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The Reel My Father Buried

He Silenced His Sitar to Survive His Own Father's Fists. Decades Later, in a Damp Camden Flat, His Son Found the Tape, and Played the One Song That Finally Set Them Both Free.



The attic smelled of dust and monsoon that had never touched England.

Rono found the box first, not because he was looking for it, but because the ceiling above his father's flat in Camden had begun to sag, and someone had to go up with a torch and see what forty years of silence had been storing. He was twenty-six, half-drunk on cheap Rioja from his own leaving party downstairs, and he had exactly the kind of reckless curiosity that only shows up after a second glass. He expected pigeon droppings. He found, instead, a reel-to-reel tape recorder wrapped in a faded blue cotton gamcha, and beside it, six spools of quarter-inch tape, each labeled in a handwriting he didn't recognize as his father's, looser, younger, almost joyful. *Kolkata Sessions, 1969. Ashok & The Moondrone Collective. Do Not Play, Baba.*

That last one was the only instruction in English, and it was underlined twice.

Naturally, Rono played it.

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He was not, by any reasonable definition, a good son. He knew this. He had spent his adolescence slamming doors that his father, Ashok Chattopadhyay, refused to slam back, a man who met every explosion with a wall of quiet so total it felt like punishment. Ashok ran a modest print shop in Kentish Town, went to temple twice a year, and had never, not once in Rono's memory, touched an instrument, hummed a tune, or so much as tapped a rhythm on a table. Rono, meanwhile, had fronted three separate university bands, none of which went anywhere, all of which were, in his father's words, "a very loud way of doing nothing." The two of them communicated mostly in logistics, rent, dentist appointments, the leaking boiler, and had done so for the better part of a decade. Something between them had scarred over rather than healed, the way a wound does when nobody tends to it.

The tape, when it finally spun up on a machine Rono cobbled together from a YouTube tutorial and sheer spite, was not what he expected.

It began with a harmonium drone, low and unhurried, like a held breath. Then tabla, tight, urgent, syncopated in a way that didn't belong to any classical raga Rono half-recognized from childhood weddings. And then, astonishingly, a guitar. Fuzzed out, bending notes with a wah pedal, playing something that was unmistakably psychedelic and unmistakably British in its bones, except it kept collapsing back into a Bengali melodic phrase, like two rivers trying to become one and not quite managing it, gorgeously, on purpose. A young man's voice, reedy, unafraid, sang half in Bangla, half in scat syllables, about a girl, or a god, or a country he was already leaving in his mind. It was the strangest, most alive piece of music Rono had ever heard, and somewhere around the two-minute mark, underneath the fuzz, he heard his father's name called out, laughing, by someone off-mic: *Ashok-da, ekta solo dao!*, Ashok, give us a solo.

Rono sat on the attic floor until the tape ran out, and then he played it twice more.

He brought the recorder downstairs at eleven that night, past the point where any reasonable conversation should start, and set it on the kitchen table between them like evidence in a trial neither of them had agreed to attend. His father was washing the last of the party glasses, his back to the room, and when the drone started up again, quieter now, coming from a cheap speaker instead of an attic, Ashok did not turn around immediately. Rono watched his shoulders instead. He watched them rise, and hold, and not fall.

"Turn it off," Ashok said, finally, in a voice Rono had never heard him use. Not angry. Frightened.

"Baba, this is *you*."

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"I said turn it off."

"You wrote 'do not play' in English. Like you knew I'd be the one to find it. Why keep it if you never wanted—"

"Because I couldn't burn it," Ashok said, and the honesty of it seemed to surprise him as much as it surprised Rono. He sat down heavily, the dish towel still in his hand, and for the first time in Rono's life, his father looked old. Not just aged, old, the way a house looks old when you finally notice the cracks you've been stepping over for years. "Some things you cannot destroy and cannot look at. So you put them where the roof leaks and you let the water decide."

What followed was not a single conversation but a slow unspooling across many nights, the way the tape itself had unspooled, reluctant, then sudden, then reluctant again. Ashok had been nineteen in Kolkata in 1969, playing bastardized psychedelic rock in a basement off College Street with four other boys who thought the Beatles and Ravi Shankar had accidentally invented the same thing from opposite ends of the earth. His own father, Rono's dadu, a man Rono had met only twice, in stern black-and-white photographs, had been a schoolteacher who believed music was a corruption, a colonial poison dressed up in electric wire, and had beaten Ashok with a leather chappal hard enough to split his lip the night he found the guitar, a borrowed Fender copy, hidden under the bed. *You will not shame this family with noise*, his father had said, and meant it, and Ashok, seventeen years old and already too well-trained in obedience, had believed him completely. He sold the guitar within the month. He stopped going to the basement. He finished his degree, migrated to London at twenty-three with two suitcases and a silence he mistook, for the next forty years, for peace.

"I told myself I protected you from it," Ashok said, on the fourth night, the tape playing low between them, both of them now three whiskeys deep in a ritual neither had planned. "No music in the house. No shouting. No, *disorder*. I thought if I built you a quiet life, I was giving you something I never had. I did not understand that quiet and silence are not the same animal. I gave you silence. I am sorry, khoka. I gave you the exact thing that was done to me, wearing a different coat."

Rono, who had spent a decade believing his father simply did not love loudly, found this reframing almost unbearable, not because it excused anything, but because it explained everything, and explanation is so much harder to be angry at than cruelty is. He thought of every band practice his father had sat through in stony, unreadable silence, arms crossed, and understood, with a lurch, that his father had not been disapproving. He had been *terrified*, of the guitar, of the noise, of the boy underneath him with a strap around his shoulder who looked, for a few unbearable seconds, exactly like the son his own father had tried to destroy.

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They flew to Kolkata six weeks later, ostensibly for Ashok's cousin's memorial, but really, both of them knew it without saying it, which was itself a kind of progress, to close a wormhole that had been open in the family for two generations. They walked along the Hooghly at dusk, past the ghats where old men still burned incense against the diesel smell of the ferries, and Ashok pointed out, with something close to wonder, the alley where the basement studio used to be. It was a mobile phone repair shop now. He stood outside it for a long time, and Rono, without quite planning to, put a hand on his father's shoulder, the first time he could remember initiating that kind of touch since he was perhaps eleven years old, and neither of them said anything, because for once the silence between them meant something entirely different than it used to.

On their last night in the city, in a rented flat above a sweet shop that never fully stopped smelling of ghee and cardamom, Rono unpacked the battered acoustic guitar he'd smuggled through two airports for exactly this purpose, and Ashok, after forty-one years, picked up an instrument again. His fingers were stiff, wrong on the frets, apologetic. But the shape of the chord was there, buried under four decades of concrete, and when Rono began to hum the melody off the old tape, the one with his father's name laughing underneath it, Ashok's hands remembered before his mind gave permission. The two of them built something clumsy and unfinished and utterly theirs: a Britpop chord progression collapsing into a Bengali scale, tabla-less, imperfect, played by a father who had spent a lifetime protecting his son from exactly this, and a son who had spent a lifetime wanting exactly this without knowing its name.

It was not a triumphant reconciliation. Ashok cried, briefly and with obvious embarrassment, and blamed it on the cardamom smoke. Rono let him have the lie, because some truths need a soft landing. But something had genuinely and permanently shifted, the water damage in the family roof had finally, deliberately, been let in on purpose, instead of leaking through in secret. They did not become a band. They did not even become easy with each other overnight; old silences don't dissolve, they just stop being load-bearing. But Ashok started keeping a guitar in the Camden flat again, propped visibly in the corner instead of hidden under anything, and Rono began, slowly, to understand that his father's quiet had never been the absence of love, only love that had been taught, brutally, to fear its own volume.

Back in London, on the first anniversary of that night in Kolkata, Rono digitized all six reels from the attic and sent his father a single track by post, on a cheap portable speaker, with no note attached except a date. It was the original recording, cleaned up, his father's twenty-year-old voice still calling out over the fuzz: *Ashok-da, ekta solo dao.*

Ashok played it every evening for a week, at a volume the old house had never once, in

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forty years, been permitted to hold. The neighbors, for what it's worth, did not complain. Some houses, it turns out, have been waiting a very long time to finally get loud.

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