it to was his father. Unfavorably.

"Just *stop*," he told her.

"You work so hard to hate him, Ada."

"He walked out on us."

"Is that what you think?"

"I watched him abandon us at the airport, after telling me it was gonna be a "fresh start"." He forced a laugh. "For him, maybe. What I remember is a string of shitty apartments and my mom working two jobs."

She sighed, and shook her head. "Is that what your mother told you?"

"I was *there*."

"She didn't want him to come! She just took you and left!"

"That's a lie."

"Look around you!" she said, gesturing to the bare walls and rooms. "Does this look like a life to you? Why would he ever leave you unless he had to?" Anand stared at her, willing her to break. They both knew what he was thinking, and the reason why.



"You're wrong," she whispered, but did not say the words.

He couldn't sleep that night. Not with the doubts swirling around in his head, and the shouts and sporadic hisses coming in through the bedroom window. His mother had painted a picture of a man who had washed his hands of them, gladly. It was the hatred that came of that, and the cold-eyed drive to rub that mistake in his face, which had kept him from answering the ringing telephone during the last weeks. Without that, where would he be?

The smell of frying pakoras came in through the mosquito netting, unbearable. He got up, slipped on his sandals and went out for a stroll.

Fans were clustered around the pitch, bonfires picking out players in white undershirts and shirts. Their play was amateurish, more enthusiasm than skill, filled with bravado and posturing and yet, infused with a gravity in spite of this. It was late. Many had shifts at the factory the next morning, or worse, the numbing depression of another day without any hope in sight. But tonight was theirs, and they knew it. Each turn in front of the wickets was significant, the batsmen swinging for everything they were worth. Dozens of eyes followed the ball's trajectory as it flew past the heads of the onlookers and into the outfields surrounding the pitch. They would not lose the ball tonight.

Anand sat in his father's lap twenty years ago, on what would be their last night together, and watched. Usually the man was restless, twitchy, working out the pent up energy of a day spent working indoors. That night he was still, listening more to his son than that of the game being played. "Will you remember this?" he'd asked. "When you're in America and everything's different? Will you forget?"

"They don't play cricket in America?"

His father watched the players. It was an impossible task, to look at his son in that moment. "No," he said. "Tell me you'll remember," he said, and there was something in his voice that scared Anand very much, because he was begging him to.

"I will," he said.

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Ganguly's office was like a tonic, a soothing, air-conditioned space of soft leather seats, back issues of Esquire and Glamour on the coffee table and even a bowl of M & M's. It made what he was here to do, and the voice inside, small but unwilling to stop its cries, telling him to stop, to just listen, have the courage to stop, easier to ignore. Because a part of him knew that listening to that voice would mean wrecking everything that had come before.

In ten minutes the lawyer had laid out a plan for selling the house: queries to sister agencies in Calcutta and Bangalore, offering the use of a prestigious country estate. Many companies, he explained, were looking to lease such properties for the use of their out of town clients. As he gave Anand a pen to sign the authorization forms, he added, in a more confidential tone, that in bypassing the town entirely, they could avoid the "unfortunate connotations" the house had attained amongst locals. Anand smirked, like he was in on the joke, and scrawled his signature.

"Your mother will be pleased!" Ganguly said.

"Has she been squeezing you?" Anand asked.

"Only every day!" he answered, and they laughed. "She's a...persistent woman."

"She is that," Anand agreed.

"I was surprised when she told me you'd decided to forego selling until now." Something in Anand came to a stand-still.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, of course, there were other issues! Family ties and all! Still, in my line of work a little relocating is par for the course in exchange for a

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larger pay-out. Deepest sympathies on your loss, by the way."

"I'm sorry," Anand said, shaking his head as though bewildered, when everything inside was willing calm, "You're saying I should have sold earlier?"

"Six months ago those Bangalore eggheads were snapping up everything in sight. Now, it'll take more time."

"I didn't realize I had the option." Ganguly looked puzzled. "The house wasn't mine to sell," Anand said.

Ganguly reached into his desk drawer, rifled through, and extracted a plain manila folder. He passed it across the table.

Inside was a copy of the deed to Bandal House, listing Anand as the official owner. The date next to his father's signature read January 12, 1977. His birthday.

"It's always been yours to sell," Ganguly said.

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His mother picked up on the third ring. "Did you think I wouldn't find out?" Anand asked, jamming the cell-phone to his ear as he stalked back towards the house.

She exhaled sharply. "Please, Ada,"

"IT'S BEEN IN MY NAME ALL ALONG?"

"I wanted to,"

"When were you going to tell me? After he was dead and gone, right? After it was too late?"

"No,"

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"Did you ever think I'd want to speak to him? Huh? Just once,"

"Listen to me!" she shouted. "He wasn't talking sense. He wanted to give you the house and go God knows where, live on the streets. I wired him some money, that's all."

Anand thought of the broken wall in the garden, and Rasa's words:  
"That was all he had left to give."

"How do you know?" he asked.

"What?"

"That was all he wanted?"

"I know him."

"He thought I'd come back to him," Anand whispered. "He thought if he gave me the house I'd come back."

"Listen to me," she said. "Whatever that woman's told you,"

"Leave Rasa out of this,"

"Because she's a liar,"

"*You're a liar,*" he told her. "You put us through hell. For what? Because he hurt your pride."

"He left us the moment he touched that whore. Don't you forget it." He had reached the cricket pitch, where two kids were trying to fly a ragged-looking plastic kite, watched by the men beneath the coconut tree.

"I stayed away," he said, as a low wolf-whistle rent the air. The children paused in their playing but, upon seeing it wasn't directed at them, resumed. "Because of what you told me about him. Because *you* couldn't forgive him."

Another whistle, more shrill and provoking, came from beneath the tree. One of the men had gotten to his feet. Anand followed his gaze and spotted Rasa crossing the field. He ended the call and slipped the phone into his pocket. As he started towards Rasa a stream of slurs came from the men, come spread your legs in the shade, what did your master pay you I'll double it, dried-out whore. Head down, Rasa quickened her pace. She flinched as Anand reached her. "Those jackals," she said. "It won't do any good," then immediately throwing those words to the wind, yelled, "Trash! Your wives didn't do much better!" The man who had risen started for them. Anand shrugged off Rasa's arm and stood fast to meet him.

"Get off my property," Anand said evenly.

"You'd defend that...dirt?" he asked incredulously.

"Get off!"

"This isn't your property, *sahib*" the man said, lending the last word an acid tinge. "It wasn't your father's and it's not yours."

"Pig," Rasa whispered, "and what do you have?" The man's eyes found Rasa's and held them. An awful knowledge came into them. He opened his mouth to spew, and before he realized what he was doing Anand had reached forward and gripped the man's shirt about the neck, vision pulsing crimson as he shook him, frail and pathetically bony, a moocher, a rag-doll. Rasa shrieked and tried to pull him off, Anand's grip slackened and the man stumbled back, nearly falling. Please let's go, she said, and the words registered.

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Hatred was a powerful fuel, it pushed you forward when you had nothing else, but it was not a perfect formula. It could never erase the love, no matter how twisted. It always remained, a voice calling to you over years and oceans, beckoning to you from beyond the pale. He heard his father calling to him now, in the guise of a low groan coming from the closed bedroom door of Rasa's flat. It was hard, drawing his eyes away

from the photos on the wall that showed Dev growing up through infancy, first around other boys, then just the three of them, gradually set adrift as what they'd been up to gradually became public knowledge. Hard not to linger on the image of his father actually smiling as Rasa bent in towards him with the look of a woman caught in a dream, unable and unwilling for it to end, yet knowing all the while it must. Hard, but not impossible.

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Dev lay crumpled on the bed, a bloodied towel wrapped around his stomach. Rasa was wiping his forehead and whispering words only a son could understand. One eye was swollen shut. Anand could see his ribs contracting on each breath.

Together they wrapped his body in a large blanket. "This will hurt, I'm sorry," Anand muttered, and Dev nodded, jaw clenched, and affection swelled in him for the boy as he lifted him up and brought him outside, where Rasa waited with an idling rickshaw.

Night had deepened to a rich violet as Dev finally succumbed to sleep. Only then did Rasa seem to become aware of her surroundings, and rise to light the kerosene lamps illuminating the master bedroom.

"He worshipped your father," she said quietly. "Any word, any moment together...he'd talk about it for weeks later." She turned to Anand. "I *told* him to stay away! I'm a woman, they can only go so far. But he's a boy," she said, and couldn't finish. Anand embraced her.

"Just a boy," he said.

"I should have left years ago," she said quietly. "I should have left the day you and your mother did."

"Why didn't you?"

She looked at him, hurt. "I couldn't leave him here," she said. "Alone like that."

"He was a famous man, Rasa. He wouldn't have been alone."

"He was a proud man, and short-sighted. He made as many enemies as friends. When they saw he was finished they pounced on him."

"He thought he was above it, that he was better," Anand said. Dimly, he was aware that he was crying. "Screwing the help was fine for someone like him."

"Don't talk about him like that,"

"Why don't you admit the real reason you stayed. It wasn't to rescue him or some garbage. With Mom gone you were Queen of the House. And you loved it."

"That's not you talking."

"A brand new family. With Dev as his new son."

"Take that back,"

"You think I couldn't figure it out? The bruises on the boy? What did you think would happen to a bastard?"

"Take that back,"

"Do you know how sick that is,"

"We weren't enough!" she said, and it was as though something achingly deep inside gave voice to the words, something that showed itself once, and was gone forever. "We loved him enough to stand by him. But we weren't enough."

His fingers itched to slap her, choke her. He knew he wouldn't do either of these things. "You could have saved him with a call," she said. "He died waiting for you."

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The moving walkway shuttled them along, yet they moved faster, cutting a swathe through the throngs of travelers boarding jets out of Calcutta. Anand had clutched his mother's hand tightly, her face set in the hard, determined cast of before a dinner party, sari trailing out like a contrail. His father was to his right, arm extended out to move stragglers out of the way. The morning sun flashed off his thick lenses. They stepped off the walkway in the wake of a few muttered curses and ran towards the Pan-Am kiosk, the pretty blue logo oddly soothing as his mother shouted for the attendant to stop closing the snaking corridor doors leading to the plane. The attendant grudgingly took the tickets in her hand and ripped them in a smooth motion. Be fast, she said in clipped Hindi, and waved them through.

It was only when Anand was nearly half-way up the corridor that he felt something amiss. He turned around on instinct- and saw his father still at the entrance, hands clasped tightly together as though afraid they might flail and flutter were he to let go.

*"Father!"* he screamed as his mother's grip tightened on his hand, yanking him forward until he was lost to sight.

Ganguly had arranged two showings the next day. Anand drifted like a zombie through them, first a young couple commenting on the glorious "colonial touches" to the place, then a beady-eyed Sikh who had the air of someone appraising everything for a quick turn-around. Neither party referred to the two people in the master bedroom. A doctor had come in earlier to examine Dev, finally informing Anand and Rasa that he had fractured a rib. He wrapped his torso, pulled some medication from his bag and Anand paid.

Outside the Sikh told him the house was acceptable, and that he'd contact Ganguly with an offer. They shook hands. Anand sat down on the front steps and watched him leave. Then he just put his head down between his legs and closed his eyes.

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"I read your poem," his father said. He'd cribbed it from one of his father's books, thinking he'd like it better that way. "What do you think about, when you write?"

Anand thought it over. "I don't know. All kinds of stuff. On my mind." His father had smirked, and it was only now, thinking back on it, that Anand realized that of course he'd recognized the poem's origins.

"What do you think about?" Anand asked.

His father took off his glasses and rubbed them against his trousers. To be allowed into his study as he worked, to be able to be close to his Dad during the long, lonely days in the garden...it was all he'd ever wanted. "It's not about what you think," he said finally. "It's what you feel that matters. I feel something and then I start, until what's left is something I can love. I write for that end." His father had asked him if he understood, and though he'd said yes at the time, it was only now, feeling sick on the steps of his home, that was his, that had *always* been his, that he began to.

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He heard Rasa come out onto the steps, the soft rustle of her sari as she sat down beside him. "We can leave tonight," she said, "if you could only help me carry him,"

"Tell me what was true," he asked her, and the words came so hard. "I need to know."

"He loved you, child," she said. "If nothing else, know that there are people here who love you. To the very end."

"I don't remember what that's like," he admitted. "But,"

"You'd like to," she said softly. He exhaled raggedly. A little of the weight lifted with it.

They stayed there, not touching, beneath the glaring sunshine for a long

time.

*Anish Majumdar* is freelance writer based in New York City, whose work has appeared in magazines ranging from Maclean's to Toronto Life, Psychology Today, and Saturday Night (clips available). He began his career as a reporter for The Toronto Star. Anish also recently completed a first novel, *The Heir*, which is currently in submission through his agent.