

Longings from Behind and Beyond the Walls



By

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“Why do you stay in the prison when the door is open?”

– Rumi

This book is dedicated to my mother, grandmother and other women in my family and their continued struggles to survive behind and beyond the walls.

Acknowledgement:

This book is based upon my recollections of conversations with my mother and grandmother as such is subject to error and embellishment. Names of direct relations have been substituted with generic titles like *khala ji* and *mamoo ji* to avoid linking the story to any specific person. All the characters in the story are people I deeply love and it is this love that gave me the liberty to expand on their characters.

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Introduction

As far back as I can remember, my mind is filled with images of me as a child sitting beside the knees of my mother, grandmother and other women in the family. As they went about their daily chores they kept talking to one another in soft or loud voices depending upon the noise level in the house. They shared their sorrows and joys with one another freely and without any reservations. I was always amazed at the resiliency of the bonds that existed-among these women despite their own rivalries and the frustrations that they continued to inflict upon each other. These bonds helped them cope with their lives confined to the women's quarters in their houses. In most cases, these bonds became chains that prevented the women from stepping out and breaking rules of the house. However, in some rare cases it was these same bonds among the women that gave them the courage to offer support to those few who wanted to escape the confines of the walls.

I emigrated from Pakistan and made the U.S. my home more than three decades ago. I have had the good fortune of working in fields that allowed me to help empower those who are vulnerable and marginalized, particularly women and children. I have been deeply appreciative of the freedoms I have enjoyed in my life in the U.S., which has been a most rewarding journey. At each stage of this journey I was reminded of the women in my past and their struggles and influences on me.

The thought of putting these stories and images in writing came only because of my joining Erika Duncan's Herstory writing workshops¹ on Long Island, NY. Or maybe as the saying goes, "The teacher appears when the student is ready to learn." It was through the guidance and warmth from Erika and her group, that I slowly began putting on paper

¹ For more information see www.herstorywriters.org

the stories that had been floating in my mind and soul. Stories about the women, whose voices and names were not allowed to be heard beyond their walls. Stories about my own mother and her struggles to accept the freedom and choices life offered her. Only by first understanding her battles could I understand the reasons for my own pain as well as passion. This journey truly helped me find some meaning and direction in my own life.

I had the good fortune of reading parts of this story in front of my mother and father at a Herstory reading event at Hofstra University in NY. At the end of my reading, I looked up and saw that both my parents had smiles on their faces; Mom had tears in her eyes and they were holding hands even though this was something my mother never liked to do in public. Mom congratulated me for being her voice and a voice for women from her generation. I felt my writing had served its purpose and the book lay in draft form for many years. Work and raising a family took over and consumed my life for the next decade.

The arrival of a granddaughter made me reflect on the freedom of choices available to the next generation in my family. As I looked in to the eyes of this child, I wondered what lay ahead for her and other girls like her. Raising a girl child in the present political times in the U.S. – a land of immigrants now promoting fear of the “immigrant” and fear of Muslims – motivated me to pick up the writing again and try to complete the work.

For in the end my mother’s story is that of an ordinary Muslim woman and those around her, each one unique with their own strengths, opportunities and challenges. One sister travelled the world by herself while another sister could not even go alone to the river bank a couple of blocks from her house. No one blanket statement can describe all

Muslims. But when looked at closely, one can see the common humanity we share and efforts by each to survive as best as possible with the cards that have been dealt to them.

My work with people recovering from addictions always reminded me of my mother, for recovery is not like climbing a ladder that one climbs straight up to the top. It is more like a two-step dance: one step forward and another back, and sometimes even a simultaneous walk on the old and new paths. Having the support of people who care at each step helps one eventually reach their goal.

Mom's story is also a reminder that change cannot be forced unless one is ready to accept it. The chains that bind and hold back recovery and progress are often made of love and fear, so that those who love us can end up causing us the most pain. But the same love can also help us resolve these fears and move forward.

Most of all these stories remind me that change is possible and that the desire to be free eventually does win even if it takes a few generations to bring the change about.

My hope is to cherish and protect this hard-won change, protect it from sliding backwards and to keep the momentum going forward. To carry the strengths and good from the past into new lands and new lives, while letting go of the painful and hurtful practices.

What worked for me most is what Grandma, Mom and countless women across the world do – that is to talk to one another. So, I am telling these stories to my granddaughter and to anyone else who will listen with the hope that these stories about a few women in my life will help many other women hear and discover their own voices in them.

In the Beginning

My mother grew up in a house with big walls around it. Walls designed to prevent outsiders from looking in, but also intimidating any insider from even imagining or dreaming of life outside the walls. Walls so high that the boys in the neighborhood had nicknamed the house, “The Red Fort.” They said it reminded them of the Red Fort the Mughal kings had built to keep out their enemies.

Grandpa had the high walls built around the house to protect the honor of the women of the house. Grandpa was a very quiet and religious man. There were some vague rumors about his previous marriages that had not worked out. But at age 55 after retiring from the British army, he married my *Nano*, who was in her twenties, and decided to settle down and raise a family in his father’s hometown of Jhelum situated at the banks of the river by the same name. Jhelum was a small town in pre-partition northern India that would later become part of Pakistan. Grandpa built some extensions to the house, which he shared with his two brothers and their wives and children. He was very clear that he wanted an orderly and simple life with no room for scandal or acting out by anyone.

Nano tried to comply by producing a child for him each year. The first girl born was accepted as Allah’s will. But the second girl brought on fears of having a wife cursed with bad luck so that when my mother was born, *Nano* felt she had no choice but to reject her. After all, it was safer to side with the husband and express annoyance at having yet another baby girl than to risk being thrown out of the home by her husband for showing any affection for the unwanted girl child.

In Grandpa's family girls left their father's home either on a *doli*, the wedding carriage that takes her to her husband's house, or on a death bed. Both those occasions are marked by excessive wailing and crying by the women of the house. My mother did not have to wait for either one of those occasions for at just a few hours old, her aunt *Khala ji* carried her out of the house. Grandpa's disappointment was not limited to my newborn mother; her two older sisters were also removed from home and sent off to live with their maternal grandmother for the next few years.

Khala had lost many children either during childbirth or soon after because of her active tuberculosis. She was happy to take a baby home with her.

Khala's house was joined to the side wall of Grandpa's house. And there my mother thrived under the loving care of her aunt, with frequent but well-timed visits to see her mother when Grandpa was out of the house.

By the time my mother was about four years old, across the wall *Nano* had dutifully produced two boys for my grandfather. While celebrating the birth of his second son it suddenly dawned on Grandpa that the daughter he had rejected some years ago as bad luck had been the harbinger of the male heirs in the family. He asked *Nano* to let my mother return to the house. Just as quietly as she had left her home she was brought back.

My Mom says she still remembers the day she returned home. *Nano* had cried out, "How could I have turned away from such a pretty girl?" All her life Mom struggled in trying to find an answer to this question, but on that day, all she could say was that *Khala ji* called her "Pretty Princess."

Grandpa put his hand on my mother's head and prayed that her reentry into the house would continue to bring good luck to the family. However, he could only go so far in his acceptance of her, for he then gave her the name "Khurshid," which is a boy's name. *Nano* said it was no big deal for she and the other women would call her Khurshida, the female version of the name. Mom said she tried on all three names and wondered which one she liked best – Khurshid, Khurshida or Princess. *Khala ji* encouraged my Mom to thank her father for giving her the good name. Then she took my Mom to show her the whole house with her siblings and tens of cousins. Mom said she was so shocked that the walls that had looked so tall from the outside when she had made brief visits to the house now seemed even higher when she knew she was there to stay.

Life Behind the Walls

The house had a big inner courtyard with rooms around it on all four sides. The rooms on the first floor were the *mardan khana* (rooms for men) and out of bounds for women. The rooms were dark and very sparsely furnished; the men spent most of their time there, meeting or greeting friends. Older boys slept in these rooms at night; however, married men went upstairs to the rooms of their wives at night, if they wanted to.

In one corner of the courtyard was a narrow staircase going up to the second floor. The staircase was almost hidden and unless one knew it was there, it could be hard to find. The steps were narrow and uneven, making the climb up to the second floor difficult if not impossible. A rope was strung around the length of the stairs to serve as a handrail.

The second floor had its own open courtyard in the center with rooms on all four sides for women and children. This courtyard was bright and sunny, unlike the one on the men's floor, which was dark and enclosed. There was a small square opening about three feet by three feet in the center of the courtyard so that sunlight could reach the first floor. This opening had a fence around it. Small children could be seen peering down from it to the dark lower level. Older girls and women had strict orders to stay away from the fence for fear that a man from the first floor might look up and spot them. At one corner of the fence a basket hung on a metal chain for the transfer of food or supplies between the two floors. When Grandpa wanted something, he would shake the chain and it would make a clanging sound alerting *Nano*. The basket would then be lowered or raised to make the transfer of whatever was needed.

There was a hand pump for water on one side of the second-floor courtyard. It was the sole supplier of water for all the inhabitants of the house. The children bathed, played and lived by the pump. When the boys got older they would then move downstairs to the *mardan khana*. The girls stayed on the second-floor with their mothers.

There was also a third floor to the house that consisted only of a flat rooftop with walls all around it and a latrine in one corner. This floor had many functions. The first one, of course was to reach the latrine at a time when no one else was using it, something that was not easily accomplished in a house with three brothers and their wives and dozens of children.

Lines and lines of ropes on this floor were for hanging the daily wash of tons of clothes to dry. This floor was the best spot to go if one wanted to be alone. It also was the preferred space where children who were punished were sent to sit in the hot sun to repent. Since Grandpa's house was the highest in the neighborhood it was also the floor from which one could peek into neighbors' homes.

But the most important use for this top floor was for sleeping in the open air during hot summer nights when the downstairs rooms would become just unbearably hot and suffocating. On one side of the wall there were piles of light wooden cots that were pulled apart and spread out at night, then covered with white cotton sheets for sleeping. To reach this top floor old and young, men, women and children all had to climb a bamboo ladder that connected the women's floor with the rooftop floor. Young mothers with babies at their hips could easily climb this ladder, as could children who since a young age had figured out how to climb this steep ladder. Many had suffered all kinds of

bruises and falls while running down the ladder in the middle of the night due to sudden monsoon rain showers.

My Mom says she loved climbing up this ladder to the top floor of the house. There she would stand on top of wooden cots piled on the side on the wall so she could lean over the wall and peer into *Khala ji's* house. She always found *Khala* busy cleaning or scrubbing one thing or another. On seeing my Mom, *Khala* would always look up and wave to her and call out, "Lucky one, blessed one, light of my house, go away, go and brighten your mother's home now."

Nano did not like to see my Mom up on top of the ladder so she would always call her to come down. It was not a girl's place to be climbing ladders or cots or to be found peering into other homes. Stories of girls who had been poisoned, drowned in the River Jhelum or at the very least be married off in a hurry for far lesser offenses were common gossip.

Since Grandpa had shown so much kindness to my Mom in letting her come back, she felt it was only fair that she now proved to him her goodness and worth. Mom says she was very happy to be home although she could never get along with her older sisters, who were always following *Nano* in helping her do the chores in the house. But she loved her younger brothers. She was their *baji* or older sister. She played with them, took care of them and was happy being around them. She loved all of them so much and they loved her back.

Nano liked that Mom was being so helpful. Grandpa never had to hear any complaints about her for she was so well-behaved and never got into any trouble.

The only time Grandpa ever heard her voice was early in the mornings after the morning prayers. My Mom says she would sit cross-legged in the courtyard with her head covered in a scarf and recite the Holy Quran out loud. She had a beautiful, loud and melodious voice and could recite the Arabic verses from a very young age. Upon hearing her voice soar in the early morning Grandpa would call out, “Praise be to Allah,” and *Nano*’s eyes would fill up with tears. Mom says she never felt shy reading the Quran even though she was not a very bold person. If her voice ever grew softer Grandpa would call out to her from his room on the ground floor and ask her to recite louder and she would immediately obey.

The women in the house would frown and exchange concerned looks, wondering if it was really a good idea to encourage a girl to raise her voice that high. Nano tried to remind herself that it was only while she read the Quran that my Mom raised her voice and that otherwise she was a quiet child and not prone to loudness.

My mother’s days were spent quietly, taking care of her brothers and helping any aunt who had a little baby. When she turned seven years old she was placed in an all-girls school that her two older sisters already attended.

Going to school was a big event each day. First, all the girls had to wrap themselves in white *chadors* (oversized shawls about two and a half yards long). Even though my Mom and her sisters were below the age required by our religion to cover up. Grandpa insisted that they show modesty and remain covered. They then had to wait for their horse carriage called a *tonga* that had white sheets all around it for further privacy. When the *tonga* would arrive the *tonga wallah* would give a loud cry, a signal for the girls to come rushing down the stairs from the second floor all wrapped up. They would

then run across the men's courtyard anxiously making sure their *chadors* were staying on their heads and not slipping off by mistake. Then they would make a dash towards the end of the courtyard, push open the huge and heavy front door to the house, climb into the *tonga* and disappear behind the *tonga's* white sheets.

My Mom's uncle would stand in the doorway shouting, "Hurry up, hurry up." No one wanted to risk their names being brought to Grandpa's notice and facing his wrath for taking longer to board the *tonga*. Years later after Grandpa and *Nano* had died, if Mom and I had to visit the house, Mom could not enter at a walking pace. She would grab my arm and run into or out of the house as if waiting to hear her uncle scream in the background, "Hurry up, hurry up."

Other than going to school there was no reason ever for Mom or her sisters to leave the house. Everything that was needed – food, clothes or school supplies – was shopped for and brought home by Grandpa or the other men. Once a year the shoe maker would send his wife with bags full of shoes of all sizes for all the women and children to try on and purchase without ever leaving their home.

There was an endless stream of vendors that passed by selling their wares on the streets beyond the huge walls of *Nano's* house. Each one had his unique cry and selling style. Some vendors sold spicy chickpeas, sweet cotton candy or roasted peanuts; others who passed by offered to sharpen knives on the knife-sharpening machine they carried on their shoulders. There were some vendors who walked with a monkey or snakes in their bags and could be called in to put on a little show for a few pennies.

Depending upon the moods and needs of the occupants of the second floor, small children were sent down to run after a vendor and bring him to the ground-floor

courtyard where he would squat on the floor with head bent down making sure not to look up as *Nano* or one of the other women would lean over the fence and conduct the sale. This could only happen in the mornings when Grandpa was out of the house conducting some business for Grandpa did not like the women of his house talking to any street vendor even from the distance of one floor. If he was home no one ever dared to call a street vendor in. Grandpa's brothers were not so strict and in his absence, they would allow the women to call the vendors, particularly the one with the monkey.

The *madari* as he was called could make the monkey dance to the playing of a drum. All the women and girls would peer down from the courtyard fence of the second floor as they watched in amazement all the tricks the monkey could do. At the end of the show they would throw pennies down on the floor and laugh as they saw the monkey scurry around and collect the change for his master. The *madari* would sing songs in praise of the generosity of the women of the house, whom he addressed as the *ranis* and *maha ranis*. He would praise the high walls of the house, which were a sure sign of the wealth and security these women enjoyed while he and his poor monkey had to wander the earth looking for food.

None of the vendors were ever allowed to go to the women's quarters on the second floor. However, Mom recalled that occasionally beggar women were allowed upstairs. Women begging on the streets all covered up in *burkas* (a flowing large white cover for the whole body, with a mesh covering in front of the eyes to look through) was a common thing. Most of these beggar women had one or two young children tagging along with them, one on their hip and another one walking beside them. Their older children, by the time they were five or six years old, were either working in homes as

hired help or out begging on their own. Those younger than five would be clinging on to their mothers as they walked the streets begging. Female children were mostly clothed even though in filthy, torn clothes, while male children would invariably be found walking naked beside their mother. If one of the men downstairs felt pity for them, they would send the beggar women upstairs to *Nano*, where they were given some leftover food or old clothing but only after telling their stories of the calamities that had struck them and sent them begging on the streets. Sometimes if the weather was cold *Nano* would take pity on the children and ask my Mom to sew pajamas for the naked babies. Mom says she would pull out the sewing machine and within minutes sew the pajamas from some leftover shawls or sheets of fabric. The pajamas had a big hole cut out in the crotch areas for children who were not yet toilet trained.

Long after the beggar women and their children were gone, the women of the house would keep reminding each other of bits and pieces of the stories they had heard and of all the horrors that existed outside their walls. They would utter deep sighs and thank Allah for being safe and secure in their homes.

Other relatives who lived close by but did not have households as strict as Grandpa's would come visit with their women and children on special occasions like the religious holidays or for sharing news of the birth, death or wedding of a family member. So there really was no reason for *Nano* or her daughters to leave the house. *Nano* had spent her life accepting Grandpa's orders as inscriptions on stones that had to be obeyed and followed.

Trips to the River

On some hot summer days when the heat would be simply unbearable, *Nano* would complain and cry out to Grandpa upon hearing about her sister's day-long trips to the river. On rare occasions, Grandpa would give in. Then Nano had to wait for nightfall for only then was she allowed out with her daughters. Night-time ensured that the riverbanks would be relatively quiet. All the women and girls would wrap themselves in *chadors* or *burqas* and walk out of the house to the Jhelum river only three blocks away.

Along the riverbanks, one could see people lying down or sleeping on wooden cots, trying to escape the heat. *Nano* and her group stayed away from these crowded spots; they needed to find a quiet secluded place for themselves. Their favorite spot was the mosque at the edge of the river, with its steps going down into the water. At night after all the practicing *namazis* had left, the steps would be empty. *Nano* would bring everyone there and still covered up they would sit and soak their feet and legs in the water.

Nano would loosen the strap of her *burqa* under her chin. The girls could loosen the *chadors* wrapped around their shoulders and feel the cool air coming off the water. They could spot a few boats out in the river with fisherman and their lanterns on the boats. The old bridge across the river was lit with very few lights but one could still see its outline clearly against the night sky. The bridge was built by *Nano*'s grandfather. For good luck, he had laid bricks of pure gold in the foundation of the bridge. She was just a child then and her grandfather had taken her to walk on the bridge as it was being built. But that was then; now she could only watch it from a distance. If they were lucky, a

train would go by on the bridge, with its rhythmic sounds and bright lights offering an amazing sight. How fast the train moved, how free the people in the train seemed!

The river water flowed fast against their feet. None of them knew how to swim or had ever dared to enter the water. Mom says she loved the speed of the water even though it used to scare her. She was always careful as she sat down on the steps for she was so afraid of slipping and being carried away by the current. For that was what had happened to two older cousins. That night, *Nano* and the women had quietly sat on the steps, shocked, literally biting their hands for fear of letting out a cry. Fear that Grandpa would be angry with them for raising their voices to a point that strangers could hear them. Fortunately, a lone, late-night fisherman had seen the two girls quietly bobbing up and down in the water and he had pulled them out.

Word had still reached Grandpa about the outrageous incident of the girls of his family being touched by a common fisherman. The fact that it was done while the poor fisherman was pulling them out of the water did not calm Grandpa. “Should have left them to drown,” was his answer as he grounded *Nano* and her girls for a year of no river visits.

My Mom would tell me the story of her cousins almost drowning on our yearly visits to *Nano*'s house in the summers. By then things had changed a lot. Mom and I would go to the river not at night but during the day with my father and brother. Mom would be walking in thin cotton pants and shirt, with a loose chiffon scarf around her neck. Dad would encourage her to step into the water as they walked along the river shore. My brother and I would be running ahead of them, my brother in shorts and tee shirt and me in a little frock that mother had sewn in a design from English magazines

that Dad would bring home from his overseas flying trips. Sometimes I would get loud and scream and insist on taking the frock off so that I could go into the water only in my underwear. Mom would become very quiet and then she would tell me the story of her and her cousins' visit to the river all wrapped up in the quiet of the night.

I used to find it so hard to believe the story and would ask my mother again and again, "Really Ma, really, you never even uttered a cry on seeing your cousins drift away in the river? And how come your cousins never screamed for help as they were floating away?" I would then try to imagine how I would react if I saw someone drowning in the river. My brother and I would make different sounds as we ran along the riverbanks pretending to see girls drowning. Mom would blush and shiver and Dad would laugh. Then he would begin a long monologue about how ridiculously old-fashioned *Nano's* whole family was.

Amma ji

Nano's family was old-fashioned. They still had their women covered in *chadors* and *burqas* even though it was the 1960s and there was some modernization going on in Pakistan. Not that Dad came from a very different family. He was my Mom's first cousin, *Nano's* older sister's (known by all as *Amma ji*)'s firstborn son.

Amma ji lived down the street from *Nano's* in a house like *Nano's*, but with a very different set of rules. *Amma ji* was a widow and a very angry widow at that. She lived with her four children in a much more open household. *Amma ji* had traveled to Bombay and Malawi in Africa with her husband when he was alive. She had been given in marriage to her husband, *Aba ji*, who was forty years old when she was only eleven. *Aba ji* had lost his wife Maryam to malaria, and Maryam's brother thought that since *Aba ji* had kept his sister so happy it was only fair that upon her death he should offer him his oldest daughter. After the marriage, *Aba ji* discovered that his new bride had not even reached puberty and so he returned her to her parents' home, where she waited another three years until she had her first menstrual cycle signaling her readiness to join him.

At 14 she was taken to Malawi where *Aba ji* worked for the British rulers building and running a railway station. Upon her arrival, he asked his young bride for her heart's desire so he could fulfill it, for she was so precious to him and he had waited many years for her. He had expected and was ready to provide the most expensive gold jewelry or fancy clothing for his beloved new bride, but instead *Amma ji* asked for a swing. *Aba ji* eagerly obliged and set one up on the oldest and tallest tree in their yard and *Amma ji* started her short-married life happily playing on the swing.

She always talked nicely about *Aba ji*, who had given her the freedom to play on swings and walk freely in her new neighborhood. He had also given her a lot of heartache in the form of yearly pregnancies. Her young body was not able to carry most of these pregnancies to term, and every few years she would come back to Jhelum crying for the loss of yet another unborn child. But she remembered his kindness, and he would send her back laden with gifts for her family. She had gold coins in her purse and her arms were always covered with gold bracelets, a sure sign of having a rich and loving husband. He had bought a home for her a few houses down the street from *Nano's* where she could come and stay all by herself with a few maids she would hire during her annual visits. A woman who could live and travel by herself in a time and place when even most men could not imagine doing so, she was the envy of the neighborhood women. Men looked at her with suspicion and wondered what had happened to *Aba ji* in his old age. He had followed the normal rules of propriety with his first wife, *Amma ji's* aunt, but with his new child bride *Aba ji* had just gone soft and lost his mind, the men said. They wondered why he loved her so – a woman who had lost four babies was not considered a valuable wife by their standards.

Aba ji lived long enough to see *Amma ji's* body mature enough to give birth to live healthy children. In her own garden, there was an abundance of fresh vegetables and fruit and she had cows in her backyard which insured a fresh daily supply of milk and butter. She grew to become a strong and healthy woman, strong enough to slaughter a lamb and chop it into pieces all by herself, even though, as a Muslim woman, she was not supposed to slaughter any animals.

She had three children, one son and two daughters. *Aba ji*, however, had grown very frail and old and by the time their fourth child was born he had weakened tremendously. He developed a fever that would not go away and asked to be taken back home to die.

Widowed at 35, *Amma ji* went back to Jhelum with her four children and settled in her house near *Nano's* home. She had enough gold coins to fill a medium-sized brass pot. Being totally illiterate, she could not even count the coins but she hoped that the gold would last her until her oldest son started working. She was used to a lavish standard of living and wanted to maintain it even after *Aba ji* was gone. Having the gold gave her a certain authority to push against any family males who tried to question her ways. She maintained her independent household and continued with the same freedom that she had enjoyed in *Aba ji's* time.

She would make daily visits to *Nano* with her two daughters. At the time, my Dad was about 14 years old, which meant that he was too old to go into the second-floor rooms and could only enter the first-floor *mardan khana* rooms for men. He said he vaguely remembered my Mom from when they were both six- or seven-years-old. But each time his sisters would come home after visiting *Nano's* they would tell him of how beautiful *Nano's* third daughter was growing up to be. Who could have imagined that the unlucky girl who was rejected at birth would turn out so pretty?

Falling in Love

Mom was pretty, very pretty. All four of *Nano's* daughters were pretty. They all had the fairest of skin, which made them stand out in a land of dark brown people. Mom was the tallest in her family, something that worried *Nano* for that could pose a problem in finding a suitable match. It was common knowledge that in a country of short people, men did not like their brides to be taller than them. There were plenty of jokes circulating about girls so tall that their *burka*-covered heads stuck out in a group of women. However, what made *Nano* overlook my Mom's height was her hair; Mom had the longest darkest hair one could imagine.

My brother and I used to love to measure Mom's plaits with a metal yardstick. Her braids were always longer than the yardstick. After washing, it used to take Mom hours to dry her hair – in those days we did not have hair dryers. Mom would stand in the sun and brush her hair until it dried, and then she would braid it into two loose plaits on either side of her head. Sometimes she would complain that her arms hurt from brushing. If Dad was home, he would stand behind her while she would sit on the edge of the bed and comb her hair and then braid it for her. He said he loved her hair; indeed, she had caught him with her hair, like the fisherman catches fish by throwing the net into the river.

For that is how my father first spotted her. He had gone to *Nano's* home to pay his regards to Grandpa on Eid day. As he waited for Grandpa to come out of his room, he looked up through the opening in the courtyard and saw my mother standing on the second floor trying to brush her long unruly hair. Dad says it was love at first sight. The moment he saw her he knew that he loved her.

She did not want to bring any shame or dishonor to her family, so she had walked away the moment she realized she was being watched. Later she would not accept any smuggled love letters that my Dad would send to her via his sisters. She had heard too many stories of what had happened to girls who fell in love with boys before marriage. Those days *Nano* was still praying to Allah for one of her cousin's bad luck at having a totally shameless daughter. *Nano* would beg Grandpa to be permitted to see her cousin's family. Grandpa had to set an example to protect his family from a similar fate so *Nano's* cousin's family was not allowed into Grandpa's house until the matter pertaining to their shameless daughter was resolved.

Bhai ji was *Nano's* cousin and lived a few houses down the street. *Bhai ji* was too busy managing the politics of his town and neighborhood and overlooked enforcing the rules in his own house. Taking full advantage of the situation, *Bhai ji's* eldest daughter tried jumping over the back wall of her house to meet a boy who was waiting on the other side, only to fall flat and fracture both her ankles and her two wrists. The women in her family were terrified and had hidden her in a storage room. By the time *Bhai ji* realized he had not seen his daughter, a whole week had passed and her broken bones had set. The story, however, had leaked out. Men in the family had come up with different solutions, ranging from once again breaking the young woman's four bones to locking her up forever in the same storage room, to save the family's honor. *Bhai ji*, though chose another path: he quickly arranged a marriage to a cousin visiting from Saudi Arabia. *Bhai ji's* daughter quickly adjusted to her new life with even greater confinement. Trying to erase her own past, she maintained strict control over her four daughters to ensure that none of them tried an escapade like the one she had carried out.

She tried to hide her twisted wrists with dozens of gold bangles, but no matter how hard she tried to forget her past, the onset of arthritis and the pain in her wrists and ankles triggered memories that could not be ignored.

Mom said Bhai ji was soft when it came to his daughters. Everyone knew that if Grandpa had found his daughters in a similar situation his wrath would not fall on that daughter alone – Nano, along with her daughters, would not live to see another day in that house. Mom says she would shake every time her cousins smuggled in a love note from their brother. I could still see the fear in her eyes so many years later as she would tell me about it. She would try to hide the fear by telling me how annoyed and angry she was at my father in those days. She would never admit to loving him. At least, not to me, ever. But maybe he had found an answer even in her not answering. Maybe when he had suddenly seen her brushing her hair she had smiled at him before turning away. Or maybe he was just being a man and would not take no for an answer. For he was persistent, and did not give up, not until he had married her.

The Reaction

Amma ji was horrified when my father told her of his interest in my Mom and his desire to marry her. She had become used to financial freedom in *Aba ji's* time, and now that he was gone she was quickly running out of her savings. By then, her oldest daughter had been married off to a rich military officer and was the envy of the family. *Amma ji* had one more daughter and a younger son to raise, with no income. Her only hope was that her oldest son would work to support her and instead he had gone and fallen in love with the third daughter of a retired old man.

Amma ji spent months worrying about the situation, hoping my Dad would forget about the girl he had seen. She could not imagine what my Dad had seen in my Mom. She reminded him that the elders arranged marriages in their family. She would look back to generations, never finding an example of a marriage that was decided on by a boy himself. It was always the parents who looked after the interests of the family and arranged marriages that were good for the entire family.

Amma ji would hold the brass pot and feel its weight to assess the amount of gold remaining in it. Who would come to her rescue if the money ran out? She could not count on her brother *Mamoo ji*, for she had become estranged from him due to her insistence on living alone. He had wanted her to move in with him upon her becoming a widow, but she had doubted his intentions and had chosen to stay with her children in her own home.

Mamoo ji used to be her favorite in her heydays of riches and money when she was in Africa, so when he asked if all three of his sisters would sign over their share of the family inheritance to him, *Amma ji* had agreed without a thought. *Nano* had a soft

heart and was easy to convince. Besides, Grandpa had been clear he did not want any money from his wife's family and if he did not want it, what would *Nano* do with the money? Wasn't she well provided for by Grandpa? *Khala ji* had caused a problem by insisting that she get her share of the inheritance. According to Muslim law, the property had to be divided into five equal shares, two shares going to *Mamoo ji* as the son and one share each to the three sisters, *Amma ji*, *Nano* and *Khala ji*. *Khala ji* cried loudly, begged for fairness, and refused to sign the papers.

Mamoo ji could be counted on to solve any problem. The answer was quick and simple. He took his two older sisters and his own wife covered in *burqas* to the court, where they all placed their thumbprints in lieu of signatures on the court papers thereby handing over ownership of the entire family land to *Mamoo ji*. Not that it lasted long. *Mamoo ji* never worked much in his life and lived by selling off a piece of land each year.

As *Amma ji* sat weighing her brass pot and fingering the gold coins, she knew *Mamoo ji* himself was counting on his fingers the few deserted pieces of land that he was left with and scheming to figure out ways of getting money. How she wished she had never handed over her share of the land to him! She could not ask her youngest sister *Khala ji*, who was herself always short on money and always coming to her house asking for some oil or sugar while reminding everyone of how her own brother and sisters had cheated and denied her rightful ownership of her share of the family land. *Nano* was so totally under Grandpa's control that it was impossible for her to do anything without Grandpa's permission, and everyone knew Grandpa did not think favorably of *Amma ji*'s lifestyle of freedom and as such was not likely to approve loaning her any money.

Amma ji had set all her hopes on her son marrying into some rich family and now she felt he had let her down; she felt betrayed by him. She cursed the day her son had set eyes on my Mom and then as if that was not enough, she cursed herself and her fate. When her frustration would become unbearable, she would go over to *Nano*'s house and cry to her.

Mom says she hated it every time *Amma ji* came to their home, for she could see an intense anger in *Amma ji*'s eyes towards her even while she was crying to *Nano*. Mom said she would get scared and would wonder that if only a look by her son had brought this much grief to *Amma ji*, what would happen if she found out that her son was writing letters to her too.

Mom said she would try to stay as far away as she could from *Amma ji*. If she had to fetch some tea or cold milk for them, she would find both sisters sitting on wooden cots, legs folded under them, with their heads touching and whispering into each other's ears trying to figure out what to do. Mom knew that her two older sister's marriages had depleted most of the family fortune due to their lavish weddings and dowries. *Nano* could not afford another expensive wedding and she did not have much left to give in terms of dowry for my Mom. Mom accepted that too, as part of the bad luck of being a third daughter.

Amma ji had wanted to marry her son into some rich family so that the bride could bring a large dowry and improve *Amma ji*'s finances. Sometimes *Amma ji* would get angry with *Nano* and tell her that she had not raised her daughter well. What was this girl doing standing near the fence anyway if not trying to attract passing men? *Amma ji* would start to fume heavily and threaten to walk out and never to come back to this house

where she had lost her son. But then *Nano* would beg *Amma ji* to be quiet and to not speak loudly. She did not want anyone else in the house, most of all Grandpa, to know what was going on. *Amma ji* would try to contain her own wailing and hit herself on her chest with her straw hand fan. Sometimes she would strike *Nano* on her folded legs and shoulders with the fan. *Nano* would hold *Amma ji's* hands and call out, "Patience, patience." Both sisters would shed a few tears at their miseries and wipe their eyes and noses with the ends of their scarves. Then *Amma ji* would put the *burka* on her head, gather her daughter if she was accompanying her, and walk back to her house down the street cursing under her breath, only to return the next day for more talking and crying. For where else could *Amma ji* go with a problem besides her sister's house, even if her problem had originated in that house?

Love Letters

Meanwhile my Dad's younger sister kept smuggling in his letters. When Mom refused to take them, Dad's sister would read them to her and then take them back to her brother.

The letters were full of promises of love, expressing frustration at the high walls that prevented him from seeing her. He told her that of all the places he had traveled to, he had never seen a girl more beautiful than her. The letters scared but also intrigued her. Someone talking about wanting her, how could that be, she found it hard to believe. Telling her she was beautiful, she knew that, for she still remembered the songs *Khala ji* used to sing to her. Songs about a prince coming to fetch her, because she was as pretty as a princess. Was he the prince *Khala* had sung about?

His letters were also full of stories of the places he had been to, and the people he had met. Open jungles of Africa where he had walked in his khaki safari suits, the excitement he had felt on seeing a new railway station being built, or riding on the train wearing his father's stationmaster's cap, or month-long journeys by ship from Malawi to Bombay during his trips back and forth from Africa to the then-undivided India, followed by week-long train rides from Bombay to Jhelum. White people and black people and people of all different colors he had seen during these travels. He talked about friends he had in school, both boys and girls, and the many languages they spoke. He remembered his house in Malawi with its open gardens and trees, and the fresh breeze that would always blow and carry with it the scent of the flowers and trees. He wrote of how choked he felt in the city with its houses with huge walls and wondered how she had survived it all her life.

The letters made her think and raised many questions in her mind. How had she coped with the walls and the *chadors*? Did she feel choked by the walls? *Nano* had always reminded her of how lucky she was to be allowed back into her father's house. For years she had believed that, so that while performing her five daily prayers she would make sure to thank Allah for granting her the comforts of her parents' home. She would pray for *Nano* and Grandpa's long life and health, and that she would be able to live a life that would be the source of peace and happiness for her parents and her family.

In his letters, Dad talked about goals for his life. Should he join the Navy and travel the world in big boats like the ones that carried him back and forth on his month-long journeys between Africa to India. Or maybe he should become a stationmaster like his father and drive trains? Maybe he would drive a train over the old Jhelum bridge just so he could spot her sitting on the steps of the mosque soaking her feet? Sometimes he wondered if he should go back to his old home in Malawi and work at his father's old post. He had not dared to tell these dreams to anyone except in writing them in his letters to my Mom.

Her long open hair, flying in the air while she struggled to contain it with a hair brush in that first chance encounter, had reminded him of the freedom he yearned for. He wrote about his desire for her to experience freedom with him. What a shame that she had to hide herself behind walls and *chadors* all the time! That is what he told her in his letters.

Mom said his letters sometimes annoyed and other times scared her. The letters meant trouble for her. She was terrified that someone would find out he was writing to her. She could not even imagine what the consequence would be, only that whatever it

was going to be, it would be something horrible. Despite her decision to never accept the letters, her heart still yearned to hear what they contained and so she would give in to her cousin's suggestion and agree to listen to yet another smuggled letter. She was surprised to hear about all the possibilities that were available to him. That someone could have so many ideas and plans for his future, she found quite amazing.

She was in the ninth grade then. The all-girls school she was attending had only 10 grades in it. Some of the girls had started talking about their plans following graduation. A large majority of the girls were engaged and were to be married upon graduation. Some of the brighter students were making plans for college. Most of these were girls from Hindu families. It was pre-partition India then and there was a sizable Hindu community settled in Jhelum. Mom said the girls from Hindu families lived a life so much different than the one she was living. It was rare to find Hindu girls using the veil. They had a lot more freedom to travel and visit one another's houses after school. Many of them took music and dance lessons, something that was totally forbidden in Grandpa's house as being against Islamic principles.

As high school was coming to an end, the Hindu girls were talking about traveling to other cities, living in hostels and attending college. Mom said it all seemed so strange to her. In Mom's family, the only woman who had ever traveled by herself was *Amma ji*, and everyone knew that was because her husband was rich and powerful and had allowed it. But even she could not allow her single daughters to travel to another city on their own. There were some things unmarried girls could never do, and living any place other than in their parents' home was one of them.

Mom says she was a bright student. Her teachers were happy that she had been allowed to continue school up to high school graduation, unlike her sisters who had been married after grade seven and eight, for the teachers understood the kind of strict home Mom came from. But they also saw some potential in her and wished she could continue her studies beyond high school. They would tell her stories of other girls from the school who had gone on to study and establish professions. They wanted to speak to her parents, but *Nano* was not allowed to leave the house during the day-and Mom said she was too afraid to tell her father about the teachers' interest in meeting him regarding her furthering her studies. So, she never told anyone at home.

But she did wonder. How would it feel to live in a hostel? Maybe a lot like living at home surrounded by all the women minus the attached *mardan khana* and the ever-present fear of keeping the voice low lest someone in the *mardan khana* heard it. She would try to imagine how it would feel to be able to walk outside without the *chador*. Just the thought would make her blush and with a racing heart she would cross her hands on her chest and bend down in embarrassment. She had a good voice and she liked to sing. She would wonder, if she could sing out, how it would feel? She was allowed only to sing verses of the Quran in Grandpa's home not love songs her classmates were singing. She wondered how it would feel to get a job as a teacher. She had always helped her younger cousins in doing homework for school, and she thought she could be a good teacher. She would have her own money, but what would she do with it? She tried to push these thoughts out of her mind even though the more she pushed, the more the questions came up. She came from a good Muslim family. Good Muslim families of those times arranged marriages for their daughters and the daughters moved from the

father's home to the husband's home. From one enclosed section of the house to another house's enclosed section. Her two older sisters were married and were living lives not much different than *Nano's*. *Nano* would thank Allah daily for how well her two older daughters had been accepted by their husbands and were settled in their homes. A woman who was not accepted or found pleasing to her husband could face some serious consequences. The example of Vilayet Begum was right in front of them.

Vilayet Begum was the daughter of Grandpa's corporal from his days in the British army. This man had been so impressed by his British rulers that he had named his son Vilayet Khan and his daughter Vilayet Begum. Vilayet in the Pakistani language meant England. Vilayet Khan joined the British army as a soldier to please his father. Vilayet Begum was married off at age 16. Upon marriage, her husband discovered that Vilayet Begum's breasts had no nipples. He might have tolerated this one insult to his expectations of a good wife, but what he could not accept was the fact that she had no vagina either. He beat her up so badly that for days she could not even move. Once she recovered, she ran away from his home back to her parents' house, from where she was promptly handed back to her husband. Her husband kept her for few months as help around the house but then he quickly got tired of her. He brought her over to Grandpa and sold her literally for a few hundred rupees. From then on, Vilayet Begum lived in Grandpa's house as a symbol of a woman rejected by her husband. She helped *Nano* take care of her babies.

Vilayet Begum was still around when I used to visit *Nano*. My Dad would tease her and call her "Miss England." She never cared about what anyone said to her. She had her own peculiar ways. She had short curly and very unruly hair that she always left

untied and uncombed; her face was covered with pock marks with two front teeth missing, a remnant of the initial beating by her husband. She could allow herself to own only one pair of clothing at a time, which she would wear for the whole week. On Friday, she would take a bath and wash her clothes by the hand pump in the courtyard, then she would walk to the top floor of the house stark naked to hang her clothes to dry. There she would sit all curled up nodding off to sleep while waiting for her clothes to dry. By afternoon her clothes would be dry enough to be worn, and then she would put them on and offer her Friday prayers in fresh clean clothes.

She had spent her life in *Nano*'s home, but her desire for her own family never left her. She would constantly plan on when and how she could visit them even though her family never made any attempts to contact her.

Nano would buy a new pair of clothes each *Eid* holiday for Vilayet Begum, which she would carefully fold and put away. She would save any money she was given. My Mom was her banker; Vilayet Begum would hold her money in a little purse and bring it out every Friday for my mother to count every penny for her. It took her a few years to accumulate enough fare money for her to go visit her parents.

Having been rejected by both her husband and her parents had freed her in many ways. She would travel by herself, visit her parents and her relatives and shower them with all the gifts she had been saving for years. If she had any money left she would go to the cinema and see an Indian movie with songs and dances. When all her money was spent, she would come back to *Nano*'s house.

Then for days she would tell the story of her travels to *Nano* and the other women in the house. They wanted to hear stories of her being ridiculed and made fun of because

of her weirdness. She had plenty of stories of nasty and cruel remarks she had to hear from strangers as well as relations on her trips traveling alone. Mom said she wanted Vilayet Begum to talk about the movies she saw, and she would ask her to repeat the dialogues from the movie and verses of the songs verbatim if she could. *Nano* would not let her continue for long and would end the story by expressing pity for Vilayet Begum, a woman without a husband and children. Then she would thank Allah for giving her a husband and home where she was safe from such cruelty.

Amma ji had traveled alone because she had an old and rich husband who had allowed it; Vilayet Begum traveled by herself for she had no one. Mom said she wondered if she would spend her entire life in the women's quarters, or would she be able to travel beyond the walls of her house.

My Dad's letters reminded her of all the thoughts she had always tried to push out of her mind. She was annoyed at him. But then there were times when his letters were full of the pain and frustrations he experienced and she was not so upset with him, for then she felt like he was a little like her in his aloneness.

He wrote to her about his father, *Aba ji*, with whom he had yearned to be close before he gave up those hopes. He liked him though, for he was not strict like the fathers of other boys he had known. His father was gone for days while the railway construction was going on. When he would come back his only question to *Amma ji* would be if everyone had been alright in his absence. Beyond that he never showed much interest in his children and let *Amma ji* take charge of them and the house. However, if any of the children needed anything all they had to do was to convey that to him through their mother and he was sure to provide it. He really did not like the children to come and ask

him directly. In that way, *Aba ji* was like Grandpa, who had always kept his distance from his own children.

My Dad also wrote to her about his house in Africa, with windows all around, no walls only green lawns with flowers and fruit trees planted all over. There were lots of open spaces to ride his bike around. *Amma ji* had been so glad at finally having children in her house that nothing they ever did mattered to her. There were no time curfews, no rules, no problems if they decided to cut class and not go to school. *Amma ji* would not say anything and there were no other elders or uncles watching.

My Dad's letters talked fondly of his life with a mother who loved to cook and feed her children. Every day his mother would cook fresh bread, dripping with homemade butter, lamb curries and roasted chicken. She would never make any beans for that was considered poor man's food; she cooked and served meat every day, a sign of her wealth. Dad wrote of how his mother would cook these elaborate meals herself and then insist on feeding him with her own hands even when he was older. He had liked his life.

He wrote of how he hated it when his father died and he and his Mom had to settle in this old-fashioned town. He particularly detested seeing his mother back in the *burqa* and himself being pushed out into the *mardan khana* at the young age of 14. It felt like he had lost his mother along with his father. He felt so alone. He wrote of how shocked he was when his Mom asked him to move downstairs and occupy the *mardan khana* of their house. He had refused and continued to stay in the same quarters with his mother and younger siblings. His cousins teased him for being a mama's boy. He

wanted to leave this place that he could not understand and that did not understand him,
and he wanted to take my Mom away with him.

The Decision

Mom says she knew she had no say in the matter. It had always been the elders who decided. They would try to make appropriate matches, like in the case of my Mom's two elder sisters, both of whom were married to distant relatives with similar backgrounds. In cases where an appropriate match could not be found, inappropriate matches were made and everyone accepted it as *kismet*. *Amma ji's* marriage at age eleven to a man of over 40 was accepted as *kismet*, as was Grandpa's younger brother's marriage to a woman twice his age because no other young girl was available when he turned a marriageable age.

So, in the end when a meeting of *Nano*, *Amma ji*, *Mamoo ji*, Grandpa, his two brothers and their wives took place to decide on matches for the next batch of children of marriageable age, the decision regarding my parent's marriage was made.

Both *Nano* and *Amma ji* had kept my father's interest in my Mom a secret. Until the end, *Amma ji* kept hoping for a girl from a more moneyed background, but one could not be found. *Mamoo ji* suggested my parents' match, though he expressed some reservations since both Mom and Dad were almost the same age and *Mamoo ji* thought a girl should be at least 10 years younger than her husband. *Khala ji* saw the anger and resentment in *Amma ji's* eyes and begged Grandpa for my Mom's hand for her son. She reminded all of them that she had cared for my Mom as her own daughter when she was born and now wanted to bring her back to her home as her daughter-in-law. But *Khala ji's* son was only 12 years old then and tuberculosis had not yet left her house. Grandpa was not sure how long that boy would live, so he vetoed that proposal. Since there was no other match available, it was decided that my Mom should be married to my Dad.

Amma ji's younger daughter, the smuggler of my Dad's letters, was not so lucky. She was matched with a farmer who had never stepped out of the city of Jhelum and would go on to beat out of his wife any remains of Africa and the freedom it had taught her for the rest of their married lives.

Getting Ready

After the matches were announced, *Nano* got busy cooking tons of sweets to be distributed to all the relatives. *Amma ji*, sighing loudly, participated nonetheless. She and *Nano* would set up a stove in the middle of the courtyard, with a huge brass pot boiling with milk and nuts and flour. They each held one large ladle, taking turns moving through the mixture to prevent it from scorching. *Amma ji* was a strong woman and had no trouble keeping the ladle moving. However, on seeing Mom, she would pretend tiredness and ask her to come and take the ladle. *Nano* would smile gently and tell Mom that now that she was almost *Amma ji*'s daughter, she should do things to make life easier for her new mother. Mom says she would shake with anxiety and fear knowing she was being watched. *Amma ji* would make faces at my Mom's weak arms and her inability to move the ladle as fast and smoothly as she could. She would tell *Nano* to teach her daughter some cooking before she went over to her house.

Mom wanted to tell them about the dreams she was starting to have. Dreams of traveling places, of going on to college, of getting a job as a teacher, of teaching a class wearing a starched white cotton sari. Dreams of going out in the evenings with a young man who said he wanted her, and who wanted her to let her hair fly open in the air. Dreams of singing songs in his arms. She did not want to learn to cook elaborate sweets bent over hot coal stoves. She was going to be married and she was going to enjoy a free life with her secret admirer of four years.

Her cousins had shown her photographs of their brother. She wished she could see them again to remind herself of what he looked like. But she dared not show any

interest in him. Mom says she kept very much to herself. She knew matches were broken and relations ended without any warnings by the elders.

Nano started calling my Mom “a guest” in her house, which is still a common practice among Pakistani families with girls about to be married. Parents let them enjoy special privileges and care before they leave their homes. In the role of a temporary guest, Mom was exempted from doing any chores in the house although she still had to go to school and finish her studies. She had to sew and finish embroidering some of the clothes she had been working on for years as part of her small dowry. *Nano* would sit on the prayer rug and after finishing her prayers would call my Mom over so she could blow her breath fresh from reciting prayers on her – a breath that was full of prayers and good wishes for her daughter’s new life. Mom would put her head down on *Nano*’s folded lap as *Nano* would stroke her hair. Sometimes she would rub her hands over Mom’s face while blowing her breath in small little puffs on it. She would then ask my Mom to say the prayers herself, for she hoped that a young girl’s prayers might carry more weight with Allah than hers and that Allah might grant her daughter happiness in her married life. Most of all *Nano* prayed that her daughter would be blessed with a son. She did not say the standard prayer for wishing seven sons for her daughter; she prayed for only one son, only one, but she prayed that he would be her firstborn.

Nano knew of the hot temper of her sister, *Amma ji*; she also knew how quiet and obedient her daughter was. She hoped her daughter would win over a place in *Amma ji*’s heart through her self-sacrificing ways. That is what *Nano* herself had done. She did not have a mother-in-law but she had shown total obedience to Grandpa and never questioned his orders. When Grandpa had ordered her to wear only white clothes, she

had immediately given all her colorful clothes to her daughters and sisters-in-law. It was true that occasionally when the monsoon rains would stop pouring, *Nano*'s heart would melt for her brocade outfit that she had given to her sister-in-law, so she would borrow back the bright red outfit, put it on and walk with her old, almost forgotten flair, laughing as all the women in the house gathered around her. Then she would rush to take the clothes off before anyone could leak the story to Grandpa. That is how things were, nothing to complain about. *Nano* had accepted the rules set forth for her life by her husband, and she was sure her daughter would accept her husband's rules, too.

Nano's marriage had been arranged; she had married Grandpa without ever setting eyes on him. She did, however, wonder what was going through her daughter's mind as she lay her head on her lap and let her blow soft breaths on her face. *Nano* would ask her, almost in a whisper, if she was happy and did she also like this boy she was about to marry? She would remind her of how *Aba ji*'s love had given so many permissions to *Amma ji*, and thought would it not be wonderful if the son could give her daughter similar freedoms.

Mom says those are her best memories, of lying on her mother's lap and feeling her mother's hands over her face and arms all the time talking softly in whispers.

Sometimes she would start to cry softly onto *Nano*'s lap. *Nano* would keep on talking in whispers while wiping the tears from her daughter's face. Tears did not bother *Nano*, but all the while she was talking she would be looking for any signs of hair on her daughter's arms, neck or face. She had sharp eyes, and could spot a single hair on her daughter's body. If she found any, she would abruptly cut short the conversation and send my Mom to her aunts for some more waxing to remove the hair and rubbing of oils

and creams. All that was part of the preparations my Mom had to go through before getting married.

The Wedding

Mom told me so many stories but never any about her wedding day. Whenever I would ask her, she would become very quiet. Dad would start laughing and tell of a very cold day in December when he sat all dressed up in a three-piece suit under Grandpa's glaring eyes to sign his wedding papers. It was a simple ceremony. Mom sat on a short bridal stool, dressed in red, her head and face covered with a big embroidered scarf. Two of her uncles walked into the women's quarters, where she sat surrounded by the women, who reached for their scarves and pulled them over their heads, some leaving their faces uncovered, others even covering their faces upon seeing the men approach. Her uncle asked her if she agreed to the marriage, and when she nodded "yes," she was asked to sign the marriage contract. Then the men came out and asked my father if he agreed to the marriage, and upon his loud verbal "yes," asked him to sign the contract. The marriage was done.

Dad would tease my Mom that she was the one who had agreed to the marriage first by signing the wedding papers before him, and he had been free and single longer than her. He thought the correct way should have been to first ask the man to sign the papers, and then the woman. I knew Mom hated it when Dad talked like that. I would wonder why, if he loved her, did he tease her so much. Mom said she was the first girl in her family who signed her own wedding papers and that was because she was a high school graduate, another first in her family. Women before her used to nod a yes when asked, while many were not even asked and their fathers or brothers would say yes and sign on their behalf. Dad would say Mom was a high school graduate only because he

had insisted that his bride complete high school when Grandpa wanted to marry her to him.

After signing the wedding contract, Mom was supposed to leave her home in a wedding carriage called a *doli*, which was a small box with wooden handles for four men to carry. Upon seeing the *doli*, my father had gotten extremely angry, so angry that he saw red in front of his eyes. He walked up to his bride as she stood all covered in her long red scarf, head bent down, waiting to enter the *doli*. No one suspected what he was going to do next when he announced in a shaky voice that he wanted to take his new wife out of Grandpa's house himself. He then reached over and grabbed her right hand.

Mom says she thought she was going to die of shame. No man had ever touched her, let alone held her hand and that too in front of her father. She stood there in shock. *Amma ji* started to scream at her son, asking him if he had gone crazy, Grandpa turned pale, but before anyone could say anything *Mamoo ji* stepped in and came to my father's rescue.

Mamoo ji reminded everyone that the groom was about to turn 18 in a few weeks, and so was almost an adult man. He had married his bride with everyone's blessing and should be allowed to take his bride home anyway he chose to. Holding my Mom's hand, my Dad walked out of her father's house leaving *Nano* and the other women crying and wiping tears. They both walked a few houses down the street to *Amma ji's* house.

Together

The earliest photographs of my Mom are from that time – newly married, blushing, eyes lowered, in photograph after photograph that my father took of her. My favorite is one in which my Dad's arms are wrapped around Mom while she is looking into his eyes. They both looked so lost in each other. I remember asking her who had taken that photo and Mom had laughed, saying it was a secret. In her time, it was not considered proper even for a married couple to be seen holding each other. It was technology that had allowed them to take a time-delayed photo while they both posed.

Amma ji would get mad every time she saw my father with a camera trying to take photographs of his new bride. So, he would take my mother onto the rooftop, away from *Amma ji's* angry eyes, and there he would take her photographs.

The rooftop was empty except for a few pots of plants that *Amma ji* had tried to grow in memory of her house in Africa. Lacking any proper water supply since the only source of water was one hand pump one floor down, these plants were mostly neglected and in various stages of dying. Amid these dying plants and rows and rows of laundry hanging to dry, I see pictures of my Mom smiling. In some photographs, her hair is loose, in others tied into two braids. Only in a few photographs is she looking straight at the camera, and I can see the love in her eyes with which she must have seen my father in those early days. In most of the photographs, she is looking down as if hiding something from him. In some she is dressed up wearing clothes with intricate designs embroidered on them. She has long dangling earrings, and a choker necklace around her neck.

Whenever I look at these photographs, I know for sure there could be no woman more beautiful than my Mom.

She looked happy in those photographs, or maybe that is how I wanted to see her. For she would tell me story after story of nasty and cutting remarks by *Amma ji*, who had never accepted my Mom or her son's love for her.

She could see that love in her son's eyes as they followed his bride all day while she did the household chores. In the afternoons when she went into her room to take a nap, as was the custom in the town, *Amma ji* would insist that my Mom keep her door open just in case she needed anything and had to call on her. *Amma ji* wanted to be sure she would be heard. It was hard even in a huge house to find any privacy away from the prying eyes and ears of *Amma ji*.

My father, though, would find ways around her. He would take my Mom over to the riverbanks on those long hot summer afternoons when the entire town, along with *Amma ji*, was taking a nap.

My mother had started wearing a black *burka* now that she was married instead of the white *chador* she had wrapped around herself as a young girl. My father hated the *burka* on her, and he tried to take her out a few times without the cover but it had produced disastrous results. Mom had become so used to the covering that she would start to shake every time she saw someone pass by. Worse than her fears were the comments of *Amma ji*, who would question my Mom about the next pieces of clothing she would remove now that she had decided to take off her *burka*. *Amma ji* was convinced this progression of discarding proper womanly attire would end up with my Mom eventually walking the streets naked. Mom had chosen to cover up and put the *burka* on; Dad had given in and accepted it, too.

Clad in her *burka*, she would walk with him along the riverbanks. On the way, sometimes they would stop to buy a packet of spicy chickpeas and share the packet between them. When they reached an empty spot along the river, he would ask her to throw back the face covers of her *burka* so he could look at her face as they talked. He loved to talk. He would tell her face to face what he had been writing to her for all those years. She had spent her life listening to tales of other women; she now enjoyed listening to him. It came natural to her to listen; no one had ever asked her to talk. Sometimes he would stop in the middle of his conversation and ask her to reply. She would get confused and not know how to answer him; she would smile and her face would blush. Her confusion was short-lived, though, for he did not wait long for her reply and would begin to talk again.

She would tell me how much she loved those walks even though she knew that upon her return *Amma ji* would scream at her for sneaking out with her son in the middle of the afternoon and if she had had a heart attack, no one would have been there to see her die.

Amma ji had been reaching into her brass pot for her last pieces of gold to run her household. She did not mind it, so long as it meant spending on her children only. Now her son was no longer interested in eating from her hand, and even when he agreed to do so she felt like his eyes looked elsewhere. He would make excuses so he did not have to eat his meals with his mother. He would take his plate into his room and ask his new wife to feed him with her henna-covered hands. All that was too much for *Amma ji*. She told him clearly that she would not spend a penny on one that was not born of her womb, and she sent him looking for a job.

Jhelum was a small sleepy town. Most people worked in its only wood factory. Logs were chopped down in the forests of Kashmir a few hundred miles north, and then sent floating down the River Jhelum. In Jhelum, the logs were pulled out of the water and taken to the factory for turning them into pieces of furniture. The factory provided work to the local people.

Other than the factory there were a few stores and offices on Jhelum's market street. Working in a factory, *Amma ji* thought, was beneath her son's status. She wanted him to work in an office so that he could be called a *sahib*. The market street was a narrow brick road with two- to three story attached houses along its entire length. The rooms on the first floor facing the street were converted into shops and offices. No sunlight or breeze ever reached these rooms. There were no trees or plants along the entire length of the dusty street. Dad says he walked into a few of the offices asking for a job but felt so choked that he thought he would pass out from suffocation. He had walked out even though he hated going home and telling his mother that he had not found a job.

He knew what that meant. *Amma ji* would be screaming at his wife for not bringing any dowry or money into the house. My Mom would then be sent back to *Nano*'s home to borrow some money from them. The little cash *Nano* could give would bring temporary relief for a time.

Mom says she knew how hard it was for *Nano* to keep pulling out cash for her. So without saying anything or telling anyone, she started to hand over to *Nano* one piece of her jewelry at a time to be pawned off. She did not have much to begin with. It became clear to my Dad how she was raising money when he saw her ears without her

dangling earrings, but he had looked away, as he had taken the money from her to give to *Amma ji*. A few weeks later, he left Jhelum to see a distant uncle in the next city in search of work.

This uncle walked my father over to a long line of men and told him to stand there and wait for his turn. When his turn came, he answered a few questions and signed on a paper. As he walked away, my Dad says he suddenly realized that he had agreed to join the Pakistan Air Force. Leaving his new bride with his mother, he left home and joined the academy for his training.

Early Years

The next few years were tough. *Amma ji* proved to be the proverbial mother-in-law and spared no chance at getting her anger out at my Mom.

A few months later, my brother was born. Both of *Amma ji's* daughters had given birth to girls, and seeing my Mom with a boy in her arms only served to increase her resentment against my mother. *Nano* had hoped that having a son would raise my Mom's status in that family, but all it accomplished was a few days' visit from my father, who left making promises of bringing her to him as soon as his training was finished.

When I was born a year later, still there was no sign of Mom moving out of *Amma ji's* house. All day long, Mom would cook, clean and work for *Amma ji*. Mom was used to a big household with lots of women and children to count on for help. Here it was just *Amma ji* and her young son, and Mom was expected to take care of her babies and her 10-year-old brother-in-law and manage the kitchen. There was no money for maids and no kindness in *Amma ji's* heart to help. Whatever Mom washed *Amma ji* would find dirt on; whatever she cooked was not tasty or cooked well enough. The more she cooked the more she lost her own appetite. She started losing weight.

The empty rooms scared her. She would not go from one room to another without dragging my brother and me with her. When the wash had to be hung on the rooftop to dry, all three of us climbed the stairs, Mom with a load of washed clothes thrown over her shoulder and my brother and I two little toddlers tagging along. There we would all work as a team. Mom would throw the clothes on an empty cot, from where my brother and I would hand her one piece at a time to hang on the line. We would repeat this ritual again at nighttime, in reverse order, to bring the clothes down.

Every few weeks her sisters-in-laws would come with their children, adding to her work. The older sister-in-law would arrive with her team of children and announce that she had come to her mother's home to rest. The younger sister-in-law, the carrier of my Mom's smuggled letters, would arrive each time with fresh bruises on her body, some caused by a jealous husband for stepping out into the street uncovered, and some by her mother-in-law for crying and complaining instead of accepting the beatings she got from her husband.

To them, Mom seemed to be in an enviable position of living in an almost-empty house with only one mother-in-law, as compared to the houses they lived in that were full of people they had to cater to.

Mom said even though she hated the house when it was empty she hated it even more when it was filled with her sisters-in-law and their children along with their constant reminders of how lucky but ungrateful she was. My brother and I liked seeing other children who played with real toys. We would watch in amazement the spinning tops, shining marbles and all kind of bats and balls that would suddenly be found scattered around the house. Mom would try to keep us by her side though our loyalty was easily displaced. We tried to make the most of our company because we knew that after our cousins' departure we would be left once again following our mother around the house and playing with pots and pans. My brother's efforts to hide some of the marbles for later use were quite unsuccessful and brought on more grief for my mother. She was always glad when the sisters left.

She would go back to her routine of cooking, cleaning and washing. When it was done, she still had to pass the long summer afternoons. She could not go out alone so she

would take my brother and me downstairs into the empty *mardan khana* rooms. We would pretend we were going on a picnic to the river and were happy to get away from *Amma ji*.

The front door of the house was never locked and had a canvas rug hanging as a curtain. On both sides of the door were two front rooms that were furnished for when the husbands of the sisters-in-laws came to visit. These two rooms were kept locked and only *Amma ji* had the keys to them. There was a hand pump for water in the center of the courtyard. Women and children from neighboring houses on the street who did not have supply of water in their homes would constantly come in to fill a bucket or two with water. Before *Amma ji* had come to live here, these women either had to walk three blocks' distance to the river or depend on the kindness of the men in other houses with water pumps. *Amma ji's* home was the only home on the street with empty *mardan khana* rooms. Women and children walked in freely with their various-sized buckets for water. They would make a loud clanging sound with the bucket announcing their coming and going.

We had strict orders not to talk to or play with any of these children of lowly backgrounds. We knew most of them by name from their mothers calling or yelling at them as they helped pump water. My brother and I would stay glued to the fence on the second floor and peer down in amazement whenever we heard someone filling water downstairs. After filling their buckets, they would look up towards us and sing praise for *Amma ji*; "the queen of generosity" is what they called her.

Standing next to us, *Amma ji* would sigh and remind them of the times when *Aba ji* was alive and she had given them more than just water. She was famous for

distributing all kinds of vitamins and medicines she had brought from Africa to the malnourished children on the street. She also had a good supply of brandy, which she would give out in teaspoon-size doses to any child or adult suffering from a cold. It was not hard to convince them that taking brandy was not un-Islamic so long as it was for medicinal purposes. *Amma ji* could only stay with the memory for so long, for then she would yell at them to stop talking and leave. Sometimes *Amma ji* would ask one of the stronger-looking women to come upstairs and as payment for the water, massage her legs and back with almond oil. She said Mom's hands were too weak to do the job right.

During our afternoon visit to the ground floor, Mom would lock the main door so no one could come in. Other than the two front rooms, the rest of the ground-floor rooms had never been occupied and were mostly empty, giving my brother and I more than enough room to run around and play in. Some of the rooms were used as storage and had leftover building material for the house from the time when it was built. Bags of cement, wood planks, tools, ladders, broken furniture and other odds and ends littered the rooms. The rooms were damp and dusty. Mom could not even enter the rooms without first covering her face and nose with her scarf. She mostly stayed in the outside courtyard and would pull out an old cot and lay on it while my brother and I explored. Sometimes we had our Dad's younger brother with us; we called him *Kala Chachoo*.

Everyone else called him *Kala* for he was a dark child born to a fair mother. Some people thought he had brought bad luck to his mother right from the womb for it was when *Amma ji* was pregnant with him that she lost *Aba ji*. Mom said she always got into trouble with *Amma ji* whenever *Chachoo* misbehaved. By then *Amma ji* had lost all control over him and was unable and unwilling to discipline him with his energetic and

lively behaviors. She thought it was now Mom's duty to take care of her young brother-in-law. We did not, however, mind our *Kala Chachoo*; in fact, we liked him a lot. We were not more than two- and three-years -old ourselves, but under the leadership of *Chachoo* we felt like explorers and old pros walking through the empty ground-floor rooms. I still remember not only the smell of those rooms but also the texture and taste, for I always tasted everything I saw including wood chips, cement and wall paint.

As sunny afternoons turned into evening, the rooms would start to get even darker. By then we would be thoroughly covered in dust and had had our fill of the rooms, so we would walk back to Mom who would be waking from her nap. She would smack my brother on his head for getting himself and me so dirty that we looked no different than the street kids. Then she would glare at *Chachoo* for she was not allowed to hit him. She would wonder out loud how much trouble she would be in if *Amma ji* saw us all in this state. Then she would walk us to the hand pump and pump it while we stood under the water flow. *Chachoo* usually managed to escape into the street for some more playing while my brother and I whimpered and cried as we washed ourselves in the freezing cold water. Tired but squeaky clean, we would climb the stairs up to the second floor of the house.

Amma ji, having woken from her afternoon nap, would be waiting for my Mom to start dinner. *Chachoo* would appear at dinnertime looking even dirtier than before after playing in the street. *Amma ji* would curse at him for staying out so late. *Chachoo* would just laugh it off, which impressed us even more. He was not like Mom, who would start crying at the slightest rise in *Amma ji's* voice. Our *Chachoo* could ignore the loudest

cursing and even beatings with a shrug of his shoulders. He was our leader, friend and hero.

We would all sit around the stove in a circle as Mom made fresh flat bread and gave us each a piece, steamy hot as it came off the stove. *Amma ji* was first at reaching into the curry bowl to select the best piece of meat inside. She would then give *Chachoo* a generous helping of curry. My brother went next. Me, I never liked to eat meat or curry anyway so Mom would sprinkle my piece of bread with brown sugar and make a roll for me to enjoy. Mom would wait until everyone was done eating and then she would take my brother's plate and first finish his leftovers before adding any fresh food for herself.

Mom says those were her toughest years, with two little children who were always crying and a mother-in-law who was always yelling and screaming. I can imagine *Amma ji* yelling and screaming, for that is how she was, but I find it hard to believe that my brother and I would cry a lot, for *Nano* told me that I was a quiet and happy child.

When things would get too unbearable for Mom, she would go back to *Nano's* home for a few days. *Nano* would look at her and cry at her daughter's bad luck. She would let her stay for a few days and then send her back, for a daughter's place was always in her husband's home and not her father's home no matter how unhappy she was there.

Mom says she was so miserable that by the time she got pregnant for the third time, she knew she would not be able to take care of another child. She had gone back to *Nano's* house and in the same inner room where *Nano* had given birth to my Mom and

where my Mom had given birth to my brother and me, she chose with the help of *Nano* to abort her third pregnancy.

Women in the house were experts on inducing abortions with a mixture of herbs and combinations of needles to induce bleeding. All the work could be done at home with no need for a midwife. Along with the expertise came a lot of myths and beliefs. It was believed that when a woman gives birth to a full-term child, she will have as many contractions as the number of bones in her body, but when she aborts a baby the number of contractions double. Mom says as she doubled over in pain she kept counting her bones and wondering if she could keep her count correct with the intense pain she was in. She almost died during that abortion. She became weak, too weak to even care for herself or her children. *Nano* had no choice but to let Mom stay in her house, for she could not go back to *Amma ji's* house in that sick state.

My father had to be called to come see his wife. When he arrived, she refused to see him and locked her door. The story that follows is known by the whole family: my father climbed the top wall of Grandpa's house outside her window and threatened to jump and give up his life unless she saw him. She gave in and opened her door. When she let him in, he could not believe his eyes at how pale and sick she looked. He held her in his arms and cried like he had never cried before, not even upon the death of his father. His tears dripped down on her shoulders and arms as she quietly looked at him.

She had gone back to *Amma ji's* house with him but only for a few days. He stayed with her and nursed her back to health. When she was fit to travel, he packed her bags and carried her and their two children to the train station. As soon as they sat in the

train, he took her *burka* off and handed it to a beggar woman. She did not resist and watched quietly as the train moved on.

Her Own Home

We traveled about two hours and reached the old city of Lahore. Outside the city was a small military base, with living quarters for the military personal and their family members. There, Dad had been able to secure a small house for us too.

Some of my happiest memories are from this time on. Mom finally had her own house, away from *Amma ji* and her constant watchful eyes. It was a small house attached on both sides to other similar houses. There was a small open lawn in the front of the house with a little walkway leading to the front door. Neighborhood women could be found standing by their front doors talking to each other while their children played on the front lawns or in the street.

In the morning when Dad went to work, Mom would walk up to the door to say goodbye to him but then quickly close the door behind him. In the afternoons, she never waited for him at the front door like the other women did. She kept the door closed and me and my brother inside with her. The house consisted of two rooms only - one served as her and Dad's bedroom and the other room was for everything else. In the back of the house was a small fenced-in enclosed yard. One corner of the backyard served as the kitchen, the other as the laundry area. This is where we spent most of our time. Mom would be cooking or washing and when she would get tired she would pull down the cot that stood against the wall and lie down on it while my brother and I tried to come up with ways of keeping ourselves occupied. The sounds of children playing outside would reach us through the walls, someone laughing, someone else calling out a name, others playing a game that we tried to figure out, the sounds were so tempting and inviting.

Mom said she did not like people looking at her, so we stayed inside our backyard and waited for the time Dad would be home. Dad being home meant we could go out in the front yard and play with other children. Dad and Mom would take a walk on our street after dinner and stop to talk to other neighbors while my brother and I played in our front yard with the other children. Sometimes I would run after them only to be sent back to our yard and told to stay there. Other times Dad would let me walk with them, but then my brother had to come along too. However, Dad did not like us walking with them and listening to their conversations so we had to walk a few feet ahead of them.

The street was full of surprises; there were always interesting things to be picked up such as, dried leaves or some twisted branches or stones. We would try to find a piece of rock that we would then kick along on our walk. Every now and then, I would look back at my parents and find my Dad totally engrossed in his conversations, oblivious of the world around, talking away. Mom walked softly and quietly next to him, always adjusting her long chiffon scarf, trying to spread it over her head or her shoulders and the rest of her body, trying very hard for the scarf to provide her with the coverage of the *burka* that she was used to. The scarf rarely cooperated and kept slipping off her head and shoulders. Dad was amused by her battle with the scarf. I can still visualize his face so clearly, a bright shiny face full of smiles as he moved his hands in the air talking to her. Engrossed in his own world, he would reach out to hold her hands, something she found so totally shocking, for she would quickly pull her hands away and look around as if someone would catch her for being immodest and that too in public. I don't know if anyone else caught them holding hands but I used to all the time. I don't think she minded that I saw them; she would look at me with a strange pleading smile as if asking

for my approval, as if she needed me to say, “Yes, Ma, it is okay, let Dad hold your hands.” I would smile at her but she would pull her hands away anyway. Not wanting to upset her, he had to settle for a corner of her scarf as he playfully twisted it around his hands. He looked happy and proud walking next to the woman he loved.

I was not good at finding or kicking a rock like my brother was. I was always coming up a loser. Besides that, it was hard to keep the focus on our play with the voices of our parents drifting into my ears from behind. After reaching the end of the block, I would invariably sit down on the street and start crying that I was tired. The crying used to bring the walk to an end with my father picking me up and carrying me home while my brother looked at me with furious eyes. Mom would say it was better to be indoors before dark. My brother would kick his stone even harder as he walked back home. Other times my father would refuse to pick me up and send me back with my brother, which meant that all the way back I had to listen to my brothers teasing me. He did not like being sent home. The rooms were hot and stuffy, so we would run into our enclosed backyard trying to catch some more playing time before nightfall.

The yard had a tall metal fence around it that separated our yard from those of our neighbors on both sides. The fence was a few inches above the ground and had holes in it from rusting and from nails being drilled in to tie ropes for hanging clothes to dry. Exchanges of borrowed newspapers, bowls of sugar or an egg or two for breakfast were conducted under and over the fence between neighbors. However, the fence still provided sufficient privacy so that many people slept in their open backyards at night to escape the summer heat of nights indoors.

I was not more than three years old when I discovered that instead of just sliding the newspaper to our neighbors under the fence as my father had asked me to do, I could slip myself under the fence and come out on the other side. I had asked Mom to stand in the backyard while I ran out the front door. I quickly crossed the front yard, then walked in through the neighbor's front door, then through their two rooms into their backyard, finally slipping out from under the fence into our backyard straight to my waiting mother. Mom had burst out laughing seeing me crawl out from under the fence. She stood there with one hand on her waist, the other covering her mouth. She was laughing as I kept showing her my newly acquired talent. She showed no signs of worry for my clothes that were covered in dirt, because I could keep my face slightly above the ground, it stayed clean. She called out to Dad to come see what his daughter was doing. He said I was truly his daughter. For in those days he was learning to navigate airplanes, learning to map the airplane's passage over different lands. And here was his daughter, navigating her own ways through her neighborhood. He picked me up and gave me a big hug, as Mom held onto his arm. He looked at her and smiled. She started to tell him what would have happened if I had crawled into a neighbor's house in Jhelum. "Forget Jhelum," he said, and she nodded her head in firm agreement: "Yes, let us forget Jhelum."

Later that night sitting next to me, Mom told me the story of her own neighbor *Khala ji's* adjoining house in Jhelum. She was rubbing oil on my hair to help it grow longer. This was her nightly routine. Before we went to sleep, she would tell my brother and me a story. Throughout the story time my brother would be climbing the bedposts and jumping on the bed while I was sitting cross-legged on the bed with a tiny brass bowl of oil in my hand. Mom kept dipping her fingers into the bowl as she rubbed the oil in

my hair, pulling my head this way and that with a tug on my hair so she could get it well covered. After she was done rubbing my hair, she stretched my legs out straight and rubbed her oily hands on them. She held my legs tightly in her hands as she told me the story of *Nano* threatening to break her bones as a child if she tried to peak into *Khala ji's* home. I did not like the story she was telling me and I did not like her holding my legs the way she was, but most of all I did not like the intense look in her eyes. I started to cry. She was surprised and asked me why I was crying.

“She is crying because she is a crybaby,” my brother had chimed in. I did not say anything, I did not tell her that I did not want to hear the story of the house in Jhelum, that I wanted her to talk about my finding my new way around the neighborhood. Annoyed with my crying, she told me story time was over and it was time to sleep, then she turned the lights off. Seeing the evening end abruptly, my brother reached over and pinched me hard. Not wanting Mom to hear him from the next room, he started whispering to me, “Crybaby, crybaby” - that was his pet name for me. I did not want Mom to hear me either, so I cried quietly.

Fun Times

Mom and Dad had been saving money for some time. Mom wanted to buy a sewing machine so she could make clothes for herself and her children. Dad had other ideas in his head, and without telling her he had gone out and bought an old motorcycle. Ignoring her tears, he had given her a long lecture, saying that we were stepping into the modern age. No more homemade clothes, he said, we will buy and wear ready-made clothes from the stores. We would not travel anymore in old-fashioned horse-drawn carriages but in mechanized automobiles. Once he had saved enough money he would buy a motorcar, but for now we had to settle for a motorbike.

In the evenings, he took all of us out for a ride. Riding on the noisy old motorbike, it did seem like we all had left Jhelum far behind as we roared on.

Mom sat behind my Dad sideways, holding onto him with one arm; my brother squeezed in between the two of them. My place was in front of my father on the oil tank. As the motorcycle picked up speed the air hit my face. I loved the feel of the air on my face and hair. Gasping for breath, I leaned forward and put my head down on the oil tank to catch a few breaths and then came up again to feel the air rushing against my face so fast that I could barely breathe. My hair flew every which way in the air. I squinted to stop my hair from getting into my eyes. I could hardly follow my parents' conversation, for my ears were filled with whistling sounds of air rushing by. I think they were worried that I was afraid sitting in front of the motorbike, but I was not; I felt secure seeing my father's arms extended on both sides of me reaching for the handlebars of the motorbike. Father asked me to sit facing backwards and hold onto him - that way I would have no

trouble breathing, he tried to reassure me. But I liked what the breeze was doing to me, and the game I was playing with it.

Dad said he wanted to show us the town he had been living in. He wanted to show us all his favorite shops and places to visit. Mom said there were too many roads to remember. She would place one arm around Dad, close her eyes, put her head on his shoulder and announce she did not want to see anymore. I sat in front hoping the ride would never end. On seeing something interesting, I would call out to Mom to look, but I don't think she could hear me above the roar of the motorcycle and the wind.

On the first of the month, Dad would get paid and we all went to the market to buy our monthly supply of rations. On the return trip, we would be so loaded, bags hanging on Mom's and my brother's shoulders, and other bags in front of me on the oil tank that I had to hold on to. Dad would maneuver the bike loaded with his family and the food supplies. Sometimes I could catch a few words here and there of him singing.

Once or twice a month, Dad would go on a flying trip for a few days. Even though during his absence we had Mom's total attention (she would even move into our room and sleep with us and read storybooks to us all day), we waited eagerly for Dad's arrival home. Dad would leave for the trips in the morning when we had a chance to say goodbye to him, but he always returned sometime in the middle of the night. We knew he had come home when upon waking up in the morning we would find Mom missing from our bed. My brother and I would rush over to the other room and there she would be sleeping all cuddled up with Dad. Our only choice was to go into the backyard and play. We had to wait for them to be up to find out if there were any goodies that Dad had brought home. He would get some extra allowance while traveling, which allowed him

to buy extra things for the home and for us. It made running the home on a very small budget a little bit easier for them. He could see new places and meet new people and so was happy each time he had to travel. He came back more excited than when he left. He was so full of stories - we would sit around him on the floor as he would open his suitcase and talk away as he pulled out his clothes mixed in with many surprises for us. Some magazines or newspapers from foreign lands, leftover plane meal, bar of chocolate, hand lotion for Mom, a sweater for me and my brother, sometimes socks - everything was eagerly seized upon and accepted as gifts. Other times we had to settle for a story about things he had seen that were just right and perfect for us, with the promises that he would bring them for us the next chance he got.

Letting Go

We had been in Lahore not even six months when *Amma ji* started sending messages for Dad. *Chachoo* was giving her trouble, not going to school, getting into fights with the poor children on the street that he was not even supposed to play with. Besides, he was lonely for children's company, *Amma ji* said, and maybe he should be taken care of by my Mom and Dad to free *Amma ji* in her old age to relax.

Mom did not want to go back to Jhelum. She said it was too early; she still remembered *Amma ji's* treatment of her. Besides, she did not want to take care of another child and a problem one at that.

Every time a message came, I could hear Mom crying for days. Dad would try to reassure her, telling her things would be alright; he would make sure that she would always live in her own home and never with anyone else. Mom was not easily comforted. Dad said he hated Jhelum, but Mom was scared. Still, every few months we would end up visiting Jhelum. Someone was getting married, someone else had died, there was a holiday to be celebrated, or a new baby to be seen or shown.

My brother and I would get excited; visiting meant having other cousins to play with. The thought of going back and visiting was appealing. *Amma ji's* house and its empty rooms still called to us for more exploration.

There were many trips but the one that stands out in my memory is when Dad finally convinced Mom to go to Jhelum without her *burka*. She had not worn the *burka* in the city at all. However, every time she went back home to Jhelum she would cover up. He promised her he would answer anyone who would dare to question her. He was her husband and if he gave her the freedom to go without cover no one had a right to

question her. She had agreed and not packed the *burka* in her bags. We had taken the train to Jhelum. The journey was unremarkable but upon reaching the town Mom started crying and trembling; she refused to get into the horse carriage without a *burka*. Dad had to leave her with my brother at the train station while he and I went into the town to borrow a *burka* from one of her cousins. By the time Dad and I returned with it, the news had traveled all over town. *Amma ji* was angrier than ever; her cursing could be heard even before we entered the house. It appeared from *Amma ji's* comments that my mother's immorality had crossed all local limits, as well as sensibilities, for she had dared to wait at the train station alone without an adult male escort.

Mom had stood shivering and crying like a little girl. *Amma ji* and Dad engaged in the loudest of arguments I had ever heard. My brother stood there watching it all with a surprised look in his eyes. At one point when *Amma ji* and Dad had stopped for a moment to catch their breath, my brother stepped up and tried to remind *Amma ji* that Mom was not alone because he was with her. *Amma ji* laughed at him; Dad looked at him exasperated and said, "Well, son, don't you realize by now you don't count?" My brother ran out with tears in his eyes. I thought of going after him but instead I went up to Mom and held her hand. It did not help much for she cried non-stop the whole week we stayed in Jhelum. I never asked my brother how long he had cried.

Many meetings of the elders were held. No one reminded *Amma ji* of her own years without the *burka* when she traveled back and forth from Africa in *Aba ji's* lifetime. *Nano* cried and asked for forgiveness for her daughter. *Mamoo ji's* final decision was that if the husband allows his wife to uncover, the family should accept it, for the final authority over what a woman could do rests only with her own husband.

I really could not figure out what the big controversy was about. In play dressing, the *burka* was an essential item that both my brother and I loved to put on. I loved the soft feel of the *burka*. Besides that, I could hold the chiffon face covering of the *burka* up to the light and see rays of light going out like shooting stars, and if I stretched the chiffon by holding it in both hands moving it ever so slightly I could make the light rays move too.

It took a few more visits to Jhelum for my Mom to give up the *burka* altogether. This change had less to do with her or Dad's desire and more to do with Dad's older sister, Aunty N, who had started coming to Jhelum with her husband without the *burka* by then. They had made it rich in the city and would drive into Jhelum in a car - something that was extremely rare in that neighborhood. Somehow *Amma ji* found it easier to accept her daughter without the *burka*. In fact, she wanted people to see her step out of the car and walk into the home without it. Slowly other relatives living in big cities started to visit home unveiled. Sometimes after that, Mom made the switch too.

Long after the whole issue was over, rows of *burkas* still hung on big wooden pegs in *Amma ji's* house near the exit door of the women's quarters. Entering or leaving the home, one had to pass by them. No one wanted to wear them but no one dared to remove them from their place on the wall either. They were discarded remnants of former times hanging like old drapes collecting dust.

That was not the case with us children though. We found a use for everything. The rows of *burkas* hanging on the wall provided us with a good hiding place. We would just slip behind one of the *burkas* hanging on the peg and disappear behind its folds during our games of hide and seek. Hidden in the folds of the *burka*, one felt safe. Faint

traces of the perfumes and smells of the various women who had worn them lingered within the *burkas*. Some had food stains, making us contemplate and wonder about the accident that had caused it. Others had stains from someone wiping their hands on it. I felt like I was being embraced not by the *burkas* but by the various women who had worn them - my aunts and cousins and grandmothers. It was a good feeling.

At other times, we would take the *burkas* off the pegs and use them in our dressing-up game. We would pretend we were going out and put on the *burka* as we stumbled and fell laughing all wrapped up in its folds. It was hard to imagine that this item that was so much fun for us had created so many other emotions in the women who had worn them.

As we grew older, our games started to change too. The *burkas* were forgotten on the pegs. Until one day when *Amma ji* had yelled at her servant for coming to work with her naked children tagging along. The servant had cried about having no clothes for them. *Amma ji*, in a combined show of anger and sympathy, had taken all the *burkas* down and spent the whole week cutting and sewing pajamas from their fabric. She had a whole bucket full of pajamas that she gave out from time to time to the servant's children and to any other naked child who happened to pass her door.

The Visits

Our trips to Jhelum started to become less and less frequent, which then led to the only other alternative left for *Amma ji*: to start visiting us in the city instead.

Upon arriving in the city, the first thing she would do was to remove her *burka* and stick it in her suitcase, only to take it out again upon her return. In our home, we called her Grandma instead of *Amma ji*. She accepted this title gladly. She was a take-charge kind of person. Whenever she was visiting us, it seemed like Mom would lose her position as head of management of the house and had to do everything by first getting permission from *Amma ji*.

The meal plan of the day, visiting hours, who and when to visit and other matters were all decided on by *Amma ji*. If Dad happened to be returning home from a trip abroad, she would not even let him open his suitcase without her being present, for she did not want him to give a gift to anyone in general and particularly to my Mom without her first checking it out and approving it.

Our lives changed drastically with each of *Amma ji's* visits. Mom's crying increased, so did the visitors to our home. Our aunts and other relatives would arrive to pay their regards to *Amma ji* and would bring with them children of varying ages. Our house would swarm with people and food. *Amma ji* loved to entertain. Mom cried about her budget but kept on cooking items ordered by *Amma ji*. Dad enjoyed having company over; he spent hours talking and ignored both Mom and *Amma ji*. *Amma ji* would usually get a few gifts from the visitors, collect a few things that belonged to Mom, and after a few days decide she did not want to stay with us anymore and leave for Jhelum.

After she left, Dad would say, “It is time to get back to our routine.” Mom kept reminding all of us about the atrocities that had been committed against her by *Amma ji* she needed some acknowledgment from Dad, which was slow in coming. She had to then settle for me. In me she found listening ears, an extremely willing shoulder to lean on and a confidante ready to validate any or all the pains she had endured at the hands of a nasty and evil mother-in-law. We both decided since heaven was found under the feet of the mother according to Muslim faith, hell must be located under the feet of the mother in law. I was not even seven years old at that time.

A Problem

I don't know when it started or for how long I had been doing it, but suddenly it became the talk of the house. Everywhere I turned it seemed someone was talking about me or my "problem" and what could be done about it. I think it had started the summer when I was six or seven with *Amma ji's* arrival in the house. Though she had never gotten along with *Amma ji*, during that time Mom found a partner in her. I tried to ignore their whispering conversations, even though they spoke right in front of me. I was good at pretending I did not hear anything. I would be helping my Mom peel green peas when she would suddenly point at me and ask *Amma ji*, "What should I do with this girl?" Sometimes I felt a little embarrassed and tried not looking at them, but other times their conversations turned into such complicated recipes of cooking and grinding different herbs and nuts to cure me of my problem that it was easy for me to ignore them and pretend they were just planning a meal.

At times Mom would get annoyed at the suggestions of *Amma ji* and then she would stare at me with these sad eyes and ask me point blank, "Don't I have enough problems? Why in the world do I have to be faced with a daughter with a problem too?" I found it hard to ignore these questions.

I thought I had everything under control. Whenever I found my bed wet in the middle of the night, all I had to do was to take off my pajamas, throw them under the bed, grab the towel that was spread on the footboard of the bed to dry, wrap it around myself and go back to sleep. In the morning, I would find a clean pair of pajamas and put them on. I did not think anyone knew of or was in any way privy to my little activity. Some nights, when Dad was away on trips, I remember sleeping in the same bed with my

mother and at night when I would be shuffling around taking off my wet pajamas, she would even help me, quietly, without saying a word. In the morning, she never said anything and I thought nothing of it. I never thought it bothered her, but now she could not stop talking about it and with *Amma ji*, someone she had never confided in before. At times, it seemed they were best friends planning a secret mission together.

Mom and *Amma ji* started feeding me dry powdery stuff at night. I was not allowed to drink any water at night. In my sleep, I was dragged out of bed many times by Mom or *Amma ji* and made to sit on the toilet and pee. My problem continued despite all their efforts.

Amma ji was not one to give up easily, and was saving her most effective recipe for last. On the day before she was to leave, she sent my brother and me out of the house in search of a red brick. We walked around the neighborhood and came back with a piece of stone. She looked it over and then sent us back to search some more until we found a red brick. We could not figure out what she was going to do with it but we knew she had a coal fire burning in a corner of our backyard. What she was going to cook we could not imagine, and then why did she need a red brick for it? Having finally found a brick from a nearby construction site, we returned triumphant.

Amma ji took the brick from us and sent my brother out of the house again. She asked me to sit next to her while she threw the brick in the fire. She gave me a large glass of cold milk to drink and told me to watch the brick get hot. I saw the brick get covered with coal ashes and wondered what was going to happen next. *Amma ji* walked up with large tongs and quickly pulled out the red-hot brick and lay it on the ground. Before I could even grasp what was happening, I felt my Mom and *Amma ji* grab me by

my legs and arms, pulled off my panties and force-me to squat over the brick, all the while screaming, “Pee now, go ahead, pee over it!”

A servant woman sitting next to the hot brick kept throwing water over it. The water made hissing sounds as it turned to steam. I screamed and stretched trying not to squat, trying to kick *Amma ji* and Mom away, to run away from that burning brick. The more they held me down, the more I fought; there was no way I was going to pee on that steaming, sizzling brick. Hearing my screams, my brother started banging on the door asking Mom what was going on and to open the door. I kept shouting at the top of my lungs while trying to get free from the grasping hold of Mom and *Amma ji*.

Suddenly, I felt both Mom’s and *Amma ji*’s hold on me loosen. I looked up and to my utmost relief saw that Dad had unlocked the front door and walked in. He looked shocked at seeing what was going on and yelled at Mom to stop. As soon as *Amma ji* let go of me, I ran over to Dad and he bent down and picked me up. I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist, holding him tightly, tears running down my face. I cried even louder as I relaxed the muscles I had been holding so tight, then I felt the pee come out of me as if in buckets. *Amma ji* ran over with a towel to clean Dad’s clothes. He pushed her away as he walked inside holding me. He held me tightly in his arms for a long time for I could not stop crying and peeing.

Sometimes later, Mom came and took me away from Dad and helped me wash up. She would not look at me while she helped. *Amma ji* declared I would never be cured of the problem and that I had not learned to control myself. She did not know what I had learned that day, the secret that my body had revealed to me: that when I held my

muscles tight and then suddenly let go of them, the sensations my body brought to me were a strange and pleasant new discovery.

Mom never talked to me about the incident again. I think she was more embarrassed about the attempted treatment than the problem itself. My brother kept asking for days what had happened; he wanted to know if I had been beaten or burnt for some bad thing I had done. He would ask Mom and she would shush him – “Not your problem,” she would say. Somehow her not answering my brother told me that I should not talk about it either, although I had wanted to tell him how mean *Amma ji* was. I wanted to tell him how nice Daddy was, like the Prince Charming that came to take the princess away from the evil witch, like Superman who always came just in the nick of time to save Lois Lane. Most of all I wanted to ask him who he thought Mom was, for she had been the one who had confused me the most.

After *Amma ji* left, Mom started leaving the towel on the footboard of the bed again just in case I needed it. The few times I did have an accident afterwards, she never mentioned it. Nor did she acknowledge it when I stopped having the accidents. She was back to being my Mom again.

Time to Play

Our next-door neighbors on the left side of our house had four girls ranging in age from 4 to 16 years. The neighbors on the other side had three boys, ages 4 to 7. Although there were at least 30 to 40 other children in the neighborhood, we stayed together with these two sets of children. We were then living on the Air Force base with all the military families. The houses were small as they were for military personnel only. The quarters consisted of just two rooms in the front, a bathroom in one corner and an enclosed backyard with a small wall running around it. There was a huge open ground around which the quarters were scattered in apparently no order whatsoever. This ground was our play area, where all the children used to hang out in small groups, playing, talking or fighting, as our mothers sat on the grass and talked or walked around in the evenings. Men were mostly at work and could be seen walking on this ground only at night after dinner.

There was not a tree or plant on this entire piece of land, just dirt and patches of dried grass. Sometimes the Air Force management tried to beautify this ground and planted some plants. The plants either died from lack of watering or were mysteriously stolen in the middle of the night only to appear in someone's enclosed backyard. Another time, a truckload of bricks was delivered to the ground to construct some fancy brick walking paths there. Before the workers could arrive the next day to lay those bricks, the whole truckload of bricks was gone. Women had worked late into the night along with their children carrying those bricks into their backyards, and overnight many houses, including ours, had a brick floor in the corner of the yard that was used for cooking. Dad appeared shocked at first. He then gave a long lecture on how corrupt the Pakistani

society was. Mom kept saying it was not her idea but the neighboring auntie's. She promised to return the bricks if anyone else would. No one confessed to taking the bricks and in the end both Dad and the management just gave up.

We did not mind the ground without the brickwork. We loved it; we could dig holes in it for playing marbles and it also made a good playing field for cricket, which was a favorite sport. In one corner of the ground there was a small grassy patch called "The Park" with a few swings and a slide. The swings were more popular among the women than the children, and they would sit on them with their young children on their laps. Their long scarves and loose clothes would blow in the air as they swung back and forth, laughing and talking all the while.

The ground and the park were the places to be in and we spent most of our waking time there. We mostly stayed within the boundaries of our ground, which were marked by barbed wire to separate the military from the neighboring civilian areas. There was an armed guard sleeping at the one and only entrance to our camp. There was a continuous battle between the guard and the children who kept rolling up the barbed wire to create other exits, thereby making the trip to school a little bit shorter. The school was outside the camp limits. We had to walk up to the main camp exit by the guard and then walk another half a mile to school. We would walk in groups to and from school with our schoolbags hanging on one shoulder. The moment we came home from school, we would throw the bags inside and run out to play on our ground.

However, during the hot summer afternoons we had to stay inside. Mom was our best friend then for she could read English and would read to us from comic books. My brother and I, with all seven of our friends, would sit around her on the cool cement floor

of our house. Mom would throw water on the floor and then turn the ceiling fan on to cool off the room.

That was the best of times, for Mom looked so happy and I felt so proud of her. It was my Mom who could read to us these fantastic stories of Clark Kent, who in the blink of an eye and with the change of his clothes could become Superman.

Sometimes she would see me squirm and wiggle on the floor and would tell me to go. I did not want to miss any part of the story so I would try to stay for as long as I could, but then she would stare at me and I would have to go to the bathroom. There I would hold myself tightly, not letting myself go, as my mind wandered back to what Mom had done that terrible day - she had changed like Superman but not into a good guy but into something horrible. The sounds of Mom and *Amma ji* yelling and screaming would flood my mind and I could even feel the heat from that red burning brick on my legs. I would look again and again to make sure nothing was hiding in the toilet. As the pressure to let go would mount, the tightness in my muscles would increase. Waiting for the familiar relief, I would start to cry and wonder if Mom was going to change into that monster again and force me to pee on the burning brick. What if the next time Mom changed into a monster Dad did not come in time to save me? I would cry for I could not figure out the answers to these questions. But then I would hear drifting into the bathroom the voices of my friends laughing as they heard yet another part of the story. Not wanting to miss another moment, I would quickly wipe away my tears and run back into the room to listen to the rest of the story.

Other days when Dad would be home from his flying trips, there was no story time. Mom would send our friends home and forbid us from going out. We would have

full meals of meat and vegetable and bread cooked fresh, unlike the boiled rice sprinkled with sugar that we would eat when he was not home and Mom did not feel like cooking. After eating lunch, Mom and Dad would go into one of the bedrooms to take a nap. My brother and I were forced to lie down and take a nap too, until the afternoon sun went down. We would wonder why Mom wanted us to take a nap; we could never fall asleep in the afternoons. We knew we were forbidden to go out, but we figured we were not forbidden to look out. So, both of us would climb onto the wall surrounding our backyard and sit on the edge of it. The wall was made of bricks and had a top edge done in cement. The edge would be hot and almost baked in the heat of the sun. It burned our thighs but never stopped us from sitting on it. Perched up on top of the walls we would spend our summer afternoon talking to any children playing on the other side in whispers so as not to awaken Mom and Dad.

Sometimes the temptations were too strong and my brother would jump out onto the ground to play with the children, leaving me sitting on the wall. He would call me to join him, but seeing me hesitate he would run off to play. Mom and Dad would be angry so I would beg him to come back, but he did not seem to care like I did. I would sit there and watch him and wonder how could he not care and other times I wondered why did I care so much.

The Pakistan Independence Day was approaching. The Air Force Officers Club decided it was time to encourage the women to participate in social activities as a sign of the modernization of Pakistan. It was the 1960s; there were seeds of change in the air. An Air Force Ladies Club was formed. Mom, along with all our neighboring aunts, joined it in large numbers. There was so much excitement. Dad kept teasing Mom,

saying that by joining the Ladies Club, she, too, had become a Lady. She seemed happy and did not appear to mind his teasing.

The Ladies Club had to come up with an event for the Independence Day festivities. Most women were like Mom, too shy to do anything on their own or to put on a show themselves. Someone came up with the brilliant idea to do a show with children. For babies, it was easy to decide - they would hold a healthy baby show, and the winner would be awarded a prize. For older children, the situation was a little complicated. Some women wanted their daughters participating, while others did not. Some thought singing or dancing could be improper and lewd, while others thought that was the only way to go. After much discussion, everyone agreed on a Fancy Dress Show for children ages 3 to 12. Anyone older than that was assumed to have either crossed or was about to cross puberty. Different sets of rules applied to them. It caused so much disagreement among the ladies that it was finally decided to leave the older age group out. However, agreement on the 3-12 age group was unanimous. They would have a Fancy Dress Show in which boys and girls could dress up in different costumes and walk onto the stage. This allowed sufficient room for creativity and dressing up while leaving the possibility of dancing movements out.

Mom wanted my brother and I to take part in it. My brother was sure he wanted to dress up as Superman and win the first prize. He was practicing flying by jumping off the bed with Mom's long scarf hanging around his back as his cape. I wanted to be Super Girl, but Mom thought I was already too old to be dressed in tights in public. She assured me that I would look lovely as a princess. I agreed right away. My brother

accused me of betraying our Superman-Super Girl team. He could not understand why I had agreed with Mom so easily.

We all went out shopping; Dad bought gold-colored paper and glue for my crown. Both Mom and Dad spent the afternoon making a beautiful crown for me.

When it came time to make my brother's costume, Dad felt that the blue shawl Mom was going to use for Superman's cape was too good to be cut up. A search through the trunks and boxes in the storage room produced an old black bed sheet, and the decision was made: my brother would be dressed like a *fakir*.

Fakirs were the crazy lunatics who walked around the streets begging for food in long black robes. They had a string of thick beads around their neck, a bowl in one hand and a walking stick in the other which they used to knock on the doors or wave about to drive away packs of children who were screaming at them.

Dad dressed me up as a princess with my crown and Mom's *sari* folded and wrapped around me like a flowing gown. He then put me on top of the dining table and asked me to sit still, so I would not walk and mess up my costume. I was happy to sit on the table.

I sat and watched them dress my brother up for his costume. He was not too pleased with the switch that both Mom and Dad had made without even telling him. Wrapped in black robes with beads hanging around his neck, he sat facing Dad, who was painting his face black with shoe polish to make him look even more sinister. I watched Dad starting to smile as he saw my brother's face get covered in black, but I could also see tears forming in my brother's eyes. Dad must not have seen them for he kept painting my brother's face and he kept smiling and giggling for he thought my brother looked like

one crazy lunatic. Soon both Mom and Dad were laughing. It was not long after that my brother broke down and started to sob, tears rolling down his face. Mom tried to calm him down but the more she talked to him the more he cried. Dad's voice grew louder, "Don't mess up the paint, stop crying, stop being a sissy." But the louder my Dad's voice got, the louder my brother cried, and the more my brother cried, the angrier Dad became. When yelling at my brother did not produce the desired result, he then started to yell at Mom. She became quiet and kept staring first at my father and then at my brother without saying a word.

Me, I just sat there watching as my brother threw off the robe and ran out. Why was Dad being so mean? Why was Mom not stopping him? I wanted to tell them to help my brother stop crying. But like Mom I too said nothing. We left him home alone. Dad thought that would teach him a lesson. I could not figure out what lesson they were trying to teach him. For a moment, I wondered if Dad had changed into a monster, but then quickly shook that thought off - that could not be, that should not be.

I won a prize in the Fancy Dress Show. Everyone praised Mom and Dad for the beautiful costume they had made for me. Dad carried me around on his arm; I smiled and posed and had my picture taken. When I came home, I knew that this was going to be one thing that I could not talk about in front of my brother. Mom saw me hide my prize brass cup in the closet and nodded in agreement. Later in the evening when neighbors came to congratulate us, she took the winning prize out to show them. I looked around to see if my brother was watching. Luckily, he was not home; he had gone out playing and had stayed out unusually late that evening.

Playing Along

The following week, Dad was leaving on a trip to London. He had promised me a doll for winning the contest. A doll with blue eyes that would open and shut, unlike the dolls Mom had bought me from the market with embroidered eyes. The ones sold in Pakistani shops were made of fabric and dressed either as a bride or a baby doll. Dad promised me a princess doll that was not made of fabric but had movable arms and legs.

I woke up one morning to find a soft cardboard box lying next to me. The box had transparent covering through which I could see the face of the most beautiful doll I had ever seen. I leaped out of bed and cuddled the doll while it was still in the box. Mom and Dad, lying next to me in the bed, were smiling. Mom helped me take the doll out of the box. It was not a princess doll but a baby doll. In my excitement, I totally forgot that I had asked for a princess doll but I did not care for it was beautiful, dressed in a little pink frock with a cap that had fur lining. I had never seen fur before in my life; I kept touching my face to the softness of the fur. The doll had socks on its feet but no shoes. “Where are the shoes?” I asked. “We will get them from the market, don’t worry,” was Dad’s reply.

I still remember the hot summer evening while looking for a pedestal fan in a market with rows upon rows of shops selling electronics fans, my Dad carrying me on his arm searching for shoes for my doll. Mom was annoyed at Dad – she kept telling him to stop the childish game he was playing with me. She wanted him to stay by her side and help her select and bargain for the right fan. Dad looked at me with reassuring eyes and told me we were not going to stop until we found shoes for my doll. He went around and asked shopkeeper after shopkeeper if they had any shoes that would fit the doll I carried

in my arms. We did not find any shoes, but I heard so many compliments about my fancy doll from the many shopkeepers who were amused to hear this strange request, that I was happy.

We came home with Mom and my brother riding on a horse carriage holding onto the large pedestal fan. I sat next to them holding my doll, while Dad drove his motorbike behind us. I smiled and made my doll wave at him.

Dancing in the Rain

Summer months were hot in Pakistan. Everyone waited desperately for the monsoon rains, rains that could provide some relief to burning bodies and scorched parched earth. Prayers were offered in mosques daily to let Allah know of the plight of people and to ask him to bless them with some rain to help pass the summer months. We children waited for the rain too, but had our own reasons.

At the first sound of thunder, my brother and I would run out into our enclosed backyard pulling our shirts over our heads, screaming and shouting as we jumped in any puddle of water we could find. My Dad would follow along trying to drag my Mom into the rain with him. She would blush, sometimes make excuses and not come out. Other times, she would run out in the rain briefly only to rush back shaking her hair, for she hated it when her hair got wet. And I think she did not like it when her clothes got wet either, for then we could see her fair, fair body through the wet clothes. When this happened, the look on my father's face would change; he would look at her with this naughtiness that both my brother and I knew meant Dad was going to try and touch her. Sometimes he would succeed and then my brother and I would keep on dancing in the rain while giggling with laughter. Our backs turned to them, we would try not to look, giving them their own special moments.

Other times, he would not be so lucky and we would hear *Amma ji's* voice louder than the thunder, "What kind of lewdness is going on here?" Mom would run back inside and Dad would tell my brother and I to dry up and go to our room.

I would wonder why my *Amma ji* was so angry, why she would not play in the rain with us. Could she not see how much fun we all were having?

But I was sure in my mind that this was the best way to have fun and I was always going to run and play in the rain, even when I got older.

I would ask Mom why *Amma ji* stopped our rain dance. Mom would mostly start crying at my question and keep crying as I would struggle to find words to tell her not to worry, that we would have another chance when *Amma ji* went back to her house in Jhelum. Then Mom would do this thing that used to forever confuse me: she would suddenly switch her position and tell me that *Amma ji* was right that I was getting older and she was not setting a good example for me. That it was not right for young girls even as young as six- or seven-years old, which is about how old I was then, to be dancing in the rain without their clothes on, let alone have their mothers join them and do the same. I never knew what to say when Mom shifted her position like that. The best thing I could figure out was to go in search of my brother at such moments. I would find him in the verandah waiting for *Amma ji's* cooking.

In *Amma ji's* eyes, the best way to celebrate monsoon rains was to eat fried sweet bread. She would pull out the little kitchen kerosene oil stove in the verandah and make fried sweet bread on it, while we all sat around her and ate it. It was so sweet and sticky that we would sit licking our fingers way after the last morsel of the bread was gone. *Amma ji* would look so smug like she had won the battle. Mom would look at Dad with a complaint in her eyes: How could he enjoy his mother's cooking so much after what she had done to disrupt their rain play? her eyes seemed to say. I would try not to let my mother see how much I enjoyed the bread. Eating sweet fried bread on rainy days was my next best thing after the rain dance.

Time to Share

I was seven years old when Mom gave birth to my sister. I don't remember Mom's pregnancy or even knowing of the imminent arrival of another child. I don't remember my sister as an infant, so engrossed was I in my own life. My memories of her begin when she turned about a year old and captured my father's heart. He had started taking pictures as a hobby. In the baby, he had found his favorite model. He propped her up in different poses and took tons and tons of photos. These he subsequently developed and printed himself and displayed all over the house. It was hard to believe I was being displaced; I did not know what to say or do.

My brother never complained to me. He said the fact that Dad had become busy with the baby did not bother him for Dad never had much time for him anyway and any time he did have was only for punishing him.

I watched in amazement this new interest of Dad's. His favorite game was to take Mom's scarf and throw it over the baby. The scarf was big and would cover her. My father would sit and watch as the baby would grab at the scarf, giggle and laugh and kick with her legs and pull the scarf off and see Dad's smiling face go peek-a-boo. Dad would laugh and then throw the scarf back on the baby for some more pulling and grabbing and smiling.

I used to love to watch him play this game with the baby. He said he loved babies and I could see how good he was with them. Mom said that is why she had the baby and why she would have another one seven years later, so there would always be a baby in the house for my father to play with. Dad was not good with clumsy, awkward, growing

children, which is what I was then. So, I would stand and watch and try to imagine the games he must have played with me when I was a baby.

Mom wanted to show the baby to her mother, our *Nano*. *Nano*, unlike *Amma ji* her sister, never traveled outside of Jhelum. So, we went to Jhelum on yet another trip. This time we stayed at *Nano*'s house. She was the softest, gentlest woman possible. Her life had a simple routine to it. *Nano* would begin her day by sitting on a low floor stool and then maneuver her stool around throughout the day for all the tasks she had to do. In the mornings, she would sit in front of the kitchen stove for a few hours. After the cooking was done, she would drag the stool while sitting on it next to the corner where she washed dishes and clothes. When the washing was done, she would again drag the stool to the end of the room and sit near the door leading into the open courtyard, and there she would either do her sewing or talk to the other women in the house. I very rarely saw her out of that stool.

Every time she saw me she would offer to wash my clothes. I would have to reassure her that what I was wearing were clean clothes that I had just put on fresh. She found it hard to believe and would question any passing woman to take a closer look and tell her if my clothes were clean or not. Sometimes she would make me take my clean clothes off and wash them, then give the clothes to me to hang on the third floor to dry. I would have to sit wrapped up in a towel at least for two or three hours for the clothes to dry so she could iron them and I could put them on again. Other times I would insist on keeping my clothes on; she was not convinced they were clean but would give up, wave her hands in the air at my resistance and then move on to her next task.

Nano loved to cook and more than that to feed anyone crossing her threshold anything and everything edible she had in the house at that time. She would offer to feed me too. This I eagerly agreed to, for I was always willing to try any goodies she had for me. Dried nuts and halva balls were my two favorites; she would ask me to cup my hand and fill them up with nuts and I would sit next to her on the floor with my hand on my lap filled to the brim. I would keep picking on it with the other hand, enjoying each morsel of the goodies she gave me. All the while she would be talking to me or any other aunt or relative sitting next to her. Other women of the house always surrounded *Nano*. Some of them would be working, some just hanging out sitting and talking, others rocking their babies to sleep while chatting away. I guess babies in those days did not need quiet to fall asleep; they were used to their mother's voices talking away and if they had any trouble falling asleep the mothers would rock them even more forcefully but never stop the conversation. When I got bored listening to the women talk, I would lay my head in *Nano's* lap. She would almost automatically start rubbing my hair, my eyes would close and I would fall asleep. I would wake up later curled up on the floor next to her. She would slip a pillow under my head and her long scarf over me while I slept. Upon waking I would resume my position next to her and continue listening to her talk to other women.

I would wait for the other women to leave, which was rare. But occasionally there would be a moment when I was alone with *Nano* and then I would move even closer to her, my face resting on her shoulder, her warm and cuddly body surrounding me as she would put her arms around me. She would wrap her huge scarf over me. Hidden under it, I would take deep breaths, trying to inhale her smells and love. I would hold her

tight. She would let me hold her for a little while and then pretending annoyance push me back. I did not mind it for I knew there would be other moments when I would be back in her lap and under her scarf.

Dad had planned a moonlight picnic on the River Jhelum. His sisters with their husbands were also visiting. Dad wanted to take them all for a boat ride on the river. The children were left behind with the grandmothers and older women. This time we were visiting with my baby sister who was not even a year old. It was her first visit; having been born in the city she was not used to any of the women or their ways in Jhelum.

Mom was nervous about leaving the baby home, but *Nano* reassured her that she would take care of her if she woke up. Mom put the baby to sleep and left with Dad for their picnic.

Sure enough, the baby woke up and not finding Mom beside her started crying. *Nano* had raised several children; she was an old pro at calming babies. She had developed special techniques to calm a crying child. She tried holding her, rocking her softly, but nothing she did seemed to soothe the baby. She even thought of letting her lick on the hashish ball that the servant women used to help their babies fall asleep so they could work uninterrupted, but then for some reason decided against it. As the baby's crying grew louder, *Nano* in her last attempt pulled her scarf over the baby and, cuddled inside the scarf, she began to softly sing to the baby while rubbing her hair. This was my special game with *Nano*! I tried sticking my head under the scarf but *Nano* pushed me away. I wanted to scream at *Nano* and the baby, but the look in *Nano*'s eyes

was enough to tell me to be quiet. I turned and started putting away the baby's things while waiting for her to stop crying.

After the baby fell asleep, *Nano* asked me to lie down next to her. She tried to rub my hair but I turned away and pretended to be asleep. My *Nano*, who could tell a story for each day of the year, who could understand what one was feeling without depending upon words, who understood the moods and feelings of her daughters from the looks in their eyes, and gave commands to all not by using words but by raising her eyebrows – my favorite teller of stories became quiet. She held my face in both of her hands and with a distant look in her eyes she kept staring at me without uttering a word.

A part of me was glad that she never put into words what my young mind was having trouble understanding and accepting. Nothing lasts forever, all can be replaced, disappointments are part of life, one must accept and move on. These harsh lessons also meant our little game of cuddling was over.

I was upset for a long time. Sometimes I felt anger at the baby – yes, it was all the baby's fault. She had taken my *Nano* away from me.

Then I remembered Mom telling me that nice girls don't ask for anything but only say thank you for what is given to them. So, was it wrong for me to expect *Nano* to play the game only with me? The blame fell squarely on my bold expectations. My seven-year-old mind did not understand then what a paralyzing lesson I was learning. The years I would struggle to ask for what I wanted and then suppress my own desires would come later. Mom somehow missed what this lesson did to me. She would go around telling people how lucky she was, for her daughter never asked for anything. What a nice daughter she had. But the compliments came with a big price tag.

The baby grew into this most adorable child that even people passing by would stop and stare at. No one left without giving compliments to my parents. No wonder then that Dad's interest in her kept growing. He was a good father to babies. My brother wanted me to go out playing with him, where as I wanted to see the games Dad would play with the baby. I loved to watch; the fact that I was not included did not bother me much. Over time I had also discovered my own ways of joining in. While playing with my dollhouse, I would take my baby sister and dress her up with beads and hair bands and pretend she was part of my dollhouse, either as a princess or a bride. Instead of dressing up as a princess myself, I willingly gave up my clothes and accessories for playing the role to my sister. My summer afternoons shifted from sitting on the wall staring out with my brother to now playing with dolls with my sister. Mom and Dad both liked me to play with my baby sister. Mom thought I was getting too old to be playing boy games with my brother and liked my shifting interests.

The only price the baby had to pay for being a part of my play was to sit still. Even as young as three years old, she knew she had to remain perfectly still if she wanted to be the princess or a bride. When she was dressed as a princess she could keep her face exposed. She would sit on a pretend throne while I prepared pretend food for her royal highness or cleaned her pretend palace.

Dressing as a bride meant I would put a big veil over her face. She had to spend time sitting quietly, while I sang songs and danced to celebrate her wedding.

Either way I was very busy. The baby was quiet and well cared for, my parents were free to nap or whatever, and I had company throughout the long afternoons. However, my brother had to find his own entertainment. He stopped sitting on the walls;

the moment Mom and Dad closed their door he would jump over the wall and run out to play. This led to even more trouble for him. In the evenings when Dad would open the compound door, he would invariably find him playing outside.

He would get into bigger trouble if *Amma ji* was visiting, for she would then incite Dad even more and help him see that my brother needed to be punished to the full extent for the crimes he had committed. Leaving the house without permission was only the first step. Having mud-filled shoes or sweat-soaked clothes brought such shocked looks to *Amma ji*'s face as if my brother was the only person in the world who had walked home from a game soaked in sweat. Having a bruised knee or pants ripped at the knees were unforgivable offenses and brought increased punishments. He would try to hide the rip at the knees by wearing his pants backwards, but nothing escaped *Amma ji*'s eyes. She never touched him, but it was her reporting that led to him being slapped, or if he was lucky, just made to stand in the corner for hours.

Every time my brother got punished Mom would walk around with tears in her eyes without saying a word. Later she would cry to me about the horrible behavior of *Amma ji* and Dad towards her son. "Then why don't you speak up?" and "Why won't you stop them?" I would ask, and she would cry some more and not answer me. I will never be like her, I promised myself. Afraid to speak up against what she knows is so wrong, afraid to speak up even for her own child. What kind of mother was she?

I was mad at her. "Stop, Ma, stop this quiet crying and do something about it!" I wanted to scream. The words would stick in my throat. Fighting my own tears, I found it much easier instead to reassure her that things would be alright, that *Amma ji* would leave soon and that all would be well again.

The Intruders

Amma ji's trips did slow down through an unexpected turn of events. *Amma ji* had lived on the second floor of her house for many years. The first floor was empty since we had left Jhelum. She was used to leaving the main entrance to the house on the first-floor open for the stream of visitors and servants who came up to her floor.

Amma ji was alone in the house with only one servant girl when a group of people was said to have barged in with boxes and bags and settled in the courtyard. They called out to her that they had come to stay and to lay claim to their part of the property.

Amma ji immediately recognized them although for most of the family it came as a shock. They knew that when *Amma ji* got married as a child of eleven, *Aba ji* had sent her home to await reaching puberty, and that after three years and her first menstrual flow she had joined *Aba ji* in Malawi. The family had grown up on stories of *Aba ji's* love for this child bride and his years spent waiting for her to grow up. But what they didn't know is that while *Aba ji* did wait for *Amma ji* he had passed the time by marrying another woman but one who did not come from the same town, class or family - *Amma ji* always would make sure to make that point when telling the story. *Aba ji* had several children with this other wife. When *Amma ji* reached Malawi, he had sent this intermediate wife and her children back to Jhelum. He continued to provide them with funds for as long as he lived. They were very poor and had struggled since *Aba ji's* death but had left *Amma ji* alone. For some reason at this stage they felt they wanted some part in their father's inheritance, long spent by *Amma ji* and her children, so they walked in and lay claim to the only thing left that had not been eaten or sold - the house *Amma ji* was living in.

Amma ji was not easily intimidated. She had sent a servant girl to run out and get help. By the time *Mamoo ji* had arrived waving bamboo sticks in the air with a few other men from the street, *Amma ji* had begun the attack on the invaders. *Mamoo ji* found them huddled in the first-floor courtyard behind wooden cots. *Amma ji*, it appeared, had stood in the balcony and thrown empty soda bottles with extreme precision at them. Soda bottles in those times were made of heavy glass and were enough to knock a person down even when empty. What was left of the intruders was easy for *Mamoo ji* and his group to clean up. Grabbing their boxes and suitcases with one hand and holding onto their bleeding noses and bruised heads with the other, the intruders left before the police arrived. Years later their children would reconnect and become good friends with *Amma ji's* side of the family, but at that time *Amma ji* could not find it in her heart to accept her co widow with her children.

Amma ji and *Mamoo ji* were proclaimed as heroes. Afterwards, *Mamoo ji* even looked younger, for he had been energized by the whole event. Years later he would tell the story of his bravery fighting men much younger than him with a bamboo stick and saving his sister and her house. *Amma ji* once again was elevated in the eyes of the entire neighborhood. She was this bold woman who had crossed the Indian Ocean and traveled to Africa by herself when she was young. And in her old age she had not been afraid when intruders came to her door. She had protected her turf. *Nano* would wonder in amazement at her sister's ability to target so precisely with soda bottles. She could never have done that. How brave her sister was!

Some people gossiped about the identity of the intruders, *Aba ji's* marriage and his neglect of this woman and her children. But then it was not considered good manners to speak badly about elders who had passed away. Some stories were best left untold.

Amma ji had a renewed concern about the safety of her home. She depended upon my Dad for her monthly stipend. Dad suggested she sell her house and move in with us in the Air Force quarters. But no matter how much pleasure *Amma ji* got out of her visits to our home, she also knew she was not welcome there. *Amma ji* liked her own space. She had kept her house through all the years after *Aba ji's* death. It was a reminder of the independence she had had. Though badly in need of repairs, it still had an aura of luxury that she could never find in our little Air Force quarters. She could not afford to lose her house. For added protection and income she rented a few rooms on the first floor. *Chachoo*, though still a teenager, was sent to England to work and support *Amma ji* if possible or at the very least lessen her burden of supporting him.

Vilayet Begum, the androgynous slave-turned-maid who had helped *Nano* raise all her children and grandchildren, had by now turned old and useless. She was then transferred to *Amma ji's* house to keep her company. *Amma ji* stayed in her house with very few trips outside Jhelum until her death a few years later.

Nano, who loved *Amma ji* despite the heartaches she had caused her daughter (my mother), could not imagine a life without her sister and promptly died the following year.

Testing New Boundaries

Freed at last from the constant threat of *Amma ji's* visits, Mom started to explore her surroundings. She was popular among the children in the neighborhood for her story time; now she started getting invitations from their mothers too. She slowly ventured out and would meet other women for tea parties in the mornings when Dad and other men would be at work. Her beautiful melodious voice got her invited to the Ladies Club, where she would sing songs at women's gatherings. The 1965 war between Pakistan and India led to her finding other areas of interest. The Ladies Club was mobilized into action, and Mom found a passion for social work. She spent hours knitting sweaters and making packages for the soldiers. Even after the war was over and the soldiers had returned, Mom continued her work.

Now the families of the soldiers needed help. Mom joined an Industrial Home where she taught the art of knitting and sewing to the wives and daughters of soldiers who had been injured or died in the war. She was happiest when she was out with other women doing her charity work. If I were in school, she would take my baby sister with her; when I was home she left her with me as my little playmate.

My brother had watched me dress ~~up~~ my sister as a bride and set her up in one corner as I sang wedding songs and then pretended to cry as she walked away with her groom. He had approached me one day and asked me if I knew what happened to the bride after she left with the groom. I was a pro at weddings. "Sure" I said, "she lives with her husband and wears gold jewelry and embroidered clothes." The look on my brother's face told me I was missing something very important. I followed him outside our home. What is he going to tell me? I wondered. I wanted to know and at the same time pushed

all thoughts of what he could tell me out of my mind. I felt like I was mesmerized. In some back corner of my mind I had an inkling of what he might tell me and a strange haze settled upon me as I walked behind him into our neighbor's home.

A group of boys and girls were hanging out in an almost-empty room. I knew all of them; some I even considered my friends. But in this room, they all looked like a group and I was the outsider. They exchanged looks as my brother entered the room after me. None of the boys was older than 12 or 13; all the girls were younger except one who was about 16 and seemed to be the leader of the pack. She looked at me and rejected me right away.

I was the one hanging out with my parents and the baby all the time. I was not fit to be a member of their group. She felt sure I would tell my parents all their secrets. They did not need members like me in their group. Distance from parents and an ability to keep secrets were necessary qualities for becoming a member of this group. They did not realize how good I was at keeping secrets. They were not aware of the secrets I had been keeping in my heart.

I did not want to leave the room; as I hesitated someone called out to give me a chance. That felt comforting - at least someone believed in me and had put in a request for me. They all huddled together for a moment and decided to give me a test. If I passed the test I might be allowed to stay. I nodded my head in agreement. They must have thought I would be shocked or surprised or show some strong reaction to the show and tell they proceeded with. My brother pulled out an old *Playboy* magazine, stolen of course from my father's hidden collection, and opened it to the center page to display a totally nude and very voluptuous blonde. I don't know what the group thought my

reaction would be but they never expected the calm and stoic looks that I displayed. I had stood by and watched *Amma ji* screaming full blast, my Dad yelling even louder, my brother running out crying and had not said anything or shown any emotion other than tell my crying Mom not to worry. This little game going on in the room did nothing for me. Besides, my own body had revealed secrets to me that went beyond what this group seemed capable of. I felt much more aware and knowledgeable than all of them combined. I was not even sure if I wanted to stay with them - it appeared so childlike to me what they were all so serious about.

As I turned around to leave, the door opened suddenly to reveal my Mom and the neighboring auntie in whose home the show was going on. Their mouths hung open in shock as they viewed my brother proudly holding the center page of the *Playboy* magazine surrounded by all the rest of the children. My mother did not utter a word - she stood there in shock. The auntie, however, started with a wild cry of calling out to Allah. Strange combination of Arabic prayers and Urdu curse words kept coming out of her mouth. One second she was praying to Allah to protect her from hell's fire and the misguiding of Satan, and the next second she was cursing out all the "mother fuckers" and "sister fuckers" gathered in her room.

There was a wild scramble as the children jumped around her to escape through the door. Luckily for us, the auntie had entered the room in her desire to catch the "fucking culprits," leaving only my mother at the door. Mom was easily pushed aside as the herd ran out and other children opened the window and jumped out. The auntie took off her shoe and held it in one hand high in the air for smacking. With her other hand,

she tried to grip and capture the “running bastards,” including two of her own. She only managed to smack a few running children. Most of us managed to escape.

Huddled behind a wall, the group spoke in whispers and wondered about the calamities that might strike them when they would go home that night. Some giggled at the new curses they had heard. Some felt sure they were seen, while others found relief in the idea that maybe they escaped unnoticed. There was some pushing and shoving, angry words flew out. Rejected at first, now I was even more rejected by the group who thought it was my presence that had brought bad luck to them. I did not want to be part of their group anyway, but I stayed with them not knowing where else to go and what else to do.

Later when I returned home, Mom was sitting in the kitchen on a little wooden stool. She had the stone bowl in front of her in which she was pounding spices with a wooden mortar. She had wrapped her scarf around her nose and head to protect them from the flying spices. As I walked in she handed me the mortar to pound saying her arm was tired from all the grinding she had been doing.

As I sat there pounding, my heart was thumping. Is she mad at me, I wondered, and if so how mad, what will she say, what will be my punishment, and would she tell Dad? Why did I have to go follow my brother anyway? I was annoyed at myself.

Whatever punishment was to fall on me I knew my brother would be sure to get it many times more. He was always getting into trouble and now he had managed to get me into the biggest trouble I had ever been in. I was more annoyed with him.

I tried to recall what had happened other times when I had been caught. I remembered once when Dad had come back from a trip, and my brother and I pulled out

a view master from his bag without asking him. Having never seen one in our lives before, we fiddled with it until we figured out what it was and then spent an afternoon watching discs of sceneries, children and even some of scantily dressed women (which probably Dad did not have time to separate out before my brother sneaked the view master). Our plan was to return the view master before our parents woke up from their afternoon nap. We were so engrossed that we totally lost track of time and were caught red-handed sitting behind the living room sofa with the view master glued to our eyes. I had been quick to point out who the real culprit was and that I was just watching what he already had in his possession. Both parents easily bought my story, leading to my brother being forbidden to touch the stolen object for a few weeks. I could watch the lighted discs in the view master whenever my parents took it out. I was even allowed to handle it by myself and play with it with my friends. Despite our long-standing partnership in crimes over the years, it was my brother who had ended up with one punishment or another whereas I had mostly escaped unpunished.

This time though, I was sure there was no escape for me. A million questions raced through my mind. I was afraid to even look up at Mom. Every few minutes she poured some more spices into the mortar. At one point, she asked me to stop so she could empty the mortar. I thought I heard her voice shake. Slowly I tried to look at her face, but she seemed even more confused than I was. I could see she was also struggling with what to say and how to say it.

There were so many spices flying in the air that it was hard to breathe. I started to sniffle and my eyes filled up with tears. Before I knew it, tears were flowing down uncontrollably. Mom kept pouring spices for me to grind. It seemed like we spent ages

grinding the spices. When it was done, she asked me to go and wash up while she finished making dinner.

She used to talk to me about all her problems: problems with *Amma ji*, problems with Dad, money problems, servant problems, problems with my brother and even problems with me, big and little problems, some I understood and some too big for my young mind to understand. I was her partner. I listened and comforted her through it all. This time I wanted her to say something to me. It would have been alright if she had gotten angry with me, but she said nothing - only her voice had quivered. I never forgot the shaking in her voice and I promised myself I would never do anything that would cause my Mom to become quiet with that shakiness in her voice.

The next time I met the 16-year-old who was the leader of the pack, I came to know that the neighboring auntie had gone to the home of each child she had recognized. Panting and sighing, asking Allah for forgiveness at what she had to say, she had nonetheless gone into great details as she reported to the mothers the shameful acts of sin she had the misfortune of witnessing with her pure and clean eyes.

“I like your Mom,” the 16-year-old had said, for my Mom did not go reporting on any children. “What happened then?” I had asked. “Were you punished? How bad was it?” She told me some of the children had gotten severe beatings, others were grounded, and that the group was not meeting anymore. Her mother had pointed out to her that if she had wanted to see such kinds of pictures she should have done it in the company of girls alone. It was because she had dared to see these filthy magazines in front of the boys that she was punished. “Next time if I want to watch any more nude pictures alone

without the boys I can without getting into any trouble,” was her casual comment as she walked away swaying her hips.

I never spoke to my brother again about the incident. I could not have, for he stopped talking to me altogether. It would be over a decade before he would open his mouth and speak to me again.

He had yelled at me once in those ten years and kicked me as I sat on the floor with my newborn baby brother. The baby was crying and I was trying to calm him by singing and swaying; it was sweet baby talk. By then I was almost 14 and had become good at taking care of babies in my mother’s absence. My brother had been watching me play with the baby; he had come up from behind, yelled a curse and walked out after kicking me hard in my back.

I did not tell anyone. I did not want him getting into any more trouble than he was in already. By then the roles had become fixed. I was my Mom’s helper and so very much liked. My sister was the apple of my father’s eyes and his favorite. My brother continued to be the problem in the family and then there was the new little baby boy to even further reduce the special ness of my brother’s position as the male heir in the family. The only time Dad talked to my brother was to punish him for something or other. I had stopped playing with my brother a long time ago and more and more of my time was taken up in helping Mom, leaving little time to even consider the whereabouts of my brother. Occasionally I would see him asking Mom for some money. Whatever she would give him would not be enough and he would stamp out of the house, leaving Mom behind sniffing and wiping tears. It is not surprising then that my brother stopped talking altogether.

What still surprises me though is that in a house where my *Amma ji* complained about everything, where Dad was quick to give a lecture on any topic in the world, where my mother cried about anything and everything, and where I was growing into a caretaker and consoler for the hurt, no one said or did anything about my brother's silence.

Moving on Up

Dad was good in his work. He was well liked by his colleagues and seniors. He was promoted to the next rank. Along with the promotion came orders for posting to a new base outside the city of Peshawar. This was good news which made Mom and Dad very happy. We had to take a train to Peshawar and then another long bus ride to a small town called Warsak. Our luggage was sent separately in a truck. Our new home was at an old Army base vacated by the American army. It was modeled on the American style of small apartments. The base had a swimming pool and bowling alley and was the most modern base the Air Force had to offer to its officers. We were excited about the move and our new home.

Arriving in the new town, soon it became obvious to us that my brother and I were among the oldest children. Our parents had married young and had had my brother and me at a very young age. Most of their colleagues in this base had children the age of my sister, who was around seven years old, and the baby, who was just born. There were not many couples with clumsy teenage children tagging along. Those that did have children our age were very senior Air Force officers and protocol dictated that our parents, and by proxy we, did not associate with them.

Mom's popularity started to increase. She was so pretty and young. People asked her all the time if I was her younger sister. She would quickly deny it and affirm that she was in fact my mother. That used to make me happy. But when people wondered that she must have married young for she had children who were already in their teens, a cloud would cover her eyes. Later I would find her lying in bed crying, her arm thrown over her face, the bend of her elbow so fair and soft. I would reach over and ask her if

she needed anything. Sometimes she would ask for a glass of water, other times a cup of tea, but most of the times she would just cry and I would sit next to her rubbing her arms - sometimes I would rub her legs for she felt comforted when I did that. She would start talking and remembering all the nasty things *Amma ji* had said to her in the past. By then *Amma ji* had been dead for a few years. However, it had no effect on Mom's memories of pain inflicted on her by *Amma ji*. I liked it when she talked for that meant there was a chance she would stop crying. So, I would sit down next to her on the bed hoping she would talk, and rub her arms and remind her that things had gotten better and beg her to please try and forget what had happened, for *Amma ji* was long gone, and to remember all the new opportunities she had.

Other times her worries turned to me and my older brother; she thought the two of us had grown up too quickly. For my brother, she had hopes that he would possibly join the academy and leave the home, but she had no idea what she would do with me. Where would the money come for her to marry me? They were just getting comfortable with Dad's promotion and pay raise. Where and how would she find the right suitor for me? Was she not too young to have to plan and manage her daughter's wedding? This was just too much for her to do without any help. Then she would make a strange switch and complain to the spirits of *Nano* and *Amma ji* for dying too early and leaving her alone in this world instead of being there for her in her times of greatest need. At such times, I really did not know what to do except to just be quiet and listen to her talk.

I reminded myself of a story *Nano* had told me many years before about a sad young woman. The woman went to a wise man and asked him to help her, for she had too many problems. The wise man asked her if she had any family or friends; the woman

told him that she was all alone in the world. The wise man then asked her if she had at least a nook or hole in the wall in her house. The woman replied that she did have a small nook in the wall where she kept an oil lamp. The wise man told her that every night she should remove the oil lamp and tell all her sorrows to this nook. The woman began talking each night to the nook and over time it turned black with all the sorrows the woman was holding inside her. Having expressed all her sadness, the woman recovered and was not sad anymore. I used to hope that once Mom talked to me all her sorrow would leave her, and like the girl in the story she would no longer be sad.

Little did I know that these skills I was practicing at that young age would then continue to guide me throughout my life and lead me into a career of helping people find their voices. During many a psychology class, I was reminded of the wisdom inherent in my *Nano's* stories. I wondered if Freud too had discovered the value of listening and catharsis from his Grandma's stories.

Mom had always been good in needlework, and now she found her talent was well suited to guide the Ladies Club's handicraft department. Her singing skills allowed her to take an active part in the social events, planning small skits and shows for the Club. My sister, with her good looks and quiet mannerism, was a great asset for Mom. Whenever possible she would accompany Mom and was even included in some of the skits and shows.

Mom and Dad over time became a very popular and social couple. Mom had finally accepted and began enjoying the lifestyle of freedom which Dad had so wanted for his family. Dad himself was the happiest person.

School Days

Dad wanted all his children to excel in studies. Every misbehavior could be forgiven except missing a school assignment. The day-to-day monitoring and supervision of the children's schoolwork was Mom's domain, with Dad choosing to be informed only about test results, which he proudly shared with his friends. With a new baby and a seven-year-old sister who was the apple of everyone's eyes in the home, the best route for me to win my Dad's attention and favor was to excel in studies.

My brother and I were admitted to a coeducational English medium high school operated by the Pakistan Air Force. The thought of coeducation had Mom really disturbed for many days. When we were young, we had played freely with both boys and girls. Now that we were in our teen years, Mom wanted me to stay away from boys. The same rule applied to boys although a bit less strictly. While Mom did not give any clear instructions to me or my brother as we started the coeducational high school, we knew that she wanted us to socialize only with students of our own gender and to stay away from mixing with the opposite gender as much as possible. She felt reassured that my brother would be going to the same school with me which would keep us both in check knowing the other could watch and report.

I was good in languages and writing which helped me in my studies. The first article I wrote for my English language class was called "Full Moon Night." Unlike in the west where the full moon is associated with madness and wolves and howling, in Pakistan the full moon was a night of love, beauty and singing. Thousands of songs have been written and will keep being written about the beauty of the full moon. My essay won great praise and was also published in the school journal. This gave me immediate

recognition with the teachers and students as a bright although somewhat nerdy recruit in the school.

My other favorite subject was poetry. The school would hold “Bait Bazi” competitions, which consisted of two teams competing by taking turns in reciting a verse from a poem. Each team had to recite a verse that started with the last letter of the verse recited by the other team. The competition would go on for hours until one team could not come up with a verse starting with the required first letter. I spent hours memorizing poems and verses from books taken from the library. Most verses would end in the letter A or Y, which were very easy to respond to since most common verses began with these same letters. The trick was to memorize verses that ended in rare letters like Q, Z or R. I was good at researching and finding such rare verses that ended and began with these letters, ensuring that my teams would win. My head was always full of poems and verses, some of them quite difficult with Persian words in them, others quite romantic which I recited without even grasping the full meaning of the poems, with the sole purpose of helping my teams win many a competition. Mom would laugh every time she heard me practice memorizing the verses. She would then sing some of the verses for me, to make it easy for me to memorize. Other times she would just shush me away and say, “Don’t worry about the meaning, just memorize it.” She liked to see me win.

My love of poetry would last a lifetime and continue to bring Mom and me closer to one another, although in the beginning, I had to pay a far bigger price for it than I had ever imagined.

It happened after one of my best wins at a “Bait Bazi” competition. The last verse that helped me win the competition was still stuck in my head as I went home. I kept

reciting the verse again and again to relive the moment of victory. I was hoping to run in to Mom and Dad so I could brag about my success, and maybe earn a trip to the ice cream parlor as a reward. That day, both my parents were not home but a young man was, sitting sipping tea at my Dad's place on the couch. He was a cousin from Dad's side of the family, and as such was favored by my Dad. The purpose of his visit was to pursue his conversation with Dad, who was guiding and giving him tips on how to join the Pakistan Air Force and any preparations which he needed to make. In my eagerness and excitement and without even thinking, I recited the winning verse to him. The verse was from a poem written by a famous poet, Mirza Ghalib, over a hundred years ago:

*“So, what if you paid attention to me
For I am poor and you are a lover of the poor.”*

The young man slowly got up and smiled as he leaned forward and kissed me on my neck. I was in such a happy mood that I did not give any thought to this peck on my neck and had walked away continuing to sing my winning verse. It just reminded me that earlier in the day at the time of winning half my team had hugged and kissed me too.

Later this young man had gone and bragged to his sisters about having one more girl fall for him, and the sister told someone else, and someone else told someone else and the story spread and finally reached Mom that I had been kissed by a boy and instead of slapping the boy as any decent girl should have done I had laughed and walked away. For the first and only time in my life, I saw Mom screaming with anger as she proceeded to slap me, again a first for her, on my neck where the forbidden kiss had been planted. I was forbidden to ever take the name of this young man or to set eyes on him again. It was a punishment I gladly and fully accepted, so shocked was I at Mom's reaction that I

was willing to agree with anything just to have her calm down. I don't know how much Dad knew about this incident, but my guess is he knew too, for he stopped coaching the young man who was forbidden to ever come to our home again. Our planned visit to Jhelum was almost cancelled to avoid facing this young man's family.

Although Mom and I never talked about the incident again, we never forgot about it either. For Mom, the innocent kiss became a reminder of the ease with which a trusted daughter could go down the wrong path. For me, it was a reminder of the shame I had brought to my family. Suppressing any feelings that the kiss had begun to stir in my heart towards the young man was the price I had to pay for restoring my mother's trust in me. Decades later when this cousin died of cancer in distant lands, Mom still could not take his name in front of me.

Wanting to put the incident behind me, I intensified my focus on my studies and continued to earn recognition and high grades that Mom and Dad could be proud of.

I graduated high school with distinction. Our high school offered two years of college where I could have stayed on if my brother had been in the same school with me. However, my brother, who was two years ahead of me academically by then, had completed the two-year college and was moving off to join the Air Force academy in another city.

He had grown into a tall and good-looking young man. I watched him pack his bags and leave. Dad was very pleased with my brother, and he gave him a long lecture on the once-in-a-life opportunity he was getting to reform himself and as such wanted him to focus on the academy. Mom told him how proud she was of him and then burst out crying; she tried to give him a goodbye hug which he refused. I stood frozen with my

sister and younger brother as my brother walked out quietly without saying a word to us. I would have to wait years before he would become a support to me once again, which he did, and stood by me through my ups and downs and failures and successes in life. But on that day, I could not even say goodbye to him; all I could do was to go into the bathroom and cry.

College Years: Learning to Fly

With my brother gone, Mom did not want me to continue my two years' college degree in the same Air Force coeducational school. To the great dismay of my teachers and my Bait Bazi team, I said goodbye to my school. The choice of college was simple - it had to be an all-girls college; there would be no more coeducational schools for me.

The all-girls college selected was a bit too far from the Air Force compound where we were living, but the college provided a bus which would go around town collecting all the girls and then drop them at the front gate of the college. Unlike my high school, which was in the much more liberal and open grounds of the Air Force base, the college was in the old-fashioned town of Peshawar and as such had high walls around it.

At the main entrance to the college there was a huge metal gate that was kept locked, with a small side entrance through which all the girls would enter and exit. The side entrance had two guards. One was a nasty female wrestler-type guard and the other was an old man we called *Baba ji*. There was a lot happening outside the college gate and as such it had to be guarded and the girls protected.

The female guard was tough and would not let anyone near the gate once we had entered the college. *Baba ji* on the other hand could be easily convinced to let us peek out to see if there was a vendor selling some favorite snack to eat. He would then arrange the transaction for us with the possibility of pocketing a little bit of leftover change. Some girls from rich families had cars with drivers bringing in lunch boxes during lunchtime that had to be collected at the gate. Other girls wanted to peek out to see if there was a forbidden lover waiting for a quick glance to satisfy their aching hearts, or a

messenger to quickly and quietly deliver a handwritten note from the lover when no one was watching.

Inside the gates were large open grounds, a few shady trees and two old buildings which at some point must have been houses. The various rooms were used as classrooms. There was no hall or large room but the open grounds provided plenty of space to hold events, meetings and assemblies. The first building as one entered the gate had a room facing the gate - this was the principal's room. Our principal was a middle-aged heavy-set woman. Her most prominent feature were her eyes, which were sharp as an eagle. Even in the winters, she sat in her office with the windows open so she could keep an eye on the gate and all the movements around it. Assuring the safe entry and exit of the girls at the college gate sometimes appeared to be more important than any education the college had to provide.

My choice of psychology as major subject of study was an easy one. We did not have any guidance counselors who could offer help in decision making. Dad told me to consult with a few of his colleagues who had older children in college to give me some ideas before meeting with the college principal. The principal asked me what I wanted to study and why; I described to her my two top choices as geography and psychology. Geography to help me learn about all the places Dad had traveled to as I had grown up listening to stories about these far and wide places. And Psychology, to help me figure out the inner workings of the hearts and minds with which I had struggled along with Mom all of our lives. The principal's response had been quick - figure out your head first and then you can learn about the world. After the two-minute session with the wise principal, I walked out of her office and enrolled in psychology classes.

Studying psychology was like opening doors - so many things began to make sense to me. I was always two chapters ahead of the one being taught in class. Mom, who had been my teacher in memorizing poetry, now became my comrade in understanding psychology. She did not want to know about any theoretical aspects of my psychology classes, but what she loved to hear about were concepts like self- growth, self-esteem and emotional well-being. We both diagnosed Mom as having suffered from depression. And even though we had both lived through her bouts of depression, having that label somehow lessened her pain. She said one person in the family with depression was enough. Besides, she would not be able to handle it if we had diagnosed me with depression too.

Mom used to sing old Pakistani folk songs for fun at home and at events in her Ladies Club. Many of these songs consisted of magnifying the qualities of the male lover, highlighting all kinds of shortcomings for the female while at the same time lamenting and blaming one's self for the loss of love. Other songs talked about dying and not wanting to live without the lover. Based upon her newly acquired knowledge on the importance of positive self-affirmations for the mental health of a person, Mom concluded that her folk songs were not giving any good messages to women. Although she loved the tunes and rhythms of these songs, it was the meaning being conveyed in these songs that started to bother her. I was surprised yet pleased when she told me that she was going to embark upon an effort to rewrite some of the most derogatory verses as positive ones. She rewrote some of the most popular folk songs and even found the courage to sing them in a few of her women's events. She was pleased to see how well these were received by other women. However, old habits are not easily changed,

particularly when it had to do with songs that women had been singing for generations. Mom would get disappointed when these women kept signing the songs with the same old verses and not the new words she had proposed to them. At one time, Mom and I even talked about putting these newly written songs in a book form, but for one reason or another we never got to do so.

The political scene in the country was changing. Tensions between the two wings of East Pakistan and West Pakistan were surfacing. Threat of interference by India and the possibility of war were looming. The songs on popular radio increasingly became more motivational and nationalistic in place of the popular folk love songs and poetry recitals. Even before the second war between Pakistan and India broke out there were reports of casualties. People were dying in confrontations in East Pakistan while the heated political dialogues were continuing across Pakistan.

Conversations in our college too changed from poetry recitals to discussions on social issues. Everyone was motivated and energized and wanted to do something to play their part. The college, which took pride in its strict rules and ability to keep all girls indoors, relaxed their rules and opened the gates. During college hours, I went out with groups of other girls with collection cans in our hands, collecting funds for the fallen soldiers from people on the street. Those girls who could not go out and walk on the street because of stricter family rules forbidding it contributed by making care packages for the fallen soldier's family members while staying indoors. Others held bake sales in the college and local schools to raise money.

Mom was doing something similar with her Ladies Club in supporting the pre-war and later the post-war care efforts for families of soldiers. She was very supportive

of my efforts and contributions. We used to compare notes each day on how much each of our teams had accomplished. Mom and I were on two teams working for the same goals.

Some of our famed poets shifted from writing love songs to increasingly writing about more patriotic themes. Mom started singing these new patriotic songs. I was not good at singing and so began taking part in college debates, which created an opportunity to not just raise my voice to recite someone else's words but to find my own words to express my opinions. I loved debating. We held frequent debates on the importance of maintaining our culture, our values and our languages. In the safety of our college walls we discussed which option would be best for a country with low literacy rates: military rule or democracy. Even as we were unsure of our own futures as women, we were more open to discussing the future of the country. Conversations on the role women would play in this future tended to still focus more on being educated mothers to their children.

Winning in debates meant opportunities to travel to other cities to take part in debates in other school districts and cities - this was the hardest on Mom. She could not sleep while I was gone. She imagined the worst nightmares possible happening to me, mostly having to do with honor and the reputation of the family and very little about safety or life.

Even as our hearts broke with the split of Pakistan in two, a new political awareness and conversation across colleges in Pakistan had been born that had not existed during the previous lengthy military rule in the country.

A few times a year the college provided opportunities for picnics and visits to the riverside. On these trips Mom would send my baby brother with me. He was in grade

school then and loved any chance he could to miss school and join me on a fun trip. He was really attached to me since he had shared my bedroom and my friends since he was a baby. My friends had a lot of fun playing with the little boy and all were happy with this arrangement, and somehow this reassured Mom that I was not going alone even though I was surrounded by close to a hundred girls and a few teachers on these trips.

I was well liked by students and teachers. I was good in studies and always willing to help other girls who were struggling with theirs. But what I was really sought after was to discuss personal problems mostly having to do with forbidden love or harsh parents and even a couple of cases of lesbian love, something still very rare in those times. I had a long history of listening to Mom and now with a few classes of psych behind me, I felt even more confident in offering advice to anyone and everyone willing to talk. More than anything, I think it was just providing a shoulder to cry on that helped the most. For what did I know about managing affairs of the heart? Still the girls kept coming to me for advice and others came to find out what the other girls were talking to me about.

I think it might have had something to do with the way I talked to the girls. Most of these conversations would happen not standing or sitting but lying down. We would find a quiet spot and lie down on the open lawns of the college grounds and talk. This was something most girls could not have done even on the lawns of their own houses. It was not considered proper for girls to be seen in a lying down position by any male non-relative or relative. They had to be either sitting or standing properly when in view of others. Having an all-girls college with its mostly female staff (other than old *Baba ji*) and its wide and open lawns surrounded by the protective walls provided its own unique

freedom. There was something so freeing about lying on the grass, arms and legs spread out, our heads joined at the crown while we looked up at the floating clouds and talked about problems big or small.

I was favored by my teachers for my good grades; some of the teachers began counting on me to monitor their classes in their absence. This was a role I took very seriously. One particularly stormy day stands out in memory. It had been raining heavily all morning, I was asked to monitor the afternoon class as the arrival of the teacher had been delayed due to heavy rains. Some girls started to pray that our building would collapse, or at least get flooded so that the classes would get cancelled.

I had a job to get done before the teacher arrived and nothing would come in my way. Rain, or no rain. I had a class to monitor. I gathered all the students in our class and started them on the assignment of the day when, suddenly with a huge noise, a few bricks from the roof came crashing down on the floor, leaving a small hole in the roof through which the rain started pouring in. Luckily no one was hurt. One of the girls ran and brought a couple of wastepaper baskets which we placed under the hole to catch the rainwater. We took turns emptying out the baskets when they filled with water. The fallen bricks were stacked on one side, some of the chairs and desks were pushed to another side to avoid rain splatters, and in a wet and noisy classroom we continued discussing our assignment. And that is how our teacher found us when she walked in. Without saying anything, our teacher quickly walked us out of the room into another empty room. The classes were not cancelled.

It was only a few days later that we realized the risk we had taken. One of the girls had brought a newspaper with an article on a few deaths in the old town from

collapsed roofs due to the heavy rains. We continued to use the broken building, which was patched up in ways that almost guaranteed that during the next rainstorm we would have another hole in the roof.

Mom was worried about my safety in the college building but Dad laughed it off and told us a story about his plane crash landing in India many years ago. The crash caused one of the airplane wings to get bent. He had to wait in India for a replacement airplane and crew to arrive from Pakistan. Diplomatic relations being tense as they normally were between the two countries, the wait kept getting prolonged. Tired of waiting, Dad and his crew took the risk and one night flew the airplane with one bent wing back to Pakistan. Dad said I was his daughter: not afraid of getting hurt and willing to take the risk.

The principal said there were no funds for any major repair of the building. With the help of a few other girls I wrote a few articles to the local newspapers and local government offices to bring the plight of our broken college building into public awareness but with no results.

I never really wanted or thought of it, but my debating wins and good grades in classes somehow gradually pointed me in the direction of the Student Union, where I not only became an active member for a few years but by my final year of college was elected as president.

The more popular I became the more worried Mom became about me. She remembered once again the stories of all the girls who had married as per the wishes of their parents and how easy it was when parents made the matches for their children. She was petrified any time she heard about a girl who found her own match. Was I becoming

too confident? Girls in her family were never bold and confident like me. *Amma ji* was a loud-mouthed bold woman but not until she got married; unmarried girls were supposed to be quiet and polite. Was I turning into *Amma ji*? Physically I already looked more like her. Would I stop listening to Mom? Would I get involved with a boy and bring shame to her and the family?

By then we did not have much family left in Jhelum. Most of our other relatives had also moved out in search of jobs and better opportunities. On rare occasions, we would visit our cousins and I did not think they minded my confident and big mouth attitude; in fact, I think that they were impressed by the freedom our family enjoyed. Still Mom and her fears continued.

The number of girls attending college kept dropping with each passing year. My graduating class in high school had over 400 girls. The four-year college had started with over 200 girls but each year a few dozen would get married, and everyone else would look at them with envy. Those were the most-sought-after girls who got married first: pretty girls, from rich families, with big dowries.

By the time I graduated from college and enrolled in the university, the number of girls in my class had dropped to less than 20. Even Rooh, my best friend and constant companion through four years of undergraduate college, could not continue her studies. Her parents had one condition for her going to school, which consisted of an old Nanny accompanying Rooh wherever she went. Every day while Rooh attended classes, this Nanny would be found asleep on the college grounds propped up against one wall or another, following her from one class to the next. Rooh reluctantly accepted this condition for many years but refused to have the Nanny tag along if she were to attend

the university. The result was obvious and quick: she was not allowed to enroll in the university and soon after she got married.

This was a common occurrence, for most of my friends from my college years were already married before graduation. Those who could not find a right match chose to stay home, for it was easier to hide their age while staying at home than being enrolled in school. To be above 20 and unmarried meant something was wrong with the girl and thus further reduced the chances of her finding a suitable match. Having an unmarried girl in the home was the biggest misfortune that could fall on a family. This was the message many of my classmates heard in their homes and that my Mom's eyes conveyed to me every time a girl we knew got married.

Flying High

Mom wanted me to be married as quickly as possible. But there was never really any suitable proposal that she herself felt confident about. She would suggest the name of one cousin or another as a possible match for me, to which my answer was always a strong no. She would ask me to at least think about her suggestions and not rush too quickly to rejection. She would get annoyed at Dad, as she thought he was the one putting wrong ideas in my head. She was right in that it was Dad's encouragement and my good school performance that kept me going, and I enrolled in the Peshawar University Master's Program in Psychology. I felt confident to pursue my studies with less interest in boys but more in the freedom and learning that the school atmosphere offered. Without any good proposal or boy lined up for me, Mom had no strong argument and accepted my enrollment in the university.

Although Mom had one major concern: the university was coeducational, for there were no all-girls universities at that time in Peshawar. Leaving home to go study in another town received an absolute no from Mom. I tend to believe that I had regained her trust in the previous four years by not showing any interest in boys, and for that reason she approved my enrollment in the coeducational university.

Another factor that worried Mom, was that this university was not close to the Air Force base where we lived, but was much farther. This meant, I had to take public transportation to reach the university. The public transportation system consisted of local buses or wagons packed with men with the front two rows marked for females. These seat allocations in the buses were a true reflection of the proportion of male and female presence in public places. All around one could see men walking, strolling or just

hanging out, with very few women or girls. I don't recall the exact percentage but the total number of girls enrolled in the university was less than 20% of the total student population. But those who had been steadfast and reached this level of study were some of the most headstrong and confident women who would go on to lead successful careers in all kinds of private and public spheres wherever their lives took them.

The Psychology Department was small with less than 50 students, mostly males, brilliant teachers (again mostly male with one female professor) and a very well-stocked library of the latest books and journals from around the world. Tucked away at the far end of the university behind the medical college, this department offered a quiet but most encouraging learning environment, which was exactly what I needed. After the ride on the crowded, noisy and filthy bus, then a walk through the even more crowded medical college, once I reached my department I would breathe a sigh of relief. Here there were no more noises but words, concepts, conversations and discussions that provided a stimulating high of their own.

My interest in studies, flair for writing and reciting poems and stories made me my teacher's pet. Moghni Sahib was the chairman of the Psychology Department. He was a big burly and hairy guy. His head was covered with long wavy grey hair; he had a thick mustache and even thicker unruly eyebrows. Although most students avoided and felt intimidated by him, he was my favorite professor.

Moghni Sahib would never accept any submission of my papers in written form. Instead, he would ask me to read out loud what I had written while he would sit with eyes closed playing with his thick bushy eyebrows. From time to time he would open his eyes and ask me some very thoughtful and challenging questions, which I would try to answer

while noting it on my paper. By the time I would finish reading, my paper was covered with my handwritten notes and remarks. Moghni Sahib would ask my opinion on the grade my paper deserved. Considering all the questions asked, some of which I thought I answered well, others maybe not so well, I could never think of a grade above B, but then Moghni Sahib would lean forward and mark it almost always with an A+. Some days when he was really pleased with my report he would even offer me one of his *pan* (beetle leaf with some beetle nuts and sweet ingredients chewed as mouth freshener) as a reward, which I would take gladly. Those were the most intellectually stimulating and learning times for me, even though at times I dreaded this focused attention. Other students saw me as bold and able to withstand the focused stare of Moghni Sahib, which could frighten many a young man away.

I was always sought out as a partner in study groups, and to lead one special event or another at the university. But no boy ever approached me with any romantic interest. Neither did I show any interest in the boys that were around me in the university. I think in some way or the other most boys felt intimidated by me and my big mouth. I was not the typical girl being coy and shy when approached by boys. I was a skinny girl with a big mouth, not a type desired by young men looking for a girl or for that matter for most women searching for a daughter-in-law for their son.

The military era of Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan was coming to an end and political parties were becoming active. Many political parties would try and enroll students in colleges and universities and invite them to their rallies. Students joined these parties in large numbers. The cafeteria and grounds of our university were filled with

passionate discussions on the future of Pakistan and the role the youth had to play in it. I was always eager to join these conversations.

On one occasion, the Peoples Party set up a flatbed truck with loud speakers and megaphone. The truck drove through the university, calling students to join the party. As the truck approached our department, all the students came out to listen. The truck was quickly surrounded by a large group of boys and girls, with boys making the inner circle and girls standing in the back listening. There was clapping and yelling; the guy on the megaphone had some catchy slogans which he read in a singing voice and invited those gathered around to join in. The atmosphere was charged and exciting. When suddenly something got stuck in the throat of the guy on the megaphone and he started coughing, the megaphone fell from his hand. The other guys standing on the truck looked at the megaphone but none seemed ready to take over the job. They asked if any of the boys in the audience would wish to take up the announcing, and when none volunteered they decided to drive away and to cut the canvassing short.

I was standing behind almost three or four rows of boys. It did not seem right to me that this exciting call for mobilizing the young should come to an abrupt stop just because one person had a coughing spell. Before my friends could say anything to me, I walked forward, the crowds of boys parting to make way for me. Someone even gave me a hand as I got pulled over the truck, and without waiting I grabbed the megaphone and started reciting what I had just heard. The crowd went wild and cheered. One of my girlfriends standing in the crowd threw a shawl at me; she had a frown on her forehead. She called to me, "If you are going to be crazy enough to do what you are doing at least be covered up." I did not disagree with her; I had never seen any other girl do what I was

doing in this university before. Surprised at my own boldness, I wrapped the shawl around me but never let go of the megaphone. There was no time to think; the truck slowly started moving with a crowd of boys following it. Someone handed me a script to read from. The next few hours I spent on the truck bed calling on students to join in the movement and to enroll to vote, and inviting them to attend the upcoming political event. I was used to public speaking as I had taken part in debates before, but those were always within confined school classrooms or school auditoriums, never like this in the open air on a moving vehicle with crowds following. Driving through the university roads, I felt so alive, so free.

Later that evening when recounting the details to my parents at the dinner table, I was just as excited and could not sit still. I had to re-enact the whole scene for them, jumping off the chair many times. Dad joined in my excitement; Mom kept reminding us both to calm down and finish dinner. I knew what she was thinking, but seeing my enthusiasm she did not bring up any reminder of Jhelum or the proper rules of behavior I had broken, and for that I was glad.

The next step was almost a natural progression. I took part in most events held in the university. I joined the Student Union and was easily elected as its vice president. Dad was quick to support and encourage me to take part in these opportunities. Mom was happy for me but a part of her shivered with fear each time I went out of the home. The memories and ghosts of her past were still with her but Dad's support was giving me wings with which to fly.

The message in the air was also that times were changing. This was the Bhutto era in Pakistani politics. Concepts of freedom of speech and equal opportunity for

women were increasingly becoming part of the national dialogue. I had an opportunity to hear Mr. Bhutto at a political event. Political events were still quiet segregated up until that time. The section for the women was cordoned off with white tents on one side of the stage, while the men surrounded the stage and could see the stage and Mr. Bhutto and his entourage. At one point during the speech, the microphone system stopped worked, making it even harder for women in the side tents to hear. Most of the young women behind the tent started shouting. The shouts got so loud that Mr. Bhutto had to stop. Upon hearing about the problem, he then asked all the men to lower their gaze and move back and make room in front of the stage for the women, as they had every right to be present at the event and to listen to him. All the women and girls came out from behind the tents, clapping their hands, and took their place in front of the stage where they were easily able to listen to Mr. Bhutto speak.

That moment had a big impact on me. In a conservative country like Pakistan where women had forever been behind curtains, change was possible. What was needed were people asking for change and someone bold enough to take a stand to bring it about.

It was not easy keeping up with good grades as well as my political activities. Moghni Sahib understood the challenges and handed me the keys to the department library. Many an evening when all the students had gone home I would sit in the library with a small electric heater at my feet (also thanks to Moghni Sahib's generosity), unlock the library cabinets and immerse myself in reading the work of great masters like Freud and Jung. The library would be freezing cold but it never bothered me as I sat there totally absorbed in my readings.

Moghni Sahib's support and investment in me did pay off. He was really pleased at the good grades I was getting. There was competition among the various departments in the university on which student would perform the best and earn the honor of the very competitive and prestigious Presidential Award, which came with a prize of funds and scholarship for further studies for the student and recognition and reputation for the department and its teachers. For several years, the honor had gone to other departments and our Psychology Department had not had any student bring home this award.

Moghni Sahib kept reminding me that he wanted me to be the one to bring this award to his department. He even started encouraging me to look at various opportunities for scholarships to further my studies outside the country after completing my master's. The education in Pakistan was subsidized, and my parents paid a minimal amount for my university fees. I knew my parents could not afford to send me to a school outside the country with high fees and expenses, but the thought of the award scholarship was energizing. Moghni Sahib even came to our home and talked to my parents about the opportunities that could open for me if I were to get a scholarship.

I would bring home various admission forms from universities in England and America. Mom and Dad would listen to my exciting descriptions of what little I knew about these universities. Dad would even help me in filling out the applications, sometimes even driving me to the market to make photocopies, etc.

Moghni Sahib had faith in me, which I did uphold by winning the prestigious Presidential Award and the scholarship prize, but not before I lost a major battle on another front.

Walls Within

We had gone to Rawalpindi, a city about 120 miles south of Peshawar to attend the wedding of one of my cousins. All the grownups gathered after the wedding to discuss other matches for the next generation of teens growing up. There were a few girls in the family much older than me in age who, had finished high school or two years of college and were sitting home waiting for the right proposal. I was quite confident that Mom knew about my lack of interest in getting married and my desire to pursue further education. So, I was not concerned when I was called into the circle of grownups. One of my uncles called me to stand by him. He put his hand on my head and in a very serious and loud voice that everyone in the room could hear said, "From now on you are my daughter-in-law."

I looked at my Mom - she had tears in her eyes begging me to be quiet and to accept. I looked at my father, who had been my biggest support and who had encouraged me to pursue my studies. I stared at my Dad wondering, "Surely you must know how ridiculous this decision appears to me." My would-be father-in-law looked seriously at me and wondered out loud if what he saw in my eyes was rebellion. Mom was quick to reply that if there was ever rebellion in any of her children she would break their legs. Mom's answer was even more shocking to me and almost made me want to laugh, for surely, she was not capable of doing what she said. Slowly Dad started walking towards me. As he approached, he put his arms around me and started crying. I tried to fight his embrace, his tears and his arms around me, but he kept holding me tight and kept crying, his tears soaking my shoulder. I had never in my life seen my Dad cry, not even when *Amma ji* had died, not when his airplane had crashed, killing his colleagues with he

himself almost dying. But standing there I could feel his tears on my cheeks. Mom came over and put her hand on my head. Her voice was shaking as she whispered something to Dad and to me. I did not even want to look at her. Held in Dad's tight embrace, I felt the walls closing in on me. Was I back in Jhelum? Was this grandfather's old house? Was this happening to me or to women of my mother's generation? Had my Dad turned into a stone cage which was suffocating me? Was this really Dad holding me down? After teaching Mom to fly he was breaking my wings. Why was I not saying no? Why was I letting Dad hold me so? My head was swarming with questions while I heard Mom's soft quivering voice, "Good girls listen to their parents and respect their wishes," she was saying. "We are doing this for your own good. Don't you trust us to do what is best for you?" I remembered my promise to myself to never be the cause of hurting Mom, and before I knew it I was crying too. My crying was a signal to all that I had accepted and so all the relatives surrounding us started hugging and giving congratulations to each other on the marriage deal that was confirmed.

My Mom took me out to a quiet room, where I spent most of the night crying. I could not even name what was happening to me. I understood and had provided labels like "emotional abuse" and "verbal abuse" to Mom to help her understand *Amma ji's* behaviors towards her. That night I had no answer as to the label I should give to Dad's arms around me holding me down, or to Mom's begging eyes. Most of all I could not understand my own lack of response. What had happened to me and to my big mouth? Why did I not scream as I was drowning? My anger and resentment towards Mom and towards the innocent and unsuspecting groom selected for me but most of all towards my

own self would surface with an intensity much later and would take me many years to shed, but that night all I felt was utter shock and so I kept crying quietly.

Mom and Dad came in to check on me a few times. Mom was crying too and complaining to Dad, “Half my life I cried because of your *Amma ji* and now the rest of my life your daughter is going to make me cry.” I had always tried to be by Mom’s side and comfort her through her crying spells. But that night, I could not even look at her or Dad.

But the thing that stood out most in that long and strange night was that my brother started talking to me again, as if those long ten years of silence in between did not exist. He dropped the walls he had put up around himself and connected with me as I cried at the growing walls that were surrounding me.

After words

Years later, I would spend many an hour on my analyst's couch trying to figure out my own life, which could not be understood without first understanding the physical, mental and emotional walls behind which my mother spent her life. The external and internal difficulties and challenges she faced when trying to overcome her fears and accept freedom. The suffocation, pain and helplessness she experienced behind the walls while never forgetting the immense love, safety, support and comfort that these same walls also provided to her.

In her own ways she did succeed in climbing out and continued to make small gains throughout her life. Once all their children were grown, married and out of the house Mom and Dad really started to flourish. They had a large social circle and kept contact with family and friends in all corners of the world. They even had opportunity of travelling to other countries which further helped to evolve Mom's thinking. Shortly after I got marriage, the marriages of my older brother and sister had also been arranged although through various levels of inclusion of their interest and willingness. However, by the time the youngest of our siblings was ready to be married with a partner of his choice, thinking in the family had changed. Both my parents and particularly Mom welcomed my brother's choice with open arms. She began to encourage all women and girls she came across, to get educated and to men, her consistent message was of respect for women and their voices and choices. Still, from time to time Mom suffered from bouts of guilt and depressions because of what she blamed were her own fears and her inability to stand in support of her children in their earlier years.

Later she would take great pride in the success of her children and particularly her daughter's careers and choices. She said she had passed the baton to her daughters knowing they were equipped with somewhat better skills and resources than her to continue to figure out and fight their own battles for freedom and independence, as each new generation must. She hoped that her next generation will carry her struggle forward. Helping and supporting the voiceless find their voice, giving a gentle push forward to those trying to climb out of the walls in whichever form these walls exist.

Mom lived to welcome the arrival of her first great grand daughter Sophia, a birth she celebrated by distributing sweets and offering prayers of thanks for what she said was a blessing that had been bestowed upon our family.

Mom prayed to Allah for granting her a *Nafs-e mutmaina*; "a soul at peace" so she could forgive herself. I do believe she found that peace in her heart. Like a good Muslim before she died she forgave all those who hurt her and asked for forgiveness from her family and friends. She faced her end with a strength and courage that surprised us all and quietly passed away in her sleep.

A month later, I visited her grave. It was a beautiful sunny day with light breeze blowing as my sister walked me to Mom's last resting place; under the shade of a neem tree, with the mountains of Islamabad in the background. The branches of the tree were moving so gently and freely. The fragrance of the neem flowers filled the air and gave the whole place a very open and welcoming feel. A sudden tweeting sound made me look up as two birds leaped from the branches and began to fly freely in the sky. Through tear filled eyes my sister and I smiled at each other knowingly.

We started walking back to our car, humming under our breath

“Fareeda turya turya ja, Fareeda turya turya ja

Man wich wal na pa, Fareeda turya turya ja”

(poetry by Sufi poet Baba Fareed)

Fareed keep on walking, Fareed keep on walking

Don't let doubts in your heart, Fareed just keep on walking

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Glossary of Terms

Abba ji: Respectful way of saying father. In this story this title is used for grandfather.

Amma ji: Respectful way of saying mother. In this story this title is used for grandmother.

Bhai ji: Brother

Burqa: Black outfit that covers the whole body including the face.

Chador: Usually white in color, a large white shawl wrapped around the body for modesty and protection. Can be used to cover the head leaving the face uncovered.

Doli: Covered carriage for bride, usually carried with four posts by men.

Khala ji: Khala is the term used for mother's sister. The word *ji* is added at the end to show respect.

Madari: A guy with a monkey who has been trained to perform a little show of tricks and dance.

Maha Rani: Queen of Queens.

Mamoo ji: Mother's brother.

Mardan Khana: A section of the house designated as men's quarters for adult boys and men. Most of the socializing among men would take place in this section. Men would go into the women's quarters only at mealtime and bedtime.

Namazi: Men who are praying.

Rani: Queen

Tonga: Horse-drawn carriage, used for transport of people and cargo.

Tonga Wallah: The tonga driver.