

## THOUGHTS OF HOME



# Hope amid Magnolias

Nature's seasons help us persevere even during times of tragedy

By **RUBY LAL** | Illustration by **BABETH LAFON**

I TAKE LONG walks in my Ansley Park neighborhood, which is dotted with oaks, crepe myrtles, tulip trees, ginkgo, bamboo, and expansive, large-leafed magnolias. In the summer of 2020, the magnolias flowered luxuriantly. Corona was raging all over the world. We had read about devastation in history books, but now, we faced devastation in our times.

The bold white magnolias regularly broke

my train of thought, made me look up—dense trees with wide green leaves, larger than your hand, and blossoms with brittle, rose-pink centers. Yet their splendor felt eerie. Out of turn, wayward. Why such magnificent sprouting amid rampant bereavement? Death loomed large in the universe. And in my own life.

Two years earlier, my father had been hit by a rash driver in India, where my parents live. By the summer of 2020, he was declining rapidly.

My mother was with him, fragile herself as they went in and out of hospitals.

That September, I traveled to Uppsala, Sweden, to take up a fellowship I had been offered at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study. I settled into the serenity of botanist Linnaeus's garden and the magnificent orangery.

In Villa Therese Andersson, where I lived, I rang my mother each evening. On September 30, I called before setting out to dinner with a colleague. My parents had just returned home from the hospital. "He won't eat..." she said to me. "He's so happy, lying on his bed. He's lying there like a king."

After dinner, reaching for my wallet, I took out my cell phone instead. Scores of missed calls. My dad had passed.

I walked back numb. The next day, at the crack of dawn, I drank a strong coffee and phoned my mother. She cried so hard, I could hear her fractured soul.

I got into the shower. That's when I first cried.

The borders were shut. There was no chance I could get on a plane to India. My partner's residence permit for Sweden had not been cleared. Amid the raging pandemic, he got an exemption and boarded a flight from Atlanta for a visit. We sat together and grieved.

In that gritty Scandinavian winter, February 2021 became a month like no other in my life. Firmer pandemic strictures. Completely alone and lonely, I saw no one. My grief came and went. Pockets of grief. Sometimes, I just cried. Sometimes, I saw my father's face in the sky. I feared calling my resilient mother.

One day, looking out of my window at the bare tulip tree that faced my study, I felt a magnetic pull. I put on my ankle-length down coat and went outside. I headed straight to the city forest, navigating the heavy snow, almost in a trance. The majesty of winter seeped in.

I began to walk each day. Bare, black trees. Several inches of snow perched upon sturdy branches. Solid, quiet. I settled into a new rhythm of work. In the wintry stillness, I began to see each word in its rich complexity, its layers, its underneath. Vivid. Like the magnolias.

I asked my mom when she'd like to visit me in America. "For now, I want to be near my garden," she said. Near her mango tree, morning and night basil called Rama and Shama, marigolds, roses. There is always life alongside death.

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