

## SHORT STORY

I NEVER imagined that one day I would be in Shikarpur. I had heard that name for so many years in connection with my mother. Like my grand mother and aunts on my father's side, Papa would say, "Your mother is a Shikarpuri!" I did not comprehend the insinuation behind that expression until I grew up and discovered that Shikarpuris were thought of as shrewd, tight fisted and, therefore, clever in business. Later on I also learnt that Shikarpur was once the centre of *Hundiwallas*, the bankers who financed business all over the country. But my mother was the opposite-completely unbusinesslike, with no clue about the outside world, unassuming and shy, and at the same time, very generous; at least, that's how I saw her.

I know very little about my mother's past. My mother seldom spoke about her childhood. Whenever she did, it was her recollection of prancing around with her three older brothers across Shikarpur's landscape: the magical gate of Lakhi Dur which glittered with lights in the summer evenings with all sorts of eateries, the walk through the royal Shahi Baag which not only had a variety of tropical plants but also the birds from paradise, a one-anna tonga ride in the horse buggy to the canal which originated from the nearby Indus river flowing on the outskirts of the town. At the canal, you could rent inflated tyre tubes with which to float downstream. Under a parching hot mid-day sun my mother, with her brothers, would jump into the canal, and swim with the black tube to the Parushah. When they came out of the water on the other side they would pick up fresh mangoes from the adjacent grove. Resting on the gravel sand, they sucked the mangoes until their clothes dried before returning home. Shikarpur had sounded like an oasis in the desert.

# Under The Starry Night

Balwant Bhaneja

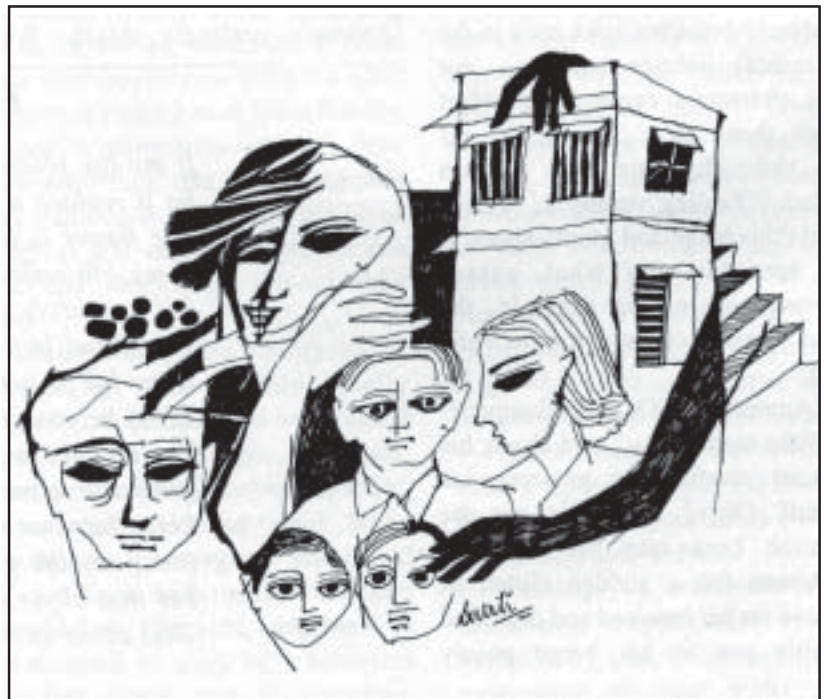
The previous, and perhaps only, time I was in Shikarpur was when I was four years old. I remember a long rail journey from my birthplace Lahore, a journey starting in the green plains and ending in a vast expanse of dazzling bright desert, a clear blue river cutting through it.

My mother was a very quiet person, of retiring nature. I recall her shouting in exasperation at her brothers, or in later years at us children. Raising her left palm she would run at us and snap in annoyance. "*Lukh jee lanut hoojai!* Let there be a thousand curses on you for badgering me." On that first, my childhood visit to Shikarpur, there

were just her three older brothers and me to aggravate her.

"Aye Manohar! Aye Girdhari! Aye Bihari! Anyone of you. Won't you be sweet to your sister. Take this little boy out to the bazaar for a while. Play with Lahori. Do something to amuse him."

The three of them would glower at me, trying to unnerve me. With their heads shaven for *pugree* ceremony, they looked scary. Seeing that I did not show any fright, they would break into laughter, teasing mother, "Hey Raji, what do you think, we have nothing else to do, but to mind your little Punjabi devil." They would carry me and start tossing me from one to



another as if I was some ball to be bounced around.

“Come on Bihari, let’s take Lahori to the Lakhi Dur.” I enjoyed the ride on Manohar’s shoulders, I could feel his soft shaven round head and smell the coconut oil off his fair scalp. I would tap it with my fingers. “Stop it *chora!*” Manohar would shout, “It is my *khopdi*, not a *dholak*.”

Bihari pinched my cheeks, “Like kulfi and falooda? Best ice-cream in the whole of Sind, better than even your Lahore.”

...Throughout the bazaar, they told everyone, “You know he is Raji’s boy. He lives in Lahore, can speak both Punjabi and Hindustani!” I remember the curious look in shopkeepers’ eyes, and one or two of them who knew Punjabi tried out a few sentences with me. “Shah Jee, have you been to Anarkali?” “Yes,” I say, “I have been there with my Mummy and Papa.” Everyone looks at me strangely. What? Uncle Bihari understands the problem. “He means with his mother and father. That’s what he calls them in English.” They all laugh, “Mummy! Bihari, I thought he was talking about his *Maami*.”

Adult jokes in a strange language I barely understand. “*Samajhwaro chokro ahai*. Bright boy.” The other vendor then closely inspects me, “Looks exactly like his mother. When she was a little girl, she used to also come for kulfi and falooda, on her father, Mukhi Chella Ram’s shoulders.” The word Mukhi before my grandfather’s name indicated the status and the respectful homage of the kulfiwalla to the departed soul. “Tell Rajeshwari, I asked for her. I will be at the *pugree* ceremonies. But tell her that I said she must teach this Lahori his mother tongue.”...

My mother and father had come to Shikarpur to attend the *pugree* ceremony, to perform the last rites of my maternal grand father. During that trip, I never saw my mother cry.



Instead, she would latch on, childlike, to her brothers to participate in their practical jokes. While my father, as the one more experienced in worldly matters (having lost his own at an early age), was busy organising the logistics of the function, my mother would be either coyly enjoying her brothers’ company or, looking bewildered, reluctantly serving pappads and tea to the circle of lamenting women dressed in white. That was the last time I saw my mother with her own relatives.

My father, a civil servant, was transferred from Lahore to Bombay to Nagpur, and then to Delhi. Soon after the Partition of the country in 1947, we had a huge contingent of refugee relatives from my father’s side arriving to stay with us. Our three-roomed government quarters had an air of a temporary refugee camp, but there was no one from my mother’s side. Nobody knew the whereabouts of my three uncles with shaven heads. Even before the partition, it was said that the three had virtually become vagrants, involved in street fights and petty crime, often ending up on the wrong side of the law. In the 1950s, I recall mother inquiring about her brothers from visitors from that part of the world. Nobody had seen them

for years. Rumours were that one of them had been killed in the Hyderabad riots, the other two having decided to permanently settle in Pakistan had embraced Islam and had married into local Muslim families. Since they were living under new identities, it was impossible to locate them. My uncles never bothered to seek out their sister.

My relationship with my mother was always cold. Until her last days, there was a strange gap between us which we could never bridge. I have often wondered whether this gulf between us grew because of my introvert nature, or it had something to do with my mother herself.

As far as I can remember, mother had little time for me, or for that matter, for any of her children. She was one of those traditional mothers whose whole life was consumed in the running of the household-cooking, cleaning and washing. By the time my mother had learnt the ropes of running a home, I was gone. There was little opportunity in the few visits back home once every four-five years, to get over the awkwardness in our approaches to know each other.

Let me start at the beginning. My mother, Rajeshwari, was married in 1938. She was fourteen and Papa was nineteen. It was an arranged marriage. In those days, the marriages of girls were set up when they were still very young, sometimes as young as twelve. The focus was more on finding a right family rather than on a right partner. Rajeshwari had had a sheltered carefree childhood because she lost her mother when she was six years old. She had been brought up by her father. At ten she was taken out from her school as “good” girls attended just long enough to read *Gita*, *Gurbani*, and *Sukhmani*. Raji never enjoyed reading holybooks (I never heard her talking about religion or God); instead she loved to loiter around the town with her rowdy brothers.

Papa’s first job was in Dadu as clerk. He always told stories about the

things he could do in those days with his forty rupees monthly salary - what he spent for his upkeep, what he sent home to his mother living in Upper Sindh, and how he was still able to keep aside a few rupees for a rainy day. He must have meant marriage, because by the time he was transferred to Karachi, he had married and brought my mother to the port city to live in a small two room *barsati* flat.

There, Papa's friends and the families he knew were amazed that his bride was so inept, unable to even light a *chullah*. "Not even tea!" they kept questioning her, "What did your mother teach you girl? Even if your mother wasn't there, some *dadi*, *mami*, *chaachi*, somebody should have taught you cooking and sewing before packing you off with Tirith to Karachi". Raji looked blank, her typical defense.

A significant part of my mother's past has been narrated to me with great exaggeration by my Karachi-wali Sita *bhabhi* who over all these years, in bits and pieces, has faithfully narrated to me my mother's arrival as a new bride in Karachi to my being born in Lahore. Sita *bhabhi* and Uttam uncle also moved to Lahore around the same time as my parents, but after the Partition decided to settle in Bombay where Uttam uncle continued with his Public Work Development job.

Soon after mother's arrival in Karachi, Sita *bhabhi* as the more experienced took upon herself the role of mentor to the new bride teaching her the ABC's of being a government officer's wife. "Your *vechari* mummy," Sita *bhabhi* would say, "Arrey, I trained her in everything from making *rotis* to sewing a button on the shirt. The poor girl couldn't even wrap-her sari around properly. *Ekdum* innocent!" As we grew older, none of us children liked Sita *bhabhi's* depiction of our



mother. Though well-meaning, you could sense the smugness in Sita *bhabhi's* every sentence about Raji's tutelage. In later years, I was surprised that Sita *Bhabhi* had mellowed. She was able to give due credit to my mother's talents and achievements. "Mahesh, all of us have pains and aches. We are not getting younger. We are all in the same boat now." There was something else being said, that age was the great equaliser whether you were smart or dumb, aggressive or timid.

In all, mother had nine children. Four lived, five died. Of those who survived, three boys, one girl. After me, Umesh was born in Bombay, then Indu, the only girl, and Chottu, the youngest one in Delhi. There was also one before me, a boy. Nobody remembers his name. My mother was carrying him in her arms during a return train journey from Shikarpur. It was only at Karachi railway station, I am told, that she discovered that the four month old baby had been dead the whole night.

It is difficult to imagine that Mummy could be so inexperienced once, considering there are so many people who would attest to her first

rate hospitality and culinary skills. Even relatives up to third and fourth cousins on my father's side recall how Rajeshwari took care of all of them when they came in throngs across the border with whatever little they could carry on their backs. Both Tirith and Rajeshwari provided them with beds, feeding them until jobs were found for them, and they got their own quarters.

Papa was by nature a romantic - a man who felt confined by narrow concentric circles of tradition, someone who instead of dealing with petty family squabbles, loved to delve into outside worldly affairs. Apart from his civil service job, he was also a writer, actor, poet, and a lover of music. When he built his first house, he insisted on getting two cement platforms in the outside *baithak*. Morning-evening visitors would come to the courtyard and the two platforms were his mini-stage for the social callers: his friends, admirers, sycophants, as well as for musical gatherings under full-moon summer nights. For years, visiting artists spent the whole night on those two cement *chabutras*, playing flute and sitar, singing *ragas* and *ghazals*. In every gathering under the star-decked sky, Papa would unabashedly sing a love ballad to Rajeshwari, "this is for my *Begum - Taron bhari raat hai hum tum wahi - Under the starry night, you and I are still the same.*" Rajeshwari would look a bit bashful, but enjoyed Papa's attention. At the back of the house, she would have the whole kitchen under her thumb. Her delectable dishes: *rogan josh*, *matar paneer*, *gajar ka halwa* were both admired and relished.

When I got my first job, Papa wanted me to move on to Lucknow. Mother had reproached him, "Why must he leave home? We don't need any money. Don't you make enough for the family?" Papa had laughed at

her naivety, "When will you understand that Mahesh has to, someday, be on his own feet, get married, and set up his own family?" Then he added firmly, "Raji, your children will be going away at some time, like the way we left our homes." And mother was upset, crying, "That's all you want, all my children to grow up and leave."

No, she did not want anybody to leave, she did not want to move out anywhere else in India, or to the States or to Canada. Since she could not stop them, she had made up her mind that she was not going to follow them all over like the way she had to follow her husband.

There is such a long distance which has been travelled since that time with her in my maternal grand father's house in Shikarpur and the mother I saw recently. She looked so frail and weak. When I touched her forehead I could feel the skull emanating heat as if it had been in constant commotion trying to relive her seventy four years. Through the hollows of her wrinkled face I could see her angular cheek bones. I wanted to hold her face in my palm, and kiss her. But I was unable to do so. I don't know why. (I think my mother also withdrew slightly, in case I might kiss her).



For long, in the darkness, Rajeshwari kept on looking at Mahesh. Day by day he seemed to become like his father. Especially with those horn-rimmed glasses and the bald patch at the back of his head. If you saw him from a distance you would think he was Mr. Tirith Ram. Then she thought it must be the nose. That was a real Shikarpuri nose, the thin nose on a long face like his Papa's. She wondered what had gone wrong with him. Always that sad look, as if it was only him who had lost a father.

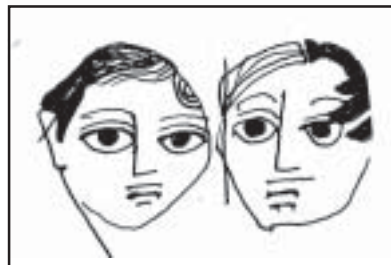
She too had lost her husband. Mahesh had been the one who, with the other three children, had planned celebrations for their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Who would know that only two months before the event Papa would suddenly die? And now with Papa gone, everyone was wallowing in pain for him, nobody ever bothered about her. She found it strange that everyone in the family now gets a birthday card, all grand children, the children, the daughters-in-law, all except her. They always had sent one to Papa on his birthday but never to her. But then how could they send one to her when nobody knew the day she was born? She must be the only one left in the world who did not know her birthday. Was it her fault if nobody told her when she was born? In those days nobody cared to note down anyone's date of birth, especially a girl's. Boys knew about theirs because they needed it for their certificates, and for government service. But for girls when they got married it would have been ludicrous to bring their *janam-patris* (horoscopes) from their parental homes.

She was, however, glad that after Papa's death Mahesh had taken over the role of the head of the family. It seemed money wasn't any problem for him, look at the number of telephone calls he made every month and then coming to India so frequently. He had been already here twice since his father died. She felt happy when he said this was just to see her and to make sure that Chottu

and his wife were properly looking after her.

She cursed her pain for causing all this great expense to Mahesh, and to every one. Was it her age or her widowhood that caused the body to give in so rapidly? What did she do to deserve this misery at the end? She would rather pass away quietly in the night than suffer through this pain. She wished that her body could, for at least a short while, stop withering. A woman's body: how much it could bear. First so tender and beautiful, bend it anyway and it will shape itself accordingly. You would never think that in spite of delivering nine children, four alive, five dead, it would look so sturdy. She always felt so good except for her monthly periods which she always dreaded. The older you got the worse they became. When the periods stopped, other problems began...the bladder, the piles, then arthritis,...She hoped once she was alright she would move out again, at least up to the market, or to the corner shops. No, it wasn't meant to be that way. Instead, the farthest she could go to was the bathroom. Now, not only was there pain, her x-rays showed weak lungs, and multiple bone fractures in her right foot. The specialist said that the fractures were caused because she had walked to the bathroom as if she would have flown there. Stupid doctors. For almost a year now she was stuck to the bed, irritable and crying in pain, dependant and a burden to everyone, her reach limited to the commode under the bed.

Oestoporosis, Rajeshwari tried to pronounce the word she had heard yesterday morning, and gave up in the middle, it had something to do with the loss of calcium in the bones. Everybody said she should have drank milk all her life. Once again, she was being lectured to by everyone,



the young, the old, the somebody, the nobody. She wasn't any more that little girl from Kishin Chand Ghiti who could neither cook nor sew, to be told all this.

She felt quite confident of her accomplishments over the past fifty years of her married life as a wife and mother of four children and now with nine grand children and even a "foreign" daughter-in-law. For a moment she thought about Mahesh's wife Claire. How she enjoyed teaching her to wear saris, making *bhaajis* and *chapatis*. It reminded her of her own days as a new bride in Karachi. She was amused at the thought of how Sita was irritated at her not being able to properly put on the sari; how loftily she would say that folksy *gothani* Shikarpuri style would not do in Karachi. And now, so quickly she had been able to show Claire the fashionable way of wearing it, tight, that it would not fall off the petticoat while at the same time elegantly shaped to her body.

Rohin, the first grandchild, was only one year old when Mahesh and Claire had brought him to this house. He had now grown so tall and handsome, already going to the university. She recalled the celebrations both Papa and she had organised for the first grandchild. Lucky Rohin. None of her other grand children got such treatment. While Papa and Mahesh would be out, both Claire and she, like two little playmates would feed, massage, and bathe small Rohin in the plastic tub.

She would mutter to herself, "*Tum sub ke sub jahunnam me jao. Go to hell! It is too late for me to worry about calcium. I will drink as much tea as I want.*" She looked at Mahesh smiling, "You will have to get me another glass of tea."

Rajeshwari was amazed at Mahesh. How cooperative he had become since Papa's death. She remembered the fights the two used

to have when he was young. He never listened to her, only to his Papa. He always wanted to be with his Papa. She remembered once overhearing Mahesh, saying to his father, "I do not like Mummy. Why is she not smart like Sita *Bhabhi*?" By smartness he meant, why did she not put on powder and lipstick on her face. She just did not have the patience to stick all that on to her. She did not understand the need for going to all that trouble. She had quietly listened.

It was not Mahesh' fault. It was Papa's. God! How many years she had been listening to him to be like



this, to be like that, moving from city to city, wanting her to meet new people, his friends and acquaintances from office, social work, music, theatre. How quickly children pick up these things even when nothing has been said. She was so scared in those gatherings, keeping quiet in case she might utter something inappropriate, embarrassing herself (or Papa). She wondered why it took her so long to say not to all that, letting Papa know that she did not care for those people or those gatherings.

Her decision to stay in the Delhi House. In spite of heated arguments and *jhagdas*, she felt so good at victory - the house as she had all along hoped would not be put up for

sale. How finally Papa and the children had to give in to her. Even though the others left for far off places, Papa, Chottu and she stayed on in the house.

She remembered the first time she had to deal, on her own, with the problem of a move. It was when Papa announced that he was being transferred to Nepal. She had howled at him in panic.

"Not again. Why do only we always have to move? There are other people with jobs in Delhi too. Why do they all stay here, but not us?"

She had decided to stay behind, not wanting to rent the house. She was convinced that there was no need for anybody to leave. But Papa always had his own way. He went alone, leaving her behind with four kids.

Six months without Papa. Her first time on her own. How she hated managing all by herself - the children, the loans, the repairs to the house - waiting for the monthly money order to arrive. She could not figure out how Papa used to look after those things. She had felt the ground rapidly slipping from under her feet. Why did she let Papa go? It was so lonely, she had felt a pain growing inside the pit of her stomach - a pain which reached out of the belly to grab you by the throat, making you quit in the middle of a climb. The only way out was through buying the *neela thotha*, a piece of the blue alum, in the market paint shop, grinding it, and mixing it in the glass of tea. She did that. She heard about a woman in the neighbourhood who committed suicide that way.

Within an hour, *thotha's* poison had spread around. Sweat was rolling down her face, her head pounding, body about to explode, she was vomiting uncontrollably. Suddenly, Mahesh had appeared from somewhere. She could see the

stunned look in his eyes, not knowing exactly what she had done. How helpless both of them looked. She told him she would soon be allright, and not to say anything to anyone about it. She rubbed the vapour balm on her forehead, and told Mahesh to go away for a while. Lying in the vomit, she had tied her scarf tightly around her head. She felt worse than before. Even dying was not so simple.

When the next money order came, she gave in. Wives, mothers, women - they all have to give, give, give, and eventually surrender, first to their husbands and then to children. If they didn't, would there ever be peace? In her quiet moments, she often thought about Shikarpur - Manohar, Girdhari and Bihari - her brothers. What happened to them? Would she ever see them again? No, instead of Shikarpur, she was meant to go even farther away. With her monthly allowance in her hand, she decided to join Tirith, her husband, taking the children with her. Mahesh wired his father that Mummy was on her way.

Had Papa like other fathers been a bit strict with Mahesh, he would not have left India. Home would be here, not scattered all over the world. Once Mahesh went, everybody followed him. Even Papa wanted to settle abroad. But this time she had made up her mind that even if she had to die alone, she would stay on in her own house. She had fulfilled her duties as a wife and mother. She had travelled all her life with Papa from Shikarpur to Karachi, Lahore, Bombay, Nagpur, Delhi, and even Kathmandu...there was a limit to moving in one's lifetime.

Why was everyone annoyed with her: her father, brothers, Papa, children... How incensed everyone was when she brought Buley, her first born, back to Karachi dead from Shikarpur. That was the first time

she was travelling on her own. She was so excited returning to Karachi. Her father and brothers had put her in the ladies compartment, requesting the other women to see her to Karachi. She had carefully wrapped Buley in the blanket, held the baby close to her so that he would be warm. How was she to know that at Karachi railway station she would have a dead child in her arms? Buley was dead. Was that her fault? Everyone looked at her as if she had killed the child. How was she to know that Buley was dead? A baby does not say, mummy, I am dying now. She thought he was asleep all along.

Even when Mahesh was born they could not stop harping on the same story, "you silly girl, now be careful this time." Though Papa would not say anything, he was so protective of Mahesh, day and night, gently instructing her on how to mind the baby. And then it happened...she couldn't believe that she was so clumsy. Sita *bhabhi* was so furious at her. She took the baby away from her, saying that she was not fit to raise children. Oh, she was so scared she cried the whole day, wondering how to face Tirith. Papa brought Mahesh back from Sita *bhabhi's* place. Putting little Mahesh in her arms, he asked her to stop crying. "You just have to be more watchful. Nobody is going to send my wife back to her father in Shikarpur."

Last evening, how full of love Mahesh was when he had carried her in his arms to the charpoy in the yard. No, she did not want Mahesh to pick her up. She had squirmed at the thought of his touch. For a fleeting moment, she wondered what if she slipped through Mahesh's arms to the ground? She wanted to tell Mahesh about the incident of having dropped him once long ago. That she did not mean to hurt him. But she couldn't...Mahesh

was about to leave for the airport. Only God knew if they would ever meet again.



It was my last evening before I left for Canada. It had been wonderful sleeping outside in the courtyard under the star-decked sky, as in my childhood days. Mother had been cooped up inside the bedroom with the dim electric bulb on, and the ceiling fan revolving like a karmic wheel. Disabled by her bone disease and unsuccessful cataract surgery, her room with attached bathroom was the most secure place. I had wanted her to come out and enjoy the fresh summer air in the yard, and was surprised when she agreed. When I said that I would carry her to the newly made bed outside, she was a bit reluctant. It was the first time I had carried my mother in my arms. She was light as a baby.

In the falling darkness of the dusk, we laid down on our charpoy's silently for a long time. I could see mother taking deep breaths to inhale the fresh air.

"Oh! It's so nice." I heard her murmuring.

A long pause.

"I am glad you came, Mahesh. Everyone was speaking very highly of your brothers, especially you for having come from so far for Papa's fifth death *barsi*. You should have brought Claire and children."

"Next time, Mummy."

"I know it is expensive. But from now on you must come home more often. Would you promise you will come back at least once a year?"

"No promises. But I will definitely try."

She smiled.

"Mummy, it is a full moon night. Those musical gatherings Papa and you used to have, I wonder if we will ever see them again."

"No one has time now. Everyone keeps on saying they are busy, as if

no one was busy before.”

“Mahesh, you are everyday looking more and more like your Papa. Indu was saying the same thing. As you opened the door, she thought Papa had come back.

I wondered if Mummy was right. In spite of her aches she seemed eager to talk.

“Like your Papa, you enjoy music, they tell me you have started writing stories also, he would have been really happy to see that. You really loved him?”

I nodded.

“Mahesh, do you love your mother also?”

It was such an unexpected question which had been so simply put that I did not know how to respond. I sat numb, watching her intently in the dark. Perhaps she had realised my unease, for she quickly rephrased herself.

“I meant when I die, you would still remember me?”

“Mummy, how could one ever forget one’s mother?”

I was looking for some way to assure her of my feelings for her. Fumbling I said, “You know in Canada, in our bedroom we have a photograph of you, by yourself, in the golden frame.”

“Which one?” she said as if she wanted to test me and make sure I was not lying. “Mummy! The one which Indu took of you when she was here last year. The one in which you are wearing a white pajama and kamez, and holding flowers.”

She looked pleased. “I also liked that one. Indu was making such a fuss about those flowers. She wanted me to hold them properly to get all the matching colours in the picture.”

I wanted her to continue. But she had decided not to go beyond that.

Nor did I know how. It seemed so phony to behave differently than the way you always have.

Saying farewell to her next morning, I remember touching her feet, distorted swollen feet affected by bone fractures, and Mummy’s nervous hand barely touching my back, saying, “*Rukh Aasro Raam jo*, God bless, call me over the phone!” It was the first time I had heard her blessing that way.



Before this pilgrimage to the birthplace of my mother, I stopped in Bombay at Sita bhabhi’s place. She expressed condolences about Rajeshwari’s passing away, so soon, only five years after her husband. “Nobody knows about death. *Kaal* can come anytime, take anyone of us. But Raji had a good life. Your Papa showed her the whole of India. Even brought her to Canada to visit you.”

It was difficult for Sita bhabhi not to include her favourite topic of reminiscing about the period of my mother’s apprenticeship under her. “In that *barsati* flat in Lahore, where you were born, I remember till today the incident about Rajeshwari giving you the bath. You must have been just a month old. She was washing you in her arms and you just slipped off her hands, falling with a thud onto the floor. Oh, the way you cried, and the way she was crying. We all ran from next door to find out what had happened. She just kept on crying. She would not touch you in case you were hurt. Fortunately, you were alright. I was so mad at her that I carried you away to our home, Telling her that if she was careless again I would throw her off the balcony.” I felt I had almost slipped through my mother’s arms.

Sita bhabhi went on. “But Mahesh, let me tell you frankly, it is not easy to be a woman. How much we must go through. If it was not for fulfilling our duty as a wife and mother, we would be long dead. And our ungrateful children, they are so self-centered. When we parents are old and in pain, you know what they hope for—I hope she dies soon.” There, Sita bhabhi was her usual self, getting carried with her generalisations. I wasn’t sure who she was talking about—us, her, my mother, or her own children. “Your mother was always a homebody, her life was in that house. So many sacrifices had been made to build that house. I know all of you wanted her to come and stay with you abroad. She wouldn’t have gone anywhere whether it were - America, Canada, or even the moon. She knew she was the queen in her house.” I felt drained after Sita bhabhi’s eulogy to my mother.

As I got off the train at Shikarpur, Sita bhabhi’s commentary on my mother dropping me on the floor, was still bothering me. *Bodies do not forget, they only fail to recollect.* Was there a connection between that incident and Mummy asking me if I loved her as we lay out on our charpoys that evening?

Strange, how Mummy had mentioned that everyday I looked more and more like Papa. That I was even enjoying the same things he did. She was right, but she did not realise that, in those interests, my choices were not those of my father. If she could have read my stories, she would have found that deep down I was like her - unsure, frightened, incapable of demonstrating love. She would have seen the people who inhabit my stories had her soul.

After all, I am my mother’s son. □