Left to Count Memories

published in Nostalgia-themed Asterism Literary Magazine, December 2nd, 2024

Aashna Soni

Here, he is far away from anyone he knows. Here, he is left to count memories.

It is midnight, pitch-black outside. Crickets chirp outside his small cottage. In his childhood, "cottage" conjured up images of quaint, cozy homes. A quiet escape from the hustle and bustle of the city and its bazaars. A place where fairy tales started, where the universe planted a seed of exquisite destiny in a chosen one. Now, it means a one-bedroom house held up by stilts that would collapse if heaven forbid it would rain tomorrow.

Today marks the day of the ritual. 25 years on the day since he left. His memories muddled with his imagination so much so that first they blurred, then it all turned gray, an unfortunate mixing of bright colors. There was no going back – no way to retrieve the vibrant colors from the gray, to unblur the blurs, to go back down the river that had led him here. But on this night, somehow, he would remember everything with sharp detail – exactly how it had happened, but not why. He could never figure out the why.

He goes into the most prized room in his house. The only room. He doesn't sleep here, he sleeps on a mattress next to the kitchen. This room is dedicated to his project, his life's purpose. This is where he remembers.

A large mahogany table lies in the center of the room, leaving only a narrow path around it for one to travel walking sideways. First, he polishes the table. Wood polisher in hand, he wipes the table aggressively until it shines, until he can see his reflection in the wood. For a minute he sees his father. This upsets him – that he had, by some unfortunate fate, ended up just like him. Wrinkles are visible on his forehead,

his oily hair is untamed. Is he going insane? Is this why he left? Is this what he was hoping to find, this secluded life free from expectations but full of burdens? It does not matter. Such things are superficial. It does not matter how he got here, it matters only that he is here.

Now, it is time to retrieve the candle holders. He walks toward the gold-embroidered showcase standing precariously behind the door. One by one, he takes out each of the 24 silver candle holders. He inspects each one for black spots. He puts these ones in a separate pile. He brings out a tub of vinegar from the kitchen and polishes them. Sweat drips down his arms and forehead; he wipes them away with the sleeve of his shirt.

Now, it is time to assemble. Each candle has its designated place on the table. He begins with year 1. He pulls out year 1's candle holder from the pile. Year 1 is easy to find, it is his inaugural candle holder. This design is both his best and his worst. Best in terms of ideation, worst in terms of execution. This was when he had just started learning how to carve designs into silver. This was when his feelings were strongest but his skills weakest. He measures a one-inch margin from the side of the table with his rust-lined ruler and sets it down gently on the table. He then takes year 2's candle holder. This holder shows no effort, neither in engraving nor shape. There was no vision behind it. A disappointment, but nonetheless something he needed to keep to count the years. He sets it 30 centimeters away from the candle on the table.

And so he repeats the same process for the next, and the next, and the next. He tries hard not to think too much about the candle holders. Otherwise, he will grow attached, the memories of designing each and every candle holder will consume him and time will not remain for remembering. He proceeds quickly now, his back bending over the table. He distracts himself from the pain setting into his back by counting. Number 3, number 4, number 5… row 1 complete, now row 2… He focuses on the measurements.

The candle holders must be spaced exactly 30 centimeters apart, and the candle holders on the edge of each row must be 1 inch away from the side of the table. This is the rule.

Finally, he has placed all 24 candle holders on the table. The sun is starting to peek out through the clouds of this early morning sky. He covers the window with the curtain he has made of old, faded clothes. He feels a weight in his eyelids, which beg to close, but then he fiercely reminds himself that this is no time to be tired, he will have all year to be tired. He goes into the kitchen and splashes his face and arms with water from a metal bucket, letting the sweat slowly detach from his skin as wipes his face with a towel. He is now ready to proceed.

Now, it is time to bring out this year's candle holder, his newest design. In his excitement, his heartbeat elevates. He takes out the brown box from the top compartment of the showcase. Inside it is a red velvet bag. He opens it, and there it is: his newest candle holder. This one is gold. He rotates it between his thin fingers. It manages to catch beams of up-and-coming light from the slight gaps between the curtain and the window. A most beautiful shimmer.

The candle holder has multiple tiers; each tier carries a unique design. Coming out of the topmost tier is a slender rod of gold, which twirls up to the top, where a snake's mouth opens to hold the candle. What some may fail to see, he proudly thinks to himself, is the other snake in the scene – it lies twirled up at the bottom in defeat. It camouflages almost too well with the intricate gold designs, its subtle scales detectable only to those looking for it. This, he can surely say, is his best design, both in terms of ideation and execution. It is the culmination of 25 years of learning, crafting, and thinking.

This candle holder will be placed after number 24. Almost as if he is cradling a baby, he transports the candle holder to its position at the edge of the table. It completes the row — 5 rows of 5 candles each. He stands back to admire his creation. The silver and

gold sparkle as light beams pierce through the cloth covering the singular window in his house, now with greater intensity. The snake's mouth opens towards the window, consuming these thin slivers of light.

He now opens the latch on the black box underneath the table and pulls out the tray of beige candles. He grabs five first. He places them on the first row of candle holders. Then, he grabs the next five. And then the next, and then the next, and then the next. He cannot wait for the scent of sandalwood and smoke to envelop him. The thought of being covered in a blanket of smoke, shielded from the cold winds piercing through the walls of his house, makes him giddy with excitement.

Now, it is time for the lighting. He grabs his matchbox from the black box. One match for each row of candles. He lights the first match. Year 1. This year was difficult – he did not know how to contain the emotions produced by his leaving, or to process the gift or curse of life after that disastrous night. A moment of silence. And now the next candle. This was the year he decided to direct his emotions into his craft. Another moment of silence. And then the next. And then the next, and the next, and the next. Moments of silence upon moments of silence, each moment acknowledging what that year meant to him in this lonely journey.

Finally, it is time for candle number 25. He lights the match and turns instinctively to the door. As if his father might just walk in. As if he would forgive him for doing this to him, embrace him, and take him back home across the river. He does not realize the lit match is still in his hand. A sharp sting races through his fingers as the match sears his skin. He winces, his hand jerking involuntarily. He drops the match to the floor and stomps over it. He rubs his fingers against his fading cotton shirt, lights a new match, and lights the final candle.

The sun keeps rising; he cannot let it interfere with his ritual. He takes a faded tablecloth from the ground and secures it to the window. Then, he closes the curtain. He looks into his room and is met by the shimmers of 25 candles. All the light he needs.

Now, it is time to watch the light. He takes his seat in front of the table, on a high chair that allows him to peer just over the heads of the candles. What beautiful things candles are, he thinks to himself. How reliable and predictable, yet at the same time random. He stares at them for some time, but then his eyes start to hurt, and he turns his gaze to the ceiling. He will spend some time here. This is his favorite part. Light dances. Light tells stories. So many random factors at play that influence this story: a slight breeze sometimes enters the room through the duct-taped openings in his walls, making a candle on one side of the table flicker vigorously; sometimes, there is an issue in the wax; some candles are weaker than others; sometimes, a match was not lit properly. But the randomness somehow becomes a story on his ceiling. He smiles, amused by this fact. People want so badly for there to be a reason behind things. Maybe there is no reason at all. But he knows this secret. He appreciates how randomness is the seed from which life grows.

Focus must be maintained for at least two hours with no break. The more he stares at the ceiling, the more he falls in love with the randomness of light. The flickers seem to form waves amid the darkness of the ceiling. Water. River.

He is transported to the night it all happened.

They had just reached the boat, he and his father. His father had planned to take his son with him on this boat ride, to show him the beauty of Satluj – the kind of beauty that never gets old, the kind that makes your jaw drop in both awe and fear. But all of a sudden, his father fell incredibly sick just as they reached the dock. He did not have in him the strength to paddle this river for 2 days, 2 days which could easily turn into more if the weather was unkind.

But the passengers were there, ready to make the journey, ready to take their merchandise back home to sell. They insisted that his father send his son, Challa, along instead. Surely, he could do it. He knew how to ferry a boat. Challa could not disappoint his father, he could not deny these passengers. He needed to fulfill his

obligation as a son.

His father was hesitant at first but then relented. “Stay safe,” he told him. “I will see you in 2 days.” His father was not one for hugging, but he hugged Challa this time. He saw in his son today not a fragile little boy, the boy his wife used to see, but the beginnings of a strong man who would help his father, who would support the family, who would carry on the boating business after he died. After giving an encouraging smile, his father turned around.

Challa boarded first, then the passengers. Fear set into his mind, but he quelled it instantly. Challa knew how to handle the waters of Satluj. They had been very high recently, but this was nothing he could not handle. He rowed and rowed and rowed. They took a break at the halfway point as he tied the rope in the boat to a tree and they got out to rest for the night. He rowed and rowed and rowed. The regular motion of rowing delivered a kind of satisfaction he scarcely received in his life. He felt in control of the paddle, in control of the waters. He owned the river. He controlled the river.

In 2 and a half days, they reached their destination. The passengers paid Challa in gold coins. His first payment. Challa was about ready to turn around, but then he looked ahead. Ahead lay a world of possibility. He had never gone beyond Ludhiana. Curiosity battled his sense of responsibility. Curiosity won. He took one last look behind him, then never looked back.

He paddled and paddled and paddled with a sense of urgency that made it seem like he was running away from something. He wasn’t, was he?

Well away from Ludhiana now, the waters of *Satluj* started to change. They had sensed his arrogance.

The waters turned against him, almost as if they were reprimanding him for his decision to set forth, reprimanding him for his ego. A storm was sent by heaven. The

boat toppled. Luckily enough, he knew how to swim. His tired arms floundered him to shore, to who knows where. Where he is today.

It has been 2 hours now. He does not know this. But what he can see is that, despite the randomness of the candlelight flickers, the center of light shifts in a regular motion, from the side of the ceiling closest to him to the other side. The candles in the front melted first, the candles in the end stayed strong longer. This is how the light behaves. Despite its randomness, there is an element of predictability, linearity. The center of light has shifted away from him.

He wonders what stories have been made about him. He knows all too well the flattening of lives into stories – what became of his mother's legacy after her passing. She became a caring wife, a nurturing mother. All her contradictions were erased, the best aspects of her life made into a neat story. He wonders if he has become a hero, or perhaps a disgrace. He wonders what has become of his father. Father. The word in his mind's voice opens his eyes, in shock, as if his father might suddenly walk in and embrace him. The thought of his father brings tears to his eyes. Tears well up and then stream down his face, collecting bits of grime before landing into his lap. The tears blur his vision of the ceiling, the light. The few flickers turn into blobs of light. The sun has risen, the coverings he has placed on the window can no longer obscure it.

The ritual is over. The memories go back where they belong – tucked away, to be revisited the next year. Challa whispers a statement of closure, wipes the water off his face, and stands up, his head and neck and back throbbing, causing him to grimace. Fatigue envelops his body, but he cannot rest yet. Challa collects the candles, one by one, and puts them into his melting pot, out of which he will make new candles. He then collects the candle holders, wipes the wax off them, and stores them in his showcase. Finally, he wipes down his table, cleaning up any bits of wax remaining.

Challa goes to sleep as the sun has risen. He sleeps for days. When he wakes up, the birds are chirping, the rooster crowing. Now, it is time to make his next candle holder.

⁂

Attribution: *This story is a twist on the Punjabi folk song Challa. Challa has been revised, rewritten, and even romanticized numerous times over the centuries. Multiple famous renditions exist today, each slightly different lyrically and musically.*

It is believed that this song was written to describe the tragedy of a boatman, Jhalla. Too sick to ferry passengers across the river Satluj, he sent his son, Challa, instead. Challa never came back. Challa's boat was believed to have capsized in the rough waters. Jhalla's grief led him to the point of insanity. He could not fathom how his son left him like this.

But what if Challa was still alive, but he chose never to come back?

A popular modern rendition of the song can be heard here, sung by Gurdas Maan and Diljit Dosanjh with musical accompaniment by violinist Raaginder: