

The Midnight Flight

Shyama Prasad Dash

The midnight flight to Indianapolis was nearly empty. The lights flickered softly, and the air reeked of coffee and recycled exhaustion. I looked out of the window, more concerned with hiding my face than the view. My reflection stared back at me from the glass, distorted and broken by streaks of condensation — hollow, unfamiliar, ashamed. Somewhere far below, the lights of my home town flickered like dying embers, fading with each mile.

Before I left, Baba had been standing by the door, one hand tightly gripping onto the frame as if holding himself up, the other dangling loosely by his side. He didn't say much—he never did in moments like these. Just a soft nod, the kind that might have meant “Go,” or “Don't worry,” or maybe even “Come back soon.” I didn't ask which it was. I couldn't. A part of me still remembered the days when his breath grew shallow, when COVID almost took him from me. The fear that had gripped me then had been my silent companion ever since. I couldn't bring myself to let go back then—not after everything. But now, there was no choice. I was leaving.

When the car pulled away, I looked straight ahead, focusing on the road instead of the rearview mirror. The sound of the crunching gravel was the only thing anchoring me in the moment, but even that faded too quickly, leaving behind a silence that felt suffocating.

I had meant to leave a note—something short, maybe a few words scribbled on a scrap of paper. But as I sat at the dining table that afternoon, pen over the page, nothing came. Not because I didn't know what to say, but because I knew there wasn't enough space to say it. How do you condense a lifetime of debt and guilt into a single sentence?

Baba had always held the belief that serving the homeland was a calling higher than any individual ambition. He never said it outright, but I knew he saw my decision to pursue an education abroad as a quiet surrender to a different ideal—a path he hadn't chosen, one he might not have fully understood. Yet he never once tried to stop me.

Somewhere over the Atlantic, I reached into my bag and pulled out a packet of cashews Baba had slipped in without telling me. He always did that—packed something small, like a talisman against the unknown. I stared at the crumpled packet for a long time, the faded logo mocking me with its familiarity. I didn't open it.

In my mind, I kept replaying the last few weeks, the quiet rituals of leaving. Baba's disapproval wasn't loud; it was in the silences, the way he busied himself with my packing, his hands steady but his eyes betraying the weight of unspoken fears. I had felt the weight of his convictions over the years, and I knew that a part of him struggled to reconcile his ideals with the reality of my leaving. The way he handed me item after item to pack into the suitcases, how he folded my clothes with the care of someone piecing together something already falling apart, his silence at dinner, the unspoken things weighed heavier than words.

The night before I left, I found him sitting alone in the living room, his glasses perched on the edge of his nose as he pretended to read the newspaper. The ceiling fan above him creaked faintly with each turn, and his tea, gone cold, rested on the arm of the chair. I wondered if he was replaying his own departure from his father's house when he left his small village to make a life for himself in the city, decades ago. I didn't ask.

As the engines settled into a quiet hum, the seatbelt signs turned off and the flight attendants got up to start the service. I hurriedly wiped my tears and settled in for the long journey ahead.

There is a peculiar weight to the moments we leave behind. A stray glance. A hand brushing the edge of a suitcase. The lingering smell of incense from the puja he performed that morning, as though offering our fates up to some higher power. I didn't know if I believed in a higher power—if one existed, I had been damned for a long time. But he believed, so I closed my eyes and prayed, not for myself, but for him.