



image credits

Roudri Bandyopadhyay

ARCHIVE OF LIFETIMES

SAFELY TUCKED AWAY INSIDE MY parents' bed storage in my childhood home is a huge plastic bag full of old albums from the era of analog reel cameras. Our Kodak camera, a gift from our grandfather, still sits inside my parents' cupboard, carrying the weight of fading memories. Back then, once the entire reel was used up, we had to take the negative reel to a studio to get the photographs developed. It took a few days for the photos to develop, and the excitement of bringing them back home always made my gut knot. The rule in my family was: *we watched the developed photographs together*. Whoever was in charge of visiting the studio to collect the package, usually my dad, was always under a strict *no peeking* rule. Once

the package safely entered the house, everyone abandoned their tasks at hand and gathered in one room to see what the developed photographs had to offer. A medley of observations would follow as soon as the treasure was revealed.

"Hahahaha, look at how Mom is tilting her head in this one!"

"Oh no! My eyes are closed here."

"Ah! This one has a double exposure."

"There is not one photo of me."

"Look! Dad is here, hidden in the background."

"That's my arm."

Soon after the observation came the story for each of the photos, thus prolonging the photo-viewing time.

"In this one, these two were fighting. Then I pointed the camera at them, and



The photo was taken at the location where the celebration used to take place. According to my memory, we weren't fighting, *per se*. We were arguing about eating ice cream. My dad had a rule that ice cream should be eaten at night, when it's already cooler outside, and not during the day when it's hot, to avoid the drastic change of temperature. My friend wanted ice cream, but I thought the world would collapse if we had ice cream while the sun was still out. Our difference of view caused friction. But we weren't fighting. When my sister, five years older than us, showed up with the black Kodak camera, she didn't just point the camera at us.

they immediately switched positions. Now look, so innocent and peaceful," my sister had said when we were viewing post-Durga Puja photos from a year I can no longer remember. But I remember the day and the incident as if it happened yesterday. She took a photo of me and my then best friend, and later, during the communal photo discovery ritual, she narrated the tale of how the photograph came into being.

She instructed us to stand straight and smile. She further instructed us to put our hands on each other's shoulders. Her closing instruction was, "Fight after the photo. Smile for the camera now." So we did. But we weren't fighting.

At the time this incident took place, I was slightly offended that my sister misrepresented the story, so I quickly jumped in to clarify because I felt that my reputation depended on

my version of the story. My parents listened to what I had to say, but before we could reach a conclusion, someone found a photograph from the last day of the celebration. Everyone was quickly distracted and began recollecting what they were doing during the [visarjan](#) procession. I sighed in relief. Dignity saved.

These albums also contain photographs from my parents' wedding, from housewarming ceremonies of various relatives, from numerous vacations, and from my and my sister's childhood. These faded images lack sharpness and color correction, but in them my parents are young, my paternal grandmother and maternal grandfather are alive, my aunt is a baby, my maternal grandmother has long, luscious black hair covering her back, and friends and relatives who once shared a bond strong enough to show up in the albums for decades but somehow faded away in real life.

But soon after my sister's graduation from high school in 2006, we bought a digital camera—a pink Nikon. In our old desktop computer, we have a folder full of photographs from 2006 to 2011, after which our phones replaced that camera. A convenient technological replacement of old plastic bags.

And yet, there is a different allure in sifting through old albums as you desperately seek that one photo that's etched in your mind, going through one page at a time, carefully studying each

photo because the person behind the camera saw a moment strong enough to immortalize within the limited reels. The album's old white plastic pages are rough against your skin, and the thin protective film covering the photographs, intended to guard them from scratches and dust, is sweating and sticking. Now and then you carefully slide your fingers underneath the film to wipe off the perspiration and unstick it.

There is a photo of me when I was about five or six years of age, standing on my father's aqua blue LML scooter in the front yard of the defense quarter where we lived. My paternal grandmother is standing next to me on the ground, and I am reaching out to kiss her cheek as she bends slightly toward me. I am wearing a peach frock and a knitted pink sweater with sky-blue half sleeves, and she is wearing an off-white sari with a black, or maybe dark-blue, polka-print border and an off-white full-sleeve sweater. Half of my body is hidden behind hers. With my exposed hand, I am holding the scooter handle while my grandmother has one arm wrapped around me and the other clutching her sweater. The way her sari is tied tells me she must have been going somewhere. When at home, she draped her sari the Bengali [aatpoure](#) way. But in the photograph, her sari is draped in basic [nivi](#) style with the aanchal pleated and thrown over her left shoulder.



I stared at the photograph for quite some time, trying to jog absolutely any memory from the day. Did we both go somewhere? Was I home and she had just returned? Where could she possibly have gone? All I could decipher was that it was a winter day. Winters in central India used to be too harsh for a light, half-sleeve sweater. October days used to be too warm for any sweater. Therefore, judging by the clothes, it's probably November. Could it have been around my birthday? But there is no timestamp to tell me more about the day, nothing to indicate what was happening around that time and what led to the creation of this photograph. All that is left is a captured moment of a version of me that no longer exists with

a person who is no longer alive, forever frozen in a sweet gesture of affection.



Living oceans away from home, in upstate New York, I was reminded of the torn plastic bag full of albums as I was scrolling through my phone's picture album. I moved to the US in 2018 and left behind an essential part of my life in a torn plastic bag. As I was scrolling through the past few years' worth of forgotten photos, I became especially aware of the sheer lack of excitement in the process. I wasn't going through the photographs for remembrance, but for clearance. The additional storage space I was paying

for each month was falling short. A pop-up on my phone reminded me to free up some space. I found my gallery filled with photographs I took months and years ago, but never looked back at them. There was a close-up shot of a pineapple cake baked by my roommate in Virginia at our mutual friend's twenty-ninth birthday. There were a few repeated shots of trees and flowers I found during my evening strolls. Also some screenshots of sad quotations about love, life, and loss saved at the odd hours of 2:00 or 3:00 am. Each photo was marked with a specific time, date, and location stamp so it didn't take me more than a few seconds to remember why the image was captured.

Out of an array of photos I viewed for selection and deletion, only a few stood out for the memory they held. I saw an old photo of me when young, wearing thick, black-rimmed glasses and a blue T-shirt, surrounded by my hostel-mates. There are five of us. I did not need to see the time or location stamp to know that the photo was taken in 2016 in Bhopal, India, the city I lived in for two years of graduate school. At the time, I lived in an all-girls hostel. I shared my room with one girl on the first floor, but we became friends with three other girls who shared a room on the third floor. We became a group of five girls.

As I stared at the photo glowing on my phone's screen, a swell of memories flooded my mind. Every night after

All that is left is a captured moment of a version of me that no longer exists with a person who is no longer alive, forever frozen in a sweet gesture of affection.

dinner, my roommate and I would go to the third floor and hang out with the other three girls until we were sleepy. One monsoon season, it rained torrentially, and my roommate and I woke up to our room flooded. We went up to the third floor and waited in our friends' room until the water went down. These girls became a safe space for me when I was living away from home for the first time in my life. The photograph opened up a window for me to look back and realize how young and naïve we all were back then. So many memories, all brought to life with one photo.

That photo is the only one I have of all of us—five of us together in one frame. I moved out of the city after graduation in 2017. The others

graduated a year or two after me, and by then I had moved out of the country. The others all stayed in touch. Their friendship grew, they attended each other's weddings, and even after a decade, they remain friends. I strayed far away, and this image on my phone is the only testimony that exists in remembrance of the friends I once had. I did not select that image for deletion.

enough to store more meaningless photos and videos.



A couple of years ago during a visit with my mother, she suggested getting rid of the plastic bag and most of the albums to free up some space in her room. Her statement sent a bolt through my body. The thought of losing the



After I was done selecting and deleting all the images I once captured but never looked at or shared, my storage was remarkably free. Free

captured moments that cannot be recreated and the images of people who cannot come back felt like an unfathomable loss. Each photograph

in that album was a conscious choice; each image captured a moment worth remembering. The analog cameras had limited reel count; therefore, we were always careful about when to press the click button. The thought of discarding a lifetime's worth of careful decisions and nuanced memories felt like a regrettable decision. I asked her to hold on to them for a few more years. I assured her that once I have a house of my own, I will move them and free the space in her house. She agreed.

That day, after the conversation, I revisited the albums, looking at the photographs as if they were allowing me to live through stories and lifetimes that are not necessarily mine. As opposed to my phone's digital album that captures only my life and whimsies, these physical albums hold the lives of my parents before and after they were married and of my grandparents when they were young and healthy before cancer and death took them away.

I landed on the photograph of my friend and me taken eons ago in our childhood during a Durga Puja celebration. We both have arms wrapped around each other, and we are both smiling from ear to ear for the camera. The dispute about ice cream is no longer relevant. All I remember is how joyful the festival felt at the time. During the five days of celebration, my friends and I lived with no care about school or homework. We existed in a

happy bubble, isolated from the regular world. I smiled at the photograph as it managed to stir emotions in my heart that I did not expect. The friend still lives in India, but in a city far from our hometown. I haven't seen her since 2015, but through social media I saw her get married, start a new job, become an aunt, become a dog-mom, and take multiple trips across the country.

And before I could put the plastic bag back in its place, I found the photograph of my grandmother and me, still frozen in the memorable moment of affection. The familiar questions resurfaced, and yet again I failed to recall anything about the time or moment that led to this photograph. That photograph exists in isolation, its context dependent only on what I can excavate from the visible details.

Susan Sontag said, "Today everything exists to end in a photograph," and I couldn't agree more. The pineapple cake, the tree by the sidewalk, a few shots of chai I had had at varied locations—all captured to share but left forgotten in my gallery's overflow.

I cannot help but believe that the converse may also be true. Everything that has ended survives now only in a photograph—the festivity that ended ages ago, the group of friends I drifted away from, the childhood that now exists only in my stories, and my grandmother who is no longer a part of the mortal plane. ❖