Baabu

Kakinada is not the hottest place in the world, but it feels like it. And it's here, during the hottest summer, in the hottest place that my uncle died.

The sun colors everything there a sandy orange; light bouncing off the suspended dust and pollution gives the roads and sky of the town a yellowed patina. Dust coats everything – homes, people, vehicles – and everything fades in the dust. A freshly painted house only stands out for a few days before the dirty haze pulls it back to its neighbors' familiar hue; proud owners of cars and motorcycles attempt to defend against it by carrying small cloths in their back pockets or glove compartments meant to wipe off their vehicles every chance they get.

Venkatarau[1] left home on his father's Vespa early in the morning.

It was a light-blue classic-seventies moped with a black seat and aluminum wheels. Its orange safety lights contrasted the pale topcoat. The front plate read AJP 652, white lettering on a black background. Its small tires gently wore as they rolled along the rough road on his way to a prep class for engineering exams.

He looked odd on that scooter. He could barely hold up the machine. Though tall, his body was thin and lanky. He was not an intimidating man. Doe black eyes hid behind thick caramel glasses – supported by the bridge of his petite, coffee colored nose.

Usually, he would ride a bicycle to class, but he needed to take the scooter today – it was the first thing in the morning (5 maybe 6 o'clock) and he was running late.

The only other person awake in the house was his aunt.

> "Baabu[2], do you want some coffee?"
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> "No, I'm already running late – where are the keys to Naandi's[3] scooter?"
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> "He'd kill me if he found out I gave them to you." She gave him the keys anyway.

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[1] The phonetic spelling is ʋɛːŋkɛʈɐrɐːu. The easier way to think about it is to say 'bank' but replacing the 'b' sound with a 'v.' Then 'cut-uh.' And finally, 'rou' as in rouse. Vank-cut-uh-rou.

[2] Baabu means boy in Telugu. It's often what the youngest boy in the family is called. It's what my family calls me.

[3] Naandi is an affectionate shortening of Naanagaaru, father.

Tired, he set out in the dark. Maybe he was distracted or lost in thought – he disliked school, or at least his father's rage when he did poorly – but he didn't see the Jeep driving on the wrong side. It was going fast.

The scooter slammed into the front grill of the car and lurched up. His inertia kept him moving forward, through the windshield, out the open back, he tumbled then laid still on the ground. The car braked hard and the doctor in the passenger's seat, a friend of his father's, picked up the boy and laid him in the back over the broken glass. They set out for the hospital.

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I'm not being entirely honest.

My uncle didn't die in the summer. He died in January. And I don't know what his scooter looked like. I don't even know what *he* looked like. We don't have any photos. He was sixteen years old, and I wouldn't be born for another twenty. I never knew him.

But I always imagined that it was during the summer.

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Chinna, also on his way to class, stopped to see a toppled scooter over a pile of glass. A scooter that looked like his friend's. He read its plate then raced home to wake up the family. My grandfather left for the hospital first.

There, he saw his son, cuts all over his body, a temporary cast on his right thigh, his head wrapped in gauze, comatose. The doctors in Kakinada were able to relieve the blood that was pooled in his skull, but they would need to transport him to a bigger hospital in a bigger city to repair the broken femur. The rest of the family followed him that evening.

In Vizag, where the streets are cleaner and the roads are paved and the dividers are regularly repainted, the doctors fixed Venkatarau's leg. He was bruised and the bone would take a lot longer to heal and he was still deep in his coma, but he was going to be okay. My grandfather's worry could lift, and fear could become anger. Why did he take my scooter when he had his bicycle? Why was he late?

Why didn't he see that damn car?

Even now, my mother insists that Baabu stayed in that coma out of fear of their father.

My mother, grandmother and grandfather visited him every day. On the seventeenth, they had just returned from the hospital to Ananth's house (His father obviously offered for them to stay while they needed to be in Vizag). The hospital called. They needed to come back right away.

They knew. Half the men in the family were doctors. And they knew that a hospital would never tell you someone died over the phone. They knew that there was no other reason to go back.

The autopsy revealed that an embolism from his broken femur had lodged in one of the primary blood vessels of his lungs. He went into respiratory arrest sometime during the family's walk back to Ananth's house.

Venkatarau would not receive a proper funeral. For a Hindu family this means the final rite of cremation. But he never had his coming-of-age ceremony, without which he is not considered a twice-born man. Born once into the world, and once again into spirituality.[4] The ceremony represents a transition. A young boy leaves his mother and father to become a man, go live with a teacher, and to learn about the Vedas and the way the world works.[5]

Despite how much my grandmother pleaded the priest, he was committed to this custom, and a grieving mother would not change his obligation to sampradaya – spiritual lineage and tradition. So Venkatarau was buried, in an unmarked grave, its location unknown to his parents.

The next years were spent sobbing. My grandmother wept quietly day after day, while at night, my grandfather cried hard. His hysterical moans muffled by concrete walls.

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Now, forty years later, pain has faded with time. And the children have grown up to become Amma[6], Chinna Uncle, and Ananth Uncle. A few names have remained the same, though. I call Naandi, Naandi – a consequence of imitating my mother as a child – and everyone still calls Baabu, Baabu.

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[4] It is tradition to have one's Uppanayana at eight years old. But that practice has receded to the more orthodox communities of Hinduism and is generally postponed to a few days before a wedding.

[5] I didn't have my Uppananayam at the proper age of eight either. I had mine when I was eighteen even though my parents were never invested in my having the ceremony. For them, past traditions are to be celebrated as our culture but ultimately left behind for modern practice. But when I was about to leave for college, I wanted to have one. After all, I was about to leave the house to pursue a greater education (the Vedas replaced with biology, physics, chemistry, and math textbooks) and to learn about how the world works.

[6] Mother in Telugu`

Maybe I always thought the accident happened in the summer because I only knew Kakinada in the summer. For the better part of my childhood, I spent each one visiting my grandparents' house. By then, they had moved to a new location[7] on a far more rural part of land on the edges of the city, close to the chemical factory.

The kids next door from my grandparents' house were named Bablu and Tanish. The wall that separates our two plots of land was not much taller than any of us and if we took a running start, we could hoist ourselves above it and jump over – that way we wouldn't have to put on shoes to cross the dirt road with its stray shards of glass and metal scrap.

Bablu and Tanish's grandfather had a spare petrol-powered motor scooter, to which Bablu got the keys when he and I were fourteen years old. The scooter looked ancient. The speedometer was broken, perpetually stuck at zero kilometers per hour. The once blue paint had aged to a dirty gray, peeling where the chassis met the wheel wells – revealing a red-stained, rusted steel underneath. It's contrasting safety lights had bleached. The right side-mirror had broken off and the left one was held loosely.

But it still worked.

After trying the ignition a few times, the engine would turn over, ready to kick up dust on the paths behind our homes. And when Bablu was at school, he gave me the keys and in the horribly hot sun, I jumped the wall to ride around.

I didn't wear a helmet; the scooter was too slow to warrant one. I passed small troops of snorting boars, dark brown and eating the litter that families would dump behind their homes. We were always warned not to get too close to the boars. They were aggressive and would chase.

I rode past the small green fields filled with trash and herds of water buffalo. They were dark, nearly black. And in the light of the sun, they had an almost purple sheen. They spent their time wading in dark pools of polluted water to avoid the summer heat and when they came out to dry, they would be cut in half. Their bottoms dark black, wet from the murky pond and their tops reflecting the sun with that purple sheen, faded with dust.

[7] The old house has still stayed in our family, however. Now, its occupied by the same aunt who offered Venkatarau coffee the morning of the accident.