

My Next Move

At gripping moments like this, I hear my Nanni Ma's hoarse voice turning over in my mind, engrained with the sound of her rocking wicker chair creaking after every swing:

'Go on. It's your turn.'

And before me -more often than not- would be a small board with 64 black and white squares and another set of 16 black and white pieces at either end.

'But I've already lost; is there really a need?'

At my protest, her eyes would narrow into black slits, and she would stare at me, like I had just ridiculed her. So, I would move my pieces in a useless effort to prevent my inevitable defeat. In her response, she would merely press her lips into a thin straight line, her frustration palpable in the way she would furrow her brow.

'Be bold. Never accept defeat.'

With that, she would once again refurnish the board, and every piece would be back in its designated place, and we would start another game, which would always end with my defeat.

My Nanni Ma was usually communicative in a reserved way, and her advice, which I wouldn't have known at the time, would mean a great deal to me.

In the short six years we had spent together in the same old room playing the same game every afternoon, she had taught me the intricacies of playing chess and the invisible art of victory regardless of situations; though I had never been able to defeat her, not once before the day she was blanketed in a white cloth and placed in her khat.

And so it came about in my early 20s when I saw my life branching into a barren, fruitless tree, its branches twisted and empty, mirroring my own bleak future, wordless and unknown. It stood like a naked pawn, always on the board, always present and thought of, yet lacking and limited in movement and power. I had found no reason to love that sight, yet amidst the desolation, there was a beauty of growth. As my Nanni Ma had snobbishly suggested, and I had snobbishly repeated, the tree will continue to flower when the time is right, and the smallest pawn can become a queen with time.

And with that, I let myself wander with the warm wind through the carefree clouds, until before me was a chess board and opposite me a skeletal tree.

Silently, I worked out my next move.