

A moment's magic

I am penning my first piece of the year, and somehow Bob Dylan's words "The times, they are a-changin'" is running like a refrain through my head. They say nostalgia is the first sign you are getting on in years and if it is indeed true, so be it. What is a few grey hairs and tiny crowsfeet compared to the joys of being a raconteur and telling the young what a beautiful and innocent place this planet had been in the spring of our childhood and youth? In this bone chilling winter of our discontent, I warm my hands, metaphorically speaking, in the crackling fire my grandfather got going in a faraway backyard, so many Magh Bihus ago. I feel my cheeks getting rosy in that welcoming heat, see that sudden shower of sparks and ash on the glowing red embers, feel in my nostrils the pungent odour of woodsmoke. Koka is gone and with him, a whole world of associations has slipped away too. As I sit at my table, snug in the chequered Tibetan poncho my younger son got me from Mcleodganj, I cannot help but think of the things we have left behind – gramophone players, posted letters, fob watches, grandfather clocks, clunky telephones, fountain pens with inkwells, one *anna* coins.... and photo albums with silver or golden paper corners that held the four edges of B/W snapshots on stiff black album pages.

What got me into this train of thought was a pavement encounter recently with a very enterprising photo studio employee. Carrying a mysterious black box, he greeted me effusively and launched onto this spiel about an amazing, futuristic technological innovation which made it possible for a person to have his whole life permanently embossed in an album, a definitive, immutable sequence of Kodak moments, as it were. He was dead sure that sentimental as I was, proved by my frequent visits to his studio to develop even my phone photos, I would gladly embrace this revolutionary technology without a moment's thought about the cost involved. So, thanks to his mysterious black box, no more photographs stuffed into cardboard boxes, no more favourite photos filched by others from the cellophane flaps of albums. Permanent imprints on laminated pages – so professional, so organised. But I had a problem with that. How was I to sift the memorable from the not so memorable? Was I to start from my own babyhood, or my children's? Which relatives to feature in this album, and who were best left unseen? I believe you must keep photographs the way life is for all of us – chaotic, full of surprises, catching us with our guard down. I cherish my huge, bewildering collection of photographs (which defy cataloguing in the way I, too, refuse to be slotted) not only because they are my only tangible link with a past receding with the swiftness of a tide, but also that each snapshot, picked at random as if in a game, has a back story which I revel in retrieving and telling anyone who I've invited to share this viewing. Even the grainiest, most faded photograph is a window that draws me to gaze through.

When I am on Facebook these days, I see novel ways of people posing before the camera. The trick seems to be to make the pics look informal, spontaneous and interesting. But we, the in-between generation, vividly remember the studio portraits of yesteryears. Our fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts posing as couples soon after the wedding. The man looks stern, ill at ease in the company of his new wife, his hair combed sideways like a schoolboy, and trying hard not to betray any joy his new conjugal state must have brought. The bride has a bouffant, looks docile and resigned, though a smile, not too wide as to appear triumphant, shows she is thrilled to be wearing all that finery. Every pair looks exactly the same. Then, a couple of years later, back to the studio, not blinking at the camera flashing on the tripod. Now they range on both sides of their children, equally solemn little people with frilly frocks, butterfly clips, baba suits and knee high socks. The formal record of these milestones are then slipped into gold and silver paper corners pasted on thick, black album pages.

In photography, there is a reality so subtle that it becomes more than reality. With camcorders, handycams allowing virtually everyone to make their home movies, YouTube videos going viral with such rapidity and frequency, the power of still photographs that have captured a piece of history somehow seems to have declined. In our times and to some extent even today, some photographs have captured a defining moment of history in a way that has caught our imagination. As a child, the picture of a little girl screaming and running from a napalm bombing in Vietnam became the stuff of many a nightmare, the toddler John F Kennedy Jr saluting the coffin of his slain father never failed to bring a lump to the throat. The Beatles jauntily trooping over a zebra crossing in single file is now on my screensaver – my way of hanging on to the Bohemian Sixties. My favourite photograph of Indira Gandhi is of the one she is shyly perched on the edge of Babu's bed, a frail waif of a child, her mournful eyes luminous on her finely etched face. Babu lovingly clasps her arm, and she looks wistful and cautious at the same time.

Singer producer Usher, speaking about Michael Jackson, recently, said: "Michael always told me that every moment is a piece of history." The lensman restlessly aims his viewfinder at random images of a world in ceaseless motion, and if he knows when to click, his picture will distil the essence of that moment. Today, we remember the communal riots in Gujarat from the unforgettable image of a man weeping, his hands folded, terror writ large on his face, as he begs his attackers to spare his life. For me, the horror of the Tsunami is brought home not by the cold statistics of human lives lost, but the image of a lone woman on a beach, face down and arms outstretched in the sand, as if trying to claw apart the earth which had swallowed her loved ones. Her body, rigid with shock and grief-in the middle of a silent, indifferent stretch of sand, is almost unbearable to see.

Think photography and some names instantly come to mind – Alfred Stieglitz, Yousuf Karsh, Henri Cartier Bresson, or our own Raghu Rai and Dayannita Singh. Closer home, two people whom I personally know – S.H Patgiri, and Prabal Das are shutterbugs whose unique personas are evident in what their lens choose to zoom in on. Prabal's Naturescapes are sheer visual poetry and complement his deep love for tranquil and unspoilt Nature. In an exquisite coffee table edition tracing the history of the Church in this region, brought out by the Don Bosco Institute, Kharghuli, Guwahati, Patgiri is in his element. A fisherman, precariously balanced atop a flimsy boat on a brown river, swings his arm upward to spread his net afar, and the billowing net, suspended in air, hangs like a cloud over the waters. A lone Manipuri matron, seated pensively amidst her intricately crafted

cane stools, mats and baskets, speaks of a lifetime's patience and an everyday quest for beauty. Standing before a humble thatched cottage almost smothered by lush bushes and shrubs, a young couple and their baby stare at the camera in startled astonishment. The baby has just been bathed, the mother holds the plump cherub in her arms, the man has his trouser legs rolled up, a bright yellow towel in his hand. The three of them look complete, happy in their solitude, playing out the roles Nature has mapped out for them.

A good photographer is passionate about dealing with things that are vanishing. With my weakness for all things transient, I could not help but be drawn to the pictures of Omar Sharif, a young professional and an amateur photography buff from Assam, now working at Mumbai. I first came across his snapshots in his sad, funny and quirky blog www.pollenflight.blogspot.com. There are no people in his compositions, just the flotsam and jetsam of their existence. A cup of tea on a table as weak winter sunshine glows beyond the iron bars of a window: A wooden chair, its legs rotting, sags tiredly in a damp, mossy backyard. An old brass vase holding flowers on the edge of a table strewn with newspapers – there is a sense of melancholy, desolation which is somehow unnerving. At the same time, the invisible presences of people who exist in these environs become so very real for the viewer. You get a sense that this is a home so lived in, so drenched in the quiet beauty of ordinary things. But it also carries within it the slow, crumbling decay of an ancestral home that will not have voices, footsteps, the familiar sounds, sights and smells within its walls much longer. It is as if Omar has already said his goodbye to his grandmother's house in an obscure corner of Assam. And this abode of yesterday sings its silent swan song.

These days, a drive to the airport to fetch or drop a loved one is a prosaic affair compared to the days of my childhood. My youngest uncle, who was a one man personification of the American Dream for the clan, flew into the bosom of his family about twice in a decade. After much gift giving, feasts and viewing of eligible brides, Hiren Uncle was given a farewell worthy of a royal. The clan turned out in full strength at the airport, the women red-nosed and swollen-eyed with weeping, the men trying vainly to bring some sense of order, and we children playing raucous chasing games in the lounge. The highpoint was the group photograph, always taken with Uncle's new fangled Polaroid camera. Today, I look back with great affection at all those people ranged together in a tight-knit group. Some have left for the realm beyond, some I have lost touch with, some are just a phone call away and yes, some I am not on talking times with. But, in that magical moment when we surrounded a much loved uncle, in the pre-internet days when contact was a tenuous, uncertain thing – we were all together, held by kinship and love, a final image of solidarity that Uncle would carry back to California as a precious memento of his visit.

What is missing in a snapshot is as important as what is within it. I have an early seventies black and white photograph, where I am among a group of women sitting on a cushioned floor. It is my aunt's wedding and the sheen of their silk clothes give off a soft radiance. I am the only child in the group, learning against a young woman to my left. She is not particularly pretty, but there is something graceful in her posture, and her eyes do not meet the camera, looking away shyly. She looks reserved and unresponsive on this happy occasion, when the others may have been singing rousing *biya naams*. Several years later, I came to know who she was and what happened to her not long after the wedding. I still get goosebumps when I see that photograph. This shy, withdrawn woman and her siblings were lured to their home from different places by their father. He then murdered them one by one, in a macabre tragedy that sent shockwaves through the State in those days. That may well have been her last photograph and the shadow over her face seems, on hindsight, to have been the portent of the fate awaiting her.

In the first years of photography, and among people cut off from modern life, the camera is believed to capture the souls of people who are photographed. Though that seems laughable today, we hold on to our photographs because we hope to find in them the persons we really are. I know myself as a doll clutching baby, a schoolgirl in braids, a college fresher decked out in Saraswati *Puja* finery, a bride flanked by in-laws, a mother hugging her children. They are all different persons posing as me, jostling for space in the canvas of my life. Photos help us travel backwards, discover the old joys and heartbreaks, the scars and the healing. Where would we be without them?

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