

Adreyo Sen

Odd Ball

Mumbai

I have two early memories of my years in Mumbai.

In the first, I am very small and in a blue frock, standing in the corner of a black room. There is a greater blackness in front of me, the ancient bed whose blackness menaces the air. I know that the two lumps on it are my parents and that if I run to them, I'll be safe.

In those years, my father used to make a little tent-refuge for me with the bedsheets and his legs. I would be so excited when he came home from work that I would dance in front of him at the door.

My second memory is of the stained nightdress our maidservant used to wear. She was a haggard, evil-looking crone and I used to run from her gap-toothed adoration and stench of stale onions.

My mother caught me trying to crawl into the nightdress when it was lying forlornly on our maidservant's bed.

In my early years in Mumbai, I spoke no English. That I went from speaking Bengali to speaking only English goes to that friend of my mother's who undertook to teach me. I am not sure whether I was more in love with her elegantly-garbed beauty or her perfumed stack of Noddy books.

My best friend at school was Rohit. He was Batman to my Robin, Shah Rukh Khan to my Amitabh Bachchan. One day, outside the auditorium, I lunged at a group of seniors as my mother approached, imagining myself as He-Man coming to her defence. I looked back at Rohit as they beat me up, prior to my mother effortlessly pushing them away. He hadn't come to my aid.

Through Rohit, I became an avid collector of Gi-Joes. His worn out, gentle mother bought me my first one. Going to his house on the weekends, I would generally fall out with him and his bullying sister, later a stunning beauty. His mother would make us delicious Nutella sandwiches.

On the school bus, the many alarmingly pink seniors would take offence at my tendency to romance and would twist my arms behind me. I had a nemesis in my year on that bus, a ferret-faced boy. We fought after fervid amicability when I was taken to his house to “bond.”

At school, I was envious of the little perfumed notebooks and fancy erasers that the other boys had. I would steal these pretty things, right until my mother took me out to buy my own collection of dainty desirables (which I soon lost). That evening, I was quite in love with my mother and importuned her to be allowed to bring her roses from our building’s vast garden.

My best friend in the building was a little Sikh boy named Arjun who had an army of soft toy Bart Simpsons and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. He would arouse my ire by pushing me into the pool, but my later diving onto his shoulders was quite unintentional.

I went through a phase of being fascinated by slugs. They were prolific in the building garden and I would pick them up and observe their tepid meanderings on my palm. And then my mother lectured me on their filthiness and I had nightmares where slugs and ants were crawling all over my body.

Those years, I was terrified by elevators and my mother expended many pages trying to explain their mechanism. But that didn’t stop me from having nightmares about being stuck on the top of an elevator for the rest of my life.

Mumbai is close to Goa and we would go there every year. We also went to the village of Thul, where my mother did research for her PhD.

I was close to the guest house manager’s tomboyish little girl and we would discuss our career plans with great seriousness. Thul is on a seafront and I acquired and killed my first pet crab in the space of a single afternoon, my tennis ball falling into its bucket and murdering it.

In Goa, I fell in love with a plump girl who was munching a doughnut, her obnoxious mother in tow (who refused to buy me a doughnut). The next morning, I fell in love with her all over again as she pranced at the front of a train composed of adoring children, resplendent in a pink frock. But she spurned my advances. Her lieutenant, a little Sikh boy, rebuked me, “She says you dirty. Go away.”

My school, Campion, was a boys-only school, rather Christian in composition. I scandalized my classmates by claiming to be Satan and they backed away from me in horror. Assembly was a dismal affair, except for the occasion when they played Michael Jackson's "Let's Make the World a Better Place."

My first grade teacher kept me out of mischief by gifting me a folder and a stack of lined sheets. I wrote little essays on the pillow that was my security blanket and to which I would later take a scissor and the sun and the moon. Two of my efforts were published in the school magazine.

My second-grade teacher was the pretty and dainty Miss. Dias, who was not so forgiving of the trouble I would cause with my reckless imagination. She would beckon me forth, a ruler in her slender hand, and rap me on the head.

I was guilty of one real sin in those two years. I had put my hand behind the doorjamb of the library in idle curiosity at the precise moment that a senior sauntered inside, slamming it shut. I blamed the resulting vivid yellow designs on my sore hand on a mythical senior.

But there was a senior of that name and he waxed scathing on my attempts to get him into trouble and my general resemblance to a budding delinquent.

In my last days in Mumbai, I went to stay with Rohit for a day. True to form, we quarreled, and I was sulking in the living room when his forever patient mother presented me with a parting gift: three new Gi-Joes and t-shirts I had no use for.

Chennai

At Padma Sheshadri, my school for those two years, I was madly in love with dainty and dark Divya, who was shy in the face of my belligerent adoration.

But my behavior with Rohini (briefly, thank God) turned her and the anemically pretty girl who surrendered her lunchbox to me every recess, against me.

Roshni was an improbably pretty girl, fawning and eager-to-please, somehow friendless and suspected of thievery. During a disagreement with her, I slapped and scratched her.

The sad thing is, no one really rebuked me. But at home, I was assailed by a terrible guilt and wrote a fervent letter to God, to the considerable amusement of my parents.

But my behavior to Roshni didn't change and I coolly spurned her attempts to join my creative writing group.

I got a Good Conduct medal in both my years at Padma Sheshadri, despite my behavior to Rohini.

But my music teachers were not so enamored with the “amusicality” I would later be charged with at Doon. One, a poetically mustachioed, elongated Jack Kerouac who was very enthusiastic about our “breadboxes”, the Western Music teacher, thawed towards me when I showed him my little autograph book full of poetry.

I would later attempt to sell this book of poetry, brandishing it at the bewildered shop clerk at Landmark Bookstore. My father rescued the poor man.

The other, an alarmingly potbellied man, was moved to affectionate derision by my mangled but sincere attempts to recite the Sanskrit verses and patted me on the back with great gusto.

Padma Sheshadri was the only place where I was ever popular and I thrived in my role as the Big Man in the classroom. My only (and rather sorry) antagonist was Muthu, who harangued my mother about my yellow teeth.

My inconveniently obsessed fan was the intense and curly-haired Abhinaya, who was determined to serve as my secretary and co-author. Her brother was the weakly humourous Abhishek. I was myself in love with the very white and delicate Shyam Sundaram Rao, who was slow to accept his status as my best friend. But he finally did, to my continued agonized delight.

Together, we were the class’ literary mafia and I remember leading my friends to the monkey gym, climbing inside and lecturing them severely, about our glorious future as writers, while the other children gaped in wonder.

I also remember a wonderful, long day in Abhinaya’s massive, crumbling yellow house where we quarreled, made up and wrote. I was scandalized by the discovery that her father was a shopkeeper and unapologetic about his amassing of wealth.

My only memory of my evening with Shyam prior to my departure for Delhi was his toy truck’s astounding ability to fit an entire Gi-Joe into its front compartment.

It was in Chennai that my father hit me for the first and the last time. I had discovered a 50 rupee note on the ground and had tried to buy a five rupee box of mints with it, before being surrounded by a group of instant friends. A teacher took the note from me and told my mother.

She was uncharacteristically gentle as she took me home at the end of classes. But the same evening, my father sat me down in front of him and slapped me again and again. I was to have no birthday celebration that year.

It was in Chennai that I discovered Edith Nesbit, my parents having bought me a stack of her books all at once. It was also in Chennai that I went from being the relentless murderer of cockroaches to being terrified of them. I will never be able to understand why.

Delhi

My three year stay in Delhi (not counting the years I was enrolled at Doon) were the worst years of my life. This was the period when my father was more away in Kolkata than he was at home. And when he was home, he and my mother fought incessantly. My mother was tense when he was at home, but even more so when he was in Kolkata. This was a period when she was often irritable and angry with me, making me feel magnified in my clumsiness and uncouthness.

It would have helped if I had friends. But events were conspiring to gradually render me painfully conscious of a complete absence of friends, both at the housing estate where I lived and in the school where I studied, DPS East of Kailash and later, DPS, R.K. Puram.

This was a period when I thought things could only get worse. I longed for an ending, or for a way out, something to get out of the grey misery of a Delhi existence, bleakly punctuated by Monday tests.

The first way out revealed itself to be a delusive fancy, a hacked-out expression of the pain I had suppressed inside. The second was to lead to a transformative experience. That was my admission to Doon.

In a funny way, my anxieties over my parents' fighting cathects with one of the brighter memories of my life in Delhi. I suppose my fear of my parents' divorcing must have been a very real one – for I am supposed to have vexed my grandfather via letter on this question. And after the two of them had a particularly acrimonious argument, they made it up to *me* by buying me a packet of chips. This packet, however, did not come with the guarantee that I was looking for: that they stop fighting.

The packet of chips was a godsend – it was not yet Friday – which meant that that week, an additional Tazo could be added to my collection.

Every Friday, I would walk to the grocery store near my house and purchase a packet of Lay's. Friday was my free day – the day I did no schoolwork – and I would read and eat my chips slowly. Each packet also contained a Tazo, a circular disc or pog, featuring Batman or Looney Tunes or some other such cartoon character. It was the first time in my life I had taken to collecting something.

The fourth standard in Delhi starts at a later date than that in Chennai and so there was a long window of time when I didn't have to attend classes. Prior to leaving for work at the Planning Commission, my mother would set me homework assignments – a little bit of Math, a little bit of English and so on. Ignoring my tearful protests, my father also attempted to drum some algebra into me.

I saw the homework as a distraction from the thrilling world of television. Inexplicably in Bombay and Chennai, I'd never been much given to watching television. Here, I was enthralled by the Cartoon Network. Who knew that there could be so many cartoons and that they could all be so good? I was particularly enthralled with Scooby Doo. My father viewed my television addiction with patent disapproval.

One of the first people I met at Technology Apartments – the apartment complex where we stayed – was Utsav. And through him, I learnt of the quaint custom whereby Delhi boys and girls address boys and girls even just a few years older to them in age as 'bhaiya' and 'didi.' I insisted on egalitarianism and this was later to prove my undoing.

Like me, Utsav was creative and full of ideas and together, we whiled away many pleasant hours pretending to be policemen or forensic pathologists. But I was contemptuous of a friendship so readily given and was not as nice to Utsav as I should have been.

Through Utsav, I joined the circle of girls who played by themselves every evening in the apartment lawns. Prior to my arrival, Utsav was the only boy in their midst. They were quite serious about their play, these girls. Under the leadership of a girl called Kaavya, rather more handsome than pretty, and a dark beauty named Anuradha, they played kho-kho sedately or converted the buildings, with their many warrens and blind spots, into the perfect place for 'hide-and-seek.'

The warning bells rang rather rapidly as far as I was concerned. Already, they were befuddled by my name and contemptuous of my readiness to simply be known as 'Adi'. And then there was the fact that I only spoke English.

But the real problem was that which was to be the bane of my life for a long time – my lack of hygiene. Once, when we were playing kho-kho, some of the girls came around to admire the hole in my shorts, while I stared oblivious into space. Why wasn't I even concerned that I had a hole in my pants?

Soon after, at a game of hide-and-seek, all the girls made it clear that they were hiding from me and not whoever 'it' was. I arrived home, heartbroken. Some of the girls apologized the next day, but I knew they were only doing it under parental pressure.

And soon after, at yet another well-organized game, little Krutika, Kaavya's sister, scrunched up her little nose and said she didn't want to play with me. Kaavya – bless her – told me in her fair, firm voice that while she'd have liked to continue to include me in their games, none of the other girls wanted me around on account of my roughness and smelliness.

Mollified, rather than hurt, by this gentle slap on the cheek, I ambled off.

In the midst of all this drama, my school career at DPS had started. Initially, I had planned to set myself up as the class clown alongside a seemingly kindred spirit called Ankur, but this role seemed to require more meanness than clean-hearted fun and so I dropped the idea. Besides, I was more jealous of tautly good-humoured Mrs. Sharma's good opinion than otherwise.

I recall little of my experience of Class V, except for an unreciprocated hatred for an unbelievably smug boy called Rahul Mahajan Nand Kishore. In conjunction with that weighty name, he already looked like a prosperous lawyer.

In Class IV, I acted in the school production, a mish-mash of fairy-tales called "Crazee Treasure Trail." My character was that of Pinocchio and I was becoming very good friends with my sidekick whose name and character I have now forgotten.

That friendship was temporarily marred by the bus ride from the campus to the dress rehearsals. The bus was over-full and thus my sidekick sat on my lap. (For some reason, this was a privilege, to have a smaller boy sit on a bigger boy's lap.) Midway through the journey, however, he looked at me with suspicion. I discovered an odd hardness in my pants, but had no way of explaining it.

Luckily, our friendship survived that incident, even if it did not survive the conclusion of the play.

After the frenzied rush of rehearsal, I found it difficult to get back into the rhythm of class. I was stricken when Mrs. Sharma attributed badly done Math homework to my having grown too big for my boots. Still, I vindicated myself at the end of the semester by scoring full marks in Mathematics.

Between the end of my two years at DPS East of Kailash and the beginning of DPS RK Puram, Mayank invited me to his birthday party.

In the last week at East of Kailash, simian and acerbic Mayank and his cousin, the sweet and cherubic Abhinav got me excited about a pre-departure pigout.

Despite my mother's warnings, I went to the last day of class with three shiny cans of coke. They were very grateful, but they had got nothing. I reveled in my brief popularity.

My fondest memory of my evening at Mayank's is the ice cream float that his mother made for us. We played hide-and-seek and one of the boys persuaded me to wear a hairband under Mayank's sister's bedsheets to disguise myself. His sister, who was playing with us, apprehended me and suspected me of perversion.

Mayank's grandmother, however, suspected me of being Krishna, the blue-skinned, flute-playing Indian god on account of my curly hair.

Mayank's father drove me home and I was in love with the suave, mustachioed man who told me I had a "good command of English". He was not so pleased when I couldn't give him adequate directions.

"I'm so sorry," I said with sudden shyness. He laughed in a strained fashion and patted my thigh.

DPS RK Puram had a fleet of buses to take us home, long rows of yellow buses outside the gate. Our bus took a whole hour to get me home.

In my last year at East of Kailash, I had managed to dirty my pants on a school excursion (the result of a pig-out at a restaurant the night before) and I was notorious among my new busmates for this, as well as my supposed effeminacy. It didn't help that I'd gone from being loud and brash to being little more than a whisper.

I was mocked and one of the boys would sit at the front so that he could kick me as I was leaving the bus. My mother wondered at the footprints on my pants, but didn't push for an explanation.

My respite on those bus rides was the vocabulary games I would play with the grade twelves, under the leadership of the erudite Biswajit.

But Biswajit teasingly prevented me from leaving the bus on the last day before summer vacations and I had to get down further down the road.

Walking home I was staring vacantly at a cow, when it decided to charge at me with an irritated snort. I turned to run and lunged for cover on the ground.

It stood over me phlegmatically, to the laughter of the louts on the road, who made no attempt to help me.

My knight in a white Maruti car was a middle-aged man who patted the cow till it trotted off and got me to the hospital before calling my parents.

Things weren't much better at the housing estate. I had been playing cricket with a group of boys who tolerated at best my poor fielding. The same boy I introduced to their midst, the political Swagat, turned them against me in the space of a week and they took to ignoring my presence or subjecting me to a catchy litany, "Adreyo, fool, fool, fool."

It would be much later, in the months preceding my departure to Doon, that they discovered just how poisonous Swagat was and made amends. And then, I was gladly surprised to feel genuine friendship from the boys.

Also, in the last months before going to Doon, I dug a hole for myself by boasting about my imminent departure, an act that got me a great deal of flak when I was initially only waitlisted.

But I had friends in my last year at DPS: the plumply malicious Rajshri, little, serious and cute Gautam and the honourable Prateek. My new seat partner, also a new boy at school, Harjaspreet, was alternately adoring and repulsed by my highhandedness. He gave me the pencil holder and eraser from his box of Kellogg's in parting and a month into my first semester at Doon, sent me a letter printed in green and festooned with images and borders from Clip Art.