# Come listen to small Butta’s long story.

Part 1

**The beginning of this story:**

I used to live in a village named Singnath, which is in the district of Allahbad in Uttar Pradesh. In my family other than me, was my mother, my father, elder sister Ruqaiya, falling chronologically after her was me, then two younger brothers Shakil and Aadil respectively, and a younger sister Kaneez.

On one side of our home was our elder paternal uncle’s home who all the kids used to call “Bade Abbu”. In his family were his wife who we called “badiammi” and their four sons. Bade abbu used to recite prayers everyday in the mosque. On the other side was my younger paternal uncle’s home who used to stay with his wife, two sons and a younger daughter.

In this village, besides our three families were a few other Muslim families and the rest were all Hindus. The whole village used to live in secularity and would visit each other’s houses often. Religion was an alien term in our village. We would dine together and celebrated each other’s festivals. The village never saw even a tinge of intolerance towards the other religion and respected each other’s beliefs and practices. All us kids used to play together and would engage in notorious acts as well. It was an environment of fun and frolic.

I used to like my village, my whole family, my cousins and friends a lot. They would be the centre of my life throughout the day. I never got tired of their company. We would play all kinds of games we could think of and I would keenly look forward to meeting them as soon as I would go back home, such was my bond with the people of my village. The memories of my childhood are still fresh in my heart.

The first house in the village belonged to us. Whenever people went anywhere, they would stop at our place for a while, take snacks and drinks, talk to my mother and only then would go to their homes. We would have visitors all the time at our home and my mother loved catering to them. She would indulge them in talks for long hours and would win their hearts with her hospitality and food. They loved talking to her. She was a keen listener as well as a fervent speaker.

My father, whose name was Asfaque Habib, mostly stayed in Mumbai. He had some business there and would come to the village once in a while. We would wait with joys in our eyes for his visits and our hearts would ache when it would be time for him to leave since we saw so little of him. Father had appointed a man named Jaishyam to take care of the house and the farming. In his absence, Jaishyam only used to look after the work and take care of our buffaloes, cows and the goats. Jaishyam was very skilled at performing his duties and never denied any call for work. He was a reliable and trustworthy man.

My mother was a very clever and a fearless woman. Everyone in the village used to like my mother a lot not only for her dexterity, but also her kind heart and jolly nature. Due to the absence of my father at home, my elder sister matured very early, although she wasn’t much older than me. We might have had only a difference of two or three years between us, she was very intelligent. She used to take good care of all the siblings and would assist mother in her chores as well. Due to her this nature, everyone liked her too. The next one elder in the family among all the siblings was me. I was around six or seven years old then but I was very different from Ruqaiya. My whole day was spent in playing **gulli-danda**  with my friends outside, roaming around in the farms of anyone in the village, climbing trees, bathing in the pond with boys and girls and catching fish. My mother would scold me every day for going on these errands and at times she would beat me up too. I used to trouble my mother a lot. Younger to me was Shakil, I think he was five years old then, after him Aadil, who was three years old then and the youngest Kaneez, who was one year old.

I was neither the eldest nor the youngest, but stuck in the middle instead and that became one of the main reasons for getting scolded the most. Aside from this, I was also scolded for playing all day with the boys being a girl and not helping my sister Ruqaiya with the chores, but mother used to take care of all work very effectively. I could never bring myself to be like Ruqaiya. No matter how different my mother thought I was from Ruqaiya, I could never understand her reason for feeling so. In my heart I never felt different from any other being standing next to me.

My uncle-aunt, bade abbu-bade ammi, all their kids along with our family would stay together in harmony. All we cousins used to do a lot of mischief together, while the elders engaged in their own private conversations.

**“The sudden arrival of my father from Mumbai”**

These days of childhood were flowing at a happy pace and like everyday one such day when I returned home in the evening and went to the room inside the house, I found my father sitting in the room along with my mother.  My eyes beamed at the sight of him. I ran towards him and he picked me up and got me seated on his lap. Having placed me so, he informed me that, he has left Mumbai forever and would never leave us and go anywhere. I couldn’t believe my ears for a while and thought all of it to be a dream but as soon as my mind registered the gravity of the words of my father, I leapt with joy and ran to everyone to inform them of the news. Having done so, I once again walked to my father and hugging him asked him again if what he had told me was true for a final confirmation. He looked into my eyes affectionately and convinced me that he will honestly never leave again. My heart leapt with joy. Every cell of my body was dancing with delight. The same excitement spread throughout our household. Everyone was radiant with inexplicable happiness.

On such a happy occasion my mother never failed to impress us further with her delicious food. Adding to the charm of the day my mother had cooked special dishes too. After eating the delicious food and caressing our filled tummy for a while, we all went to sleep, blissful and contented.

The next day when I woke up, I found father at home and was finally convinced that he would stay with us now at all times for real.

I couldn’t wait to deliver the news to the villagers especially my friends that from then on I will also go with my father to places. When other kids used to go to places with their father, my heart would ache for the same experience and would terribly miss my father. I always used to wish that father could stay with us forever. Then, I would take food for him to the farm and walk back home holding his hand. I would dream many such dreams regarding my father and today I could see all my dreams to be finally coming true. All my siblings were elated too with his coming back. That day I announced it throughout the village that my father is never returning to Mumbai. It was like a dream come true for us to see mom and dad together under the same roof. I started feeling like the whole world’s happiness was in my arms. But in just a few days, all our happiness turned into sorrow and horror.

**The reason for Abbu’s return**:

After a few days of Abbu’s return, the police came to our place and taking him outside started interrogating him. We were all terrified and scared thinking what offense abbu might have made to bring the police after himself. Everyone from the village started gathering around our house, but the police didn’t let anyone come near. No one could understand what was happening. All our family members; bade abbu, choteyabbbu came to our house. My mother was crying her heart out throughout. She had gathered all of us around her and was equally terrified. It was the first time I had ever seen her that afraid.

After a few hours, the police left and immediately the entire village entered into our house and began asking father the reason for their visit and on what matter was he being interrogated on.

Even my uncles began to ask what the matter was. It was then that my father revealed them that the police had come to investigate about his business in Mumbai and his partner there. He convinced everyone that there was nothing to be worried about; the police just have had some misconceptions which they would be coming to clear a few more times. Hearing it, everyone left for their homes and father heaved a sigh of relief. But my mother still looked worried and tensed. While crying, she asked father to tell us the truth and not hide anything from us. She had a hunch that whatever father was narrating was a half-spoken truth.

Then my father revealed a part of the truth. He had faced loss in his business in Mumbai; he had been cheated on by his business partner. Whatever loans they had taken from the bank for the business was under my father’s name and now he had no money to clear these loans. He also owed money to a few money-lenders in Mumbai.

The world crashed on my mother. She gathered all us siblings together and wept for a long time. I was too innocent to understand the whole situation then, but today when I look back at that day, I realize how terrible mother must have felt in that moment. My mother was a very brave woman. She didn’t let any of this affect any of us and managed her emotions well. She knew how happy we were for father’s return. She couldn’t bring herself to ruin our happiness. She thought it best to keep us out of all the chaos.

Father was also much tensed. He had no clue on what to do next. He had no idea about farming. He was the most educated one among all his siblings and had a college degree. I think because of being a graduate,only he could think of going to Mumbai to do a business rather than take up farming and had appointed a man to do the farming. But maybe it was in his destiny to end up doing farming because now he had no other option.

After this episode my father began showing interest in farming. He would accompany Jaishyam to the farm. Jaishyam stayed with us only for a few days. As the days went on, we started deteriorating financially and we started having scarcity of food as well. Father could no longer afford Jaishyam’s wages, due to which he resigned. My father was left all alone to look after the farm. He found it very difficult to handle it all alone but tried to give his best. More than often my mother after being done with her chores would go to the farm to lend him a hand, and all of us kids especially Shakil and I would help him out too.Ruqaiya had to always stay back to look after the younger siblings. Shakil and I used to have a lot of fun, but I especially enjoyed the company of my father. My father disliked my mother’s coming to the farm, and gradually stopped her from doing so. No woman of our stature used to go to a farm and probably my father felt ashamed when his wife had to do so.

After my mother stopped visiting the farm, the entire work load fell on his shoulders once again and it became very difficult for him to handle all the pressure. A lot many times I would bring lunch to my father in the farm and we would eat together. After finishing my lunch, I would return back home while father would return in the evening all tired and exhausted. Despite his exhaustion, he would spend a lot of time with us after coming home.

Working alone and dealing with all the work singe-handed was becoming very challenging for him and the output was also not satisfactory. Our financial conditions further deteriorated. We would not have enough grain in our house to cook meals and my mother had to borrow it from either badiammi or my aunt and then cook it for us. But how long could we live on borrowings. There were times when we would eat only one meal the entire day and our parents probably just passed their day on water.

I still remember those days when father used to bring chocolates for all the kids of the village on his return from Mumbai and a lot of villagers would come dine with us that night. My father loved playing the host. When he had money, he had helped a lot many people and had never asked the money back. Whenever Ruqaiya and I would buy bangles, he would buy it for our friends as well. He was the most extravagant person in the entire village. Maybe for this reason we always had a lot of visitors.

My father had made our house very beautifully and everyone would praise its beauty. But times had changed for us now. It was the same house but it had no visitors like the old days. It’s hard to believe how fast things change. Ruqaiya and I had to drop out of school too even though Ruqaiya was a brilliant student. Our condition kept getting worse with time. Due to scarcity of food at our place, mother would send all of us kids to our aunt’s home. My aunt was elder to my father and used to live near our village. She was very rich. Her husband was very jolly person. He would never mind us visiting him and we too loved staying there. Aunty cooked the best meals for us. She had a huge garden of fruits and we would get to eat a lot of varieties of fruits. My aunt had three children. The eldest son used to live in Delhi, next to him was a daughter who was a bit older to Ruqaiya and the youngest son was younger than me. My aunt’s daughter, Munni became one of our comrades too. When Ruqaiya and I used to go to school, all of us cousins would go together. On our return every time, my aunt would send with us a lot of stuff for home. My aunt was possibly mad at my father for spending all his money in Mumbai, but she had a soft corner for my mother.

Things went on like this for a while and when it was time to harvest and lot of people from the village helped my father sow the seeds. I guess we had a good produce that year and our financial condition improved a bit after that.The dark clouds were clearing from our head gradually. Father custom-made for us new clothes, bought us sweets and we could afford meals three times a day. My mother looked happy too. There was a sense of peace in our home after a long time. All those times of hardship seemed to be ending.

I remember it was the month of Ramdan, Eid was just around the corner. During those days after breaking our fasts in the evening, all of the cousins would go to the mosque with our fathers and everyone would get delicacies from their respective homes. We would munch on these mouth-watering delicacies voraciously. This was my favourite time of the year. I would wake up early for the shehri along with my parents and Ruqaiya, and in the evening would go to the mosque to eat the delicacies. Every day, badeyabbu would call out the azaan and then recite namaz to us.

On the day before Eid, my mother massaged us well with oil and the next day bathed us all extensively. She then clothed us in new clothes and our parents wore new clothes too. We all looked good and felt happy too. My father had prepared delicious sheer khurma and we took it to our badeyabbu and chacha’s home. In return we got Idi from them. All of us had a lot of fun together. It was the time of celebrations and everyone was in a festive mood. It felt really nice to celebrate it with family.

To recite the prayers for Eid, we would go to the eidgah of a nearby town called Biskohar. All people from the nearby villages used to come there only. They would decorate their bullock-carts artistically and would return on them. A huge fair would also be set and we would have a lot of fun. To recite the prayers, the women would have to sit on the other side to where the men sat. In between both the sides, a long veil was outstretched. They were prohibited from sitting together or reciting the prayer in any other circumstances other than this. It was only on the day of Eid that the women from nearby villages could meet each other given the social restrictions on them. It would be a time for re-union between family members as well.

After the ceremony every one of us would return home. I still remember that father had bought us many kinds of sweets and toys that Eid, thus making this Eid by was far the best one for us. What else could we as kids cherish the most other than the petty demands of a child being fulfilled.  Our times were changing and things were taking a turn for the better finally. People from our village and the nearby villages started revisiting our house like before. My father’s hand at farming had improved a lot and Jaishyam had joined back as a help again.

Just when our life was coming on track again, the fateful happened. The police revisited my father and started interrogating him again. This was not like the last time. This time threatened him to pay back the bank’s load or else he would end up behind the bars. They also broke the news to him that due to delayed payment of the loan, with the increasing interest added to it, it had increased to more than thrice the original amount. With this revelation, my father’s mind was blown. My mother also got worried and was scared. It felt like happiness had some troubles with our destinies. We didn’t seem to hold it back for long.

This news tore our world apart. We were heading for times where nothing would anymore be like the old days. My father was clueless on how he would manage to arrange for such a huge amount of money. He started working hard on his farm, mother joined sides with him on the field once again. This time my father couldn’t ask her to stop coming to the farm even if he wanted to do so. Every penny was of worth now.

It was also true that it was impossible to repay the debt only through farming and my father was well aware of this fact. He started stressing over it at all times. He started losing his temper in the mildest of issues. He would scold us over petty things. One day when I returned home after my play-time, I found father dragging my mother outside the house and beating her up mercilessly. She kept on crying all the while. People started gathering around our house and tried pleading with him to stop, but their words fell on deaf ears. He continued beating her. Meanwhile, Ruqaiya, Shakil, Kaneez and I had begun crying too and maybe hearing our sobs, he finally stopped beating her. It was for the first time that we had seen her humiliated in front of the whole village and our father was the one to bring that upon her. That was the first time I felt hatred and terror for him.

Our financial condition began falling again. My mother would try spending as little as she could on the ration and save up as much as she can. Some days we would stay only on one meal. We were facing hard times again, but harder times were ahead. Among all these, I developed blisters on both of my eyes due to which I had difficulty in my vision. My eyes hurt a lot.

My father used to take me to Biskohar for my treatment. It was very far from our village. Due to cash crunch, sometimes we would go to the village on foot. When I would get tired, he would pick me up on his shoulders and keep walking. He had to face a lot of troubles for my treatment. Even after a lot of treatments, my blisters remained uncured and, so he had to take me to the city once in a while for better treatment. Whenever we would go to the city, it would take up the whole day and that day the work on the farm would lag behind. Jaishyam would help a bit but it wasn’t sufficient. My heart would ache whenever I would see my father so tensed. I felt sadder because my treatment had been the cause of his stress and even after the extensive treatment it wasn’t getting cured.

Meanwhile, the police started doing rounds of our house very often and my father started hiding in different places. People who spotted the police’s car from a distance would alert him and he would go into hiding into some or the other home in the village. Sometimes the police would wait for the whole day for my father and keep interrogating my mother regarding my father and his whereabouts. One time before leaving the police informed my mother that if they didn’t find my father on their next visit, all our property would be put to auction. All we siblings also heard his statement. After the police left, my mother started crying inconsolably and gathering all us children around started saying that all our belongings, our house everything would be taken away from us. It was then that I realized that having put to auction meant losing one’s belongings. Mother was terrified by this idea and as soon as father returned home, she narrated the whole episode to him. My parents started remaining stressed and terrified at all times after that. We were too young to share their stress and terror, but all our young minds could register was that our home was no more the haven of peace and happiness.

Then one day, my mother took me and Kaneez along with her and left the home for some relative of hers. Father accompanied us till the bus stand, got us the tickets for our journey and was left behind with Ruqaiya, Shakil and Aadil at home. Ruqaiya stayed behind to take care of the household chores, father and my brothers. I was very elated when I took my seat inside the bus. I always looked forward to travelling to places and this sure was the kind of journey I enjoyed. The relative’s house might have been a long distance from our village because it took us a long time to reach there. I don’t remember how we were related to these relatives of my mother, but they were decent people.

They were very hospitable to us and I think we stayed for a long time at their place. They had a huge house and it was very beautiful. I think they were very rich and that is why my mother had travelled so far to ask them for assistance. I don’t know if they helped us financially but all throughout our stay, they cooked us lavish meals and took us to other relatives living in the same city. Wherever we would go, we would be treated with care and love.  After receiving so much love and hospitality, I didn’t want to go back. I had made friends with all the kids in the house too. But how long could we stay in someone else’s house. The day of our farewell came, and my mother took her leave from all our relatives. We were gifted new clothes by all our relatives. They packed for us a lot of eateries and then seated us on the bus back home.

On our way back home, I started recalling the good days I had spent there and at the same time wondered how the situations would be when we return back home. Would we get full meals, will the police visit again, and do we have to be scared again. All through the way I kept thinking all these things and it was soon time to get down. As soon as we stepped out of the bus we found Abbu waiting for us in the bus stop. He was very happy to see us and embraced me and Kaneez in his arms. It felt like he had missed mother too. Everyone at home was happy at our return too. Their happiness was doubled when mother presented them with gifts we had got from her relative’s home.

As a homecoming treat, my aunt called us over for dinner that night and after taking the dinner, we had a long session of chit chats. I narrated the incidents from my stay at my mother’s relative’s house to my uncle-aunt, their two sons Haaris and Kaashif and their daughter Shabana who was younger than me. I told them about how delicious the food that we ate there was. After enjoying our time at my aunt’s place, we left for home to sleep and then slept a sound sleep that night uncared about the worries and tensions of our lives.

**Arrival of younger Khalu from Murla village**

One day when I returned home after playing, I found chotey khalu at home. He quickly picked me up on his lap and showered me with love. He used to love us a lot and on his every visit got us a lot of food to eat. We always loved his visits to our home. He informed us that khala and their daughter Assam couldn’t accompany him as she didn’t want to miss school. He then added that when he returns this time, he will take me along with him. I was very delighted to hear this. I always wanted to visit khalu’s place and from that day began dreaming about the day I would finally leave for there.

While this news brought immense pleasure to me, Ruqaiya wasn’t that enthusiastic. She told me that she never got the chance to go to places while I always did. I couldn’t disagree with her because it was true indeed. Being the eldest, she always had to stay back and take care of the younger siblings. I don’t remember how many years Ruqaiya was elder to me, but I do remember that khalu was talking about her engagement with my parents. Probably this was the motive behind his visit this time. My parents probably liked the proposal too and they were stressing over the fact that the groom’s family doesn’t demand much dowry for at that time my father was not in a state to pay them much. He still had to get rid of the bank loan from our heads or else we would have to lose our home and property to auction. He used to be immersed in these worries day and night. It was then that khalu assured him of leaving everything up to him including the dowry part and probably the engagement was fixed.

I guess Ruqaiya was around ten years old then and during those times, in our village people would get their daughters engaged by this age and when they would turn fourteen or fifteen, they would be married off. I have no recollection of when Ruqaiya got married but my parents would remain stressed at all times over this matter.

Khalu stayed for a few more days and then taking me along with him came back to his village. Finally, my dream had come true. I parted with my family with a smile on my face. My father used to love me a lot and hence couldn’t bear to stay away from me for a long time. This time before leaving my father had planned on sending me back to school and promised me that he would come soon to take me back with him. I didn’t understand then if I wanted to return back but the thought of staying away from them forever didn’t hold much meaning to me then given my immature age. In that moment I was just happy to visit my khala’s place.

As soon as we reached her place, khala hugged me and then showered me with love. Khala’s only daughter Asma who was a few years younger than me hugged me too and then we went off to play. My heart was filled with happy emotions. I wasn’t missing my family at all. This aunt of mine was my mother’s youngest sister. She had only one eye, her other eye had shut down when she was young. This deformity didn’t seem to affect khala in any way. She was of a very jolly nature and was naughty too. She would indulge in our notorious acts equally and this was the reason we used to love her so much. She never appeared like an adult to us. We always found a friend in her.

It had been only a few days of my stay there when khalu brought the news of my parents, siblings, uncle’s and their kid’s arrival to his house. It was like the cherry on top for me. Both Asma and I got so thrilled with the news that we started running here and there shrieking loudly. Khala was happy too because she would be able to meet both her sisters after a long time. The women got very little opportunities to meet their mother’s side of the family and they waited for such occasions with great enthusiasm. Khalu then told us that their purpose of visit was a grand celebration happening in a nearby village. Back then my only idea of a celebration was of it being like a huge fair which lasted three to four days. The only difference was that in this celebration there would be a lot of talks about the Quran, esteemed Maulvis and highly educated people would come down to discuss about the good points narrated in the Quran and they would encourage young boys and girls to read out from the Quran. All the elders would listen to all of this with great attention while all we kids would be lost in our games.

Finally, it was the day when my entire family from my village came down to khalu’s place at last. The whole house was occupied, and it felt very cozy and exuberant. My mother and her two sisters rebounded with a lot of gossips and would cook food for everyone meanwhile enjoying each other’s company after a long time. In two days the celebration began, and we would go their everyday. Other people from the village would walk with us to the fair and then return with us too on foot. One day while returning from the celebration I got lost in the crowd and started crying loudly. I had never been lost before and when I couldn’t see any known faces around me, I got terrified. After a while, my parents found me and the light in my eyes returned. I was very happy to see them again but my father shouted at me a lot for being so restless and that I keep running here and there unaccompanied. While my father expressed his worry in the form of anger, my mother kept me clutched in her arms all the while without speaking a word. This episode had scared the wits out of her. The thought of losing me forever had shaken her and she was shivering with terror. I felt safe in her arms. This incident had such a great impact on me that it is still etched in my memories.

A few days after the celebration, all of us returned to our village. Immediately after reaching the village, my father began with the farming again. He had not a moments rest and had started working harder with the growing tension of the repayment of debt. The thought of losing the shelter from above our heads was too terrifying for him and he invested all his time to earn the money in all possible ways. Like before, I carried lunch for him every day to the farm but Shakil accompanied me this time. We would take our lunch together under the shadow of a tree and then after playing a bit we would return back home while father continued to work. Sometimes we would wait till the evening and return along with father especially when he would grow peas. I would sit amidst the pea crops and eat them straight from the pods. Sometimes I would stuff them in my pockets and eat them on my way home. My mother made delicious peas pulao which I would love to eat. I can still taste it in my mouth and miss it so much. It reminds me of mother every time I crave for it.

After peas, it would be the time to harvest gram. I loved grams too.  During this harvest, my mother and Ruqaiya along with Kaneez and Aadil would come to the farm to lend a hand. We would work till the evening, then burn a few crops and collect the grams after the fire would extinguish. We would all love eating the grams and used to call it “harbara.” The other villagers used to do the same and sometimes we would all do it together. It used to be a lot of fun when we would all gather and do it together.

During winters, we would collect dry sticks in front of our house in the evening, light it up, sit around it in a circle and enjoy the warmth. This helped us get rid of the cold. We would roast potatoes in this fire and they would taste delicious. A lot of times we would roast eggs and they would taste equally delicious. We then shared stories and would listen to each other keenly. In those moments of warmth and comfort, everything felt very peaceful and calm. The burning fire, the food, the people around it and the conversations had a different charm which is hard to find in the hustle bustle of the city life.

Sometimes these memories would haunt me a lot and I wish those days to come back again and my childhood to return too. Despite of whatever I wish, the truth still stands that those days can never come back but will remain as beautiful memories etched in my heart forever.

**Marriage of my aunt’s elder son, Munna**

As far as I can recall, Munna was the elder son of my aunt. One day she visited us and broke the news of him getting married to us. He was coming down to the village from Delhi to get married. We were all excited with the news especially all us cousins. A marriage meant new clothes for us gifted to us by our aunt and lots of fun and frolic. After staying with us for a while, she went over to badey abbu’s place. She used to spend more of her time at their place since our grandmother used to live with badey abbu. My aunt was the only daughter of my grandmother and hence was the dearest to her. She had three sons other than my aunty; my father, bade abbu and chotey abbu. My aunt was the apple of their eyes but she herself preferred the company of her mother more than the others. Each one of us loved our grandmother dearly and she reciprocated our emotions.

When my aunt informed grandmother of the marriage, she beamed with happiness and distributed jaggery among all of us immediately. After a long time someone was getting married in our family and our happiness was reaching the limits of the sky. My aunt had a lot of arrangements to make and so she rushed in a hurry without eating anything. We didn’t mind it much because the marriage seemed very important to us too at that moment. We started counting our days from the time my aunt left our home and couldn’t seem to be able to wait for it. Then it was finally the wedding day.

We reached our aunt’s place three to four days ahead of the marriage day. There are certain customs prior to marriage which are essential for all the family members to attend. I don’t exactly remember what these rituals were about but I do remember the variety of food we got to eat those three to four days. We enjoyed our food with great fervour.  These meals weren’t cooked by any family member but a cook, because it had to be cooked in large quantities for all the guests. The kids enjoyed the function by indulging themselves in games while the elders busied themselves with fulfilling responsibilities. Finally, it was the day of the wedding, every one of us wore ours new clothes and got ready. After this, a few men and women from our house along with Munna went to the bride’s home. The bride’s house was located in a distant village and hence no kids were taken along.

Even my mother, khala and the others did not go for they were making preparations for the bride’s welcome. We kids were engrossed in making plans of how to steal the groom’s shoes. All the women of the house had decorated the room of the newly-wed couple amazingly. After being done with all the responsibilities, we began waiting for the procession keenly. In the evening, the procession returned with a lot of jibber jabber. Munna was sitting on a horse while the bride was inside a beautifully decorated palanquin. The face of the bride was behind a veil. My mother and khala assisted her out of the palanquin and seated both of them in Munna’s room. We were all very excited to see the face of the bride but there were still a few rituals to be done before we could do so. While the elders were busy with their rituals, my cousins and I were waiting for Munna to open his shoes. As soon as he opened his shoes to enter the room, we grabbed hold of it and hid it immediately. We gave it back to him in return of a lot of money. After a while, they took Munna out of the room and made him sit with the guests while the ritual of showing the face of the bride began which was exclusive for only women and kids. When it was my turn to see her face, I was mesmerized by her astonishing beauty. It was the first time I had seen a bride and it added to my mesmerisation. She would be related to me as my sister-in-law and I was dancing with joy for being related to such a beauty. We kids were so happy to get such a beautiful sister-in-law that we did not want to leave the room. Everyone had to persuade us a lot and when we finally agreed, they sent for Munna to join her in the room. I started insisting to sleep on the same bed with my brother and sister-in-law and mother had to convince me a lot to give up my persistence to which I finally quieted down after a lot of hesitation. The night of the wedding brought a fresh new morning. The guests had started returning to their villages and when it was our turn, everyone was ready to leave but me. I wanted to stay back a little more. This time my mother had to give in to my persistence because my aunt indulged. She convince mother to let me stay behind and finally mother had to let go. I was on cloud nine with the thought of spending some more time with my sister-in-law.

**Stung by a scorpion at aunt’s place**

When all the guests had returned and only I was left back I started receiving a lot of attention from them. Munni and I, my aunt’s daughter who was elder to me would hang around our sister-in-law all day long and she used to adore us equally. She would comb our hair and dress us up every day. I was enjoying the time of my life at their place. There was a huge garden as an extension to the house with a lot of variety of fruits which I loved to munch on. They had fruits like, guava, mango, pomegranate, papaya, etc and we usually ate fruits from this garden only. There was only little need to buy fruits from the market. She used to send us season-fruits whenever it was the time. Since I had access to the garden that time, I would climb on the trees and savour my taste buds with their lustrous juice.

My aunt’s husband was a very decent man. He used to love us a lot and never lost his temper on us. It was my aunt instead who would lose her temper in a few moments. They had been like an anchor in all our hard times. I do not have many recollections of the memories from my stay there, but I vividly remember that my aunt was taller than my uncle. I am not quite sure why I remember this fact, but maybe in my childhood this fact must have held a lot of meaning for me.

Days went by in pure bliss till one night while I was sleeping next to my aunt, something stung my toe. I started shrieking with pain and everyone in the house woke up to check up on me. They carefully dusted all the blankets and just then a scorpion fell on the ground and ran towards the door. My uncle caught it in time and killed it with the blow of a stick. I was in incomprehensible pain and they had no doctor nearby, so in the darkness of the night my uncle lifted me on his shoulders and took me to my home. He also let Munna accompany us.

When we reached my home, it scared the wits out of my parents to receive me in such a condition. I was in excruciating pain which now appeared to be extending further towards my leg with the spreading of the poison.  My uncle quickly made my father understand the whole situation by suggesting that I might have got stung by a scorpion and the poison might be spreading. My father ran immediately and fetched the village doctor. The doctor took charge of my toe as soon as he entered by fastening it tightly with a cloth. He kept applying something or the other on my toe. After a while, the pain subsided, but it took the whole night. I kept crying throughout the night and seeing me cry my mother, Ruqaiya and the others also began to cry.

My father kept me clutched in his arms while the doctor tried to get the poison out of my system all night. With the break of the dawn, the pain in my foot calmed down and the doctor declared me out of danger. A lot of people and my entire family had gathered in our house by now. Everyone was concerned about my safety and when I was declared out of danger they hugged me, wept and thanked God. My uncle had been so terrified that only when he made sure I was all fine did he heave a sigh of relief. When I recovered fully by the afternoon, only then uncle and Munna returned to their home.

This episode didn’t work in favour of me much. It had scared everyone to such extremes that my father explicitly told me that further he won’t ever allow me to stay at any relative’s. After recovering fully, I was back to my mischief once again. I took up activities like climbing the trees, hopping around, taking the goats for grazing with the other kids, and playing in the pond with a lot of kids. Till the time I would reach my home, I would be dripping with water and a few times would have to be subjected to the thrashings from my mother too. I loved my cows, sheep and the goats and loved to take care of them. I recall an episode where on one particular day of the rainy month, it was raining heavily. Due to the heavy pouring, we couldn’t take our goats for grazing and they were crying in hunger. I couldn’t bear their pain and felt like crying myself thence I insisted my father to get them leaves from the nearby tree and forced him to go out in such a stormy weather to fetch it.  My father obliged and brought the leaves in spite of the storm. One of the goats had a small kid that I was extremely bonded to. On Bakri-Eid, without informing me, my father sacrificed that goat and when I got the news of it, I broke down into a fit and no one could console me. I did not even dine the festive food and made a firm decision to turn into a vegetarian from that day. My parents tried to cheer me up a lot and when I wouldn’t let go, my father got me a puppy from no one knows where. I got really attached to the puppy. It became my constant companion and during the night he would climb into our beds and sleep amidst us, but my mother would shoot him away always.

One such day, when he was entertaining us with his annoying habits my mother quite unusually hit him hard and sent him away.

I too ran after the dog and all of a sudden bumped into the door and fell on my hands, fracturing my left hand consequently. Although the dog was in no way responsible for this, my father took him back to where he had brought it from. After that he fetched an orthopaedic from an outside village. The doctor planked my hand for a month due to which I was unable to do any work and had to depend on others for even nominal of activities. Everyone in the house took up the job of taking care of me especially my father who took extra care.  Incidents like this kept happening and each time I would become an extra headache. I would curse myself for causing so much trouble to them. The reason for a lot of their worries was me. Ruqaiya had never caused any nuisance neither had Shakil, Kaneez and Aadil were kids so they couldn’t have possibly been that notorious. I was the only trouble-maker. The villagers would intentionally tease me telling me that Ruqaiya and Babban were better kids than I and that I, Butta was very mischievous. I would get agitated on their remarks and they would tease me further to add to my agitation.

I remember this one time; I had gotten so mad that I went on a hunger-strike.  Mother tried to console me but I stayed my grounds. It was only when my father made me eat with his own hands that I broke my fast. People would call me the elephant’s teeth and I would fight with all of them. I used to think that Ruqaiya and Shakil were the favoured ones and everyone disliked me. But people used to like my archness, especially bade abbu. I was so dear to him that no one could ever dare to comment anything on me around him. Whenever bade abbu used to teach us Quran in the mosque or taught counting and tables to the kids by lining them in a queue, I would sit right next to him while the others had to stand. I owe my excellence in studies to him, especially in Maths. It was he who had helped me and Ruqaiya join back school. Ruqaiya was the topper of the school and was very talented.

How innocent I was back then. Looking back to those days makes me feel warm inside. I wish I could relive those days just one more time.

**“The visit of my Khala from Bombay”**

Our vacations had just started when my grandmother got very sick and was taken to chachu’s place since she wanted to spend her final days with him. Five to six days after that, she passed away in peace. All we kids were heartbroken with her passing away. We cried inconsolably for a long time and would sometimes sneak out to her graveyard and cry there. We would complain to her about a lot of things and somehow felt relieved imagining that she could hear us from beneath the grave.

After a few days of grandmother’s funeral, my mother’s eldest sister from Bombay came down to visit us with her two daughters. She was my mother’s step-sister but they loved each other like blood sisters. This aunt was huge in built and was of a wheatish complexion. She looked a bit scary by her appearance. She had ten kids, six daughters and four sons. She had accompanied her youngest daughters to our place. The elder one, Laila was of my age while the other one whose name was Jahida was younger.

My aunt stayed for around four to five days and meanwhile her two daughters had mixed with us well. They had come to a village for the first time and were fascinated by our lifestyle out here. I bonded with them really strongly. It was by this time that the infection in my eyes grew again. My aunt offered to take me to Bombay to get me cured and also to teach me tailoring. I felt like my aunt was trying to help us given the circumstances of our household probably narrated to her by my mother. She perhaps was trying to help my parents by taking one load off their heads and she had chosen me. I was resistant at first, but then my mother convinced me that if I go with my aunt, my eyes would be properly treated and by learning to stitch I would be able to use that in helping my younger siblings. This was enough to convince me. All I could think of was a better future for them. I had one selfish motive as well, I wanted to visit Mumbai. I was so thrilled to go to Mumbai that I was completely oblivious of the fact that as soon as I leave, I would leave behind my whole childhood in that village forever and would have to bid farewell to all my friends. In that moment I was least bothered about these things, I was just waiting to see the new city.

My mother hid this news from my father because I was very dear to him. He would never agree to send me to Mumbai at any cost. A father’s heart can never bear the pain of being separated from his daughter, ever.

The day when khala was about to return, my father was not at home. My mother hurriedly got me ready and along with all my siblings, she, chachi and a few other people accompanied us till the bus-stop. Soon the bus arrived and while I was climbing in, my mother explained everything to me one last time and made me assure her that I wouldn’t cause any trouble to khala or give her reasons to complain. The bus left after a while and I kept waving at them till I could only see their silhouettes and then nothing.

As the bus was proceeding, I could feel a strange sensation in my heart. I was both happy and scared at the same time. I was scared of going away from my parents, getting separated from my siblings and at the same time felt happy for the new places I would visit in Mumbai. My heart was in a very strange state. I was totally oblivious to the fact then that it was the last time I would ever see my family, friends and my village. The thought of not being able to meet my father before leaving was troubling me but nothing could be done anymore. Laila was trying to console me by sharing with me stories of Mumbai and I don’t know when I dozed off while talking.

Khala had to make a stop at her in-law’s house before we went to her home in Bombay. I don’t exactly know how far her brother-in-law’s house was from our village but it had to be at least six hours away because when we had boarded the bus it was afternoon and when we got down it was already dark. As soon as we reached their place, after freshening up we sat for our dinner. I was the topic of discussion throughout the afternoon and all these unknown faces staring at me made me long for my home badly. I couldn’t express my desires to anyone even though I was dying to cry on the inside.

Khala’s family was very hospitable and they took a lot of care of me. Gradually, I started liking it there and started playing with all the kids there. I guess now it was almost time to leave because Khala had begun packing the bags. A lot of people would come to meet her there and they would invite her to dinner at their place too. Although I had adjusted into the new surroundings, I still missed my family and longed to see them every day.

A day before Khala was about to leave her in-laws house for Mumbai, my father and Haaris, younger uncle’s elder son came to visit me. On the sight of my father, I ran towards him and clutched him in my arms. I was thrilled to see them. Haaris informed me that everyone back at home missed me a lot. I wanted to tell him that I missed them too but I didn’t. Father asked me if I wanted to go to Mumbai otherwise he will take me back home. My father didn’t want me to go to Khala’s house in Mumbai probably because during his stay in Mumbai, he had had stayed at her place and knew that I wouldn’t get the ambience of the village there. He knew how much I loved spending my time playing in the village and the city wouldn’t allow me that freedom. There was another reason that he had travelled this far just to meet me and change my mind, he loved me for dear life and couldn’t bear to part with me, but my decision was unshakable. I had drank the idea of going to Mumbai like an elixir and wasn’t ready to part with it.

My Khala tried to make my father understand that, Mumbai would be a really nice opportunity for me. She would get my eyes treated with the best doctors, admit me into a school, teach me tailoring and then send me back to my home when I became efficient. Through promises of a bright future, Khala was able to convince my father. He made me sit by his side for a long time and directed me to behave like a decent child in her house and not leave the house unescorted. Taking out some money from his pockets, he handed it to me and told me to buy chocolates from it if ever I had any craving for it. I denied the money and even Khala assured him that there was no need of any money since she will take full care of me. She knew how much in dire need of money my father was then. Even Haaris didn’t want me to go but the decision had already been made. They chatted with us for a while and then left for the village. After their departure I began longing to go back home but it was too late. My father had already left and no one from my Khala’s village could drop me back. It tore my heart into numerous pieces, but I consoled myself.

The next day, Khala got me and her two daughters ready and then her brother-in-law along with a few members from the family accompanied us to the Lucknow railway station. To reach Mumbai we had to board a train from this station. I remained mesmerized at the sight of the station and the trains. It was the first time I had seen either of them and the only thing I could think of was if my siblings and other people from the village could see the station and the trains as well.

I had already made up my mind that when I return to the village I would tell them about the trains and narrate to them numerous stories from my experience in the city. The least did I know then that this would remain just a wishful thinking.

I was engrossed in my thoughts when the train left the station. I was sitting by the window side along with Laila and as the train moved forward my heart paced faster. While I was thrilled with the thought of visiting the city, I was sad at the same time for being miles apart from my family. I was in a confused state of mind and couldn’t interpret if I was sad or happy.

The train journey was enthralling and I think it took us two days to cover the distance from Lucknow to Mumbai. On the third day we reached Mumbai. With the approach of the V.T station of Mumbai, Laila started narrating to me a lot of stories about the city. Her stories made me extremely keyed up to visit all the places she had been telling me about and see them in person.

Leaving the station, we boarded a taxi home. Throughout the way home from the station, I kept staring out of the window. A whole new world had opened up for me. The sight of the different vehicles I had never seen before in my village, the tall buildings, the overcrowded streets, everything caught my attention. The setting of my village was in stark contrast to the city. I was completely awed by the sight and had a lot of questions running in my head but couldn’t muster up the courage to bring them to my lips. I think probably everyone else understood my thrill too and hence didn’t disturb my little expedition. In a very loving manner, Khalu told me that cities are different from the villages and I would gradually learn everything about the city life. This enthralled me even more.

The taxi finally reached Khala’s place and as soon as I got out of the car, Laila held me by my hand and took me inside the house. Her neighbours came out to meet Khala and on spotting me, began enquiring about me. Khala then introduced me to everyone and told them whose daughter I was. A lot of people already knew my father since he regularly visited her when he was staying in Mumbai. They seemed to like me.

Khala had another daughter, Meher the talk of whose marriage was under progress. I had heard Khala discuss about the matter with her brother-in-law. Meher was very beautiful and sweet. She very lovingly hugged me and talked to me a lot. I liked her instantly.

**Beginning of a new life in Mumbai.**

On the night of the day we arrived in Mumbai, I started missing my family terribly and broke into loud sobs. No one got a good night’s sleep because of my crying that night. Everyone tried to console me saying that in a few days everything would be fine, and then Khala would take me to a doctor, get my eyes treated and then take me back to my village when my eyes get cured completely. After a lot of persuasion, I finally slept that night. I don’t know why I was engulfed with a weird kind of fear. I was missing my parents overwhelmingly and while thinking about them dozed off.

The next morning when I woke up, everything looked very unfamiliar. The strangest thing was the queue we had to stand in to use the public toilet. Laila took me to the toilet and there was a long queue already. I was disgusted while standing in the queue only and didn’t know how I would deal with it when my turn would come. In the village, we went to the farm for our bowels and urination and it never smelled, but this place smelled horribly. When our turn came, Laila went in first and asked me to stand outside. After she was done, she sent me inside. I was clueless on how to deal with the situation then, but cleaning my bowel system was necessary too, so I went inside hesitatingly and got over with it quickly. This first experience of the city life and the thought of having to repeat the same ordeal everyday till my stay at Khala’s place, made me weepy.

The next new thing that I learnt about the habits of a city dweller was their breakfast routine. Instead of chapatti and curry, people there, consumed either bread butter or bun butter along with tea. This was very difficult for me but to satiate my hunger I had to eat it. Everything was very different here. Back in my village we would pluck fresh vegetable and mother would make hot chapattis with it whereas here everything had to be bought and it didn’t even taste that well. I convinced myself that I have to get habituated to their way of living since I had no other option. With a lot of resistance, I was trying to blend in gradually.

**The treatment of my eyes.**

After two to three days of our arrival, Khala took me to a renowned government hospital, K.I.M. There were numerous doctors there for different diseases and after running here and there for a while, Khala booked an appointment with an oncologist. We had to wait for an hour or two till our turn came and then we went inside.

The doctor for a long time inspected my eyes with a torch and then asked Khala to get particular blood tests done. He wrote them down for us. He asked us to come back with the reports. Khala took me to the blood testing department of the same hospital where the sister used a syringe to draw my blood into a small bottle from my arm. She informed us that the reports would come after a few days after which we returned home. The visit to the hospital took up half of the day and while I was very happy after visiting the hospital, Khala was very tired. She was a bit on the heavier side which fatigued her and caused difficulty in walking but even then she was quite active. It was in her nature to complete the task as soon as possible and not procrastinate. Even after being a mother of ten children, she was full of zip and never showed any signs of lethargy.

After four to five days we visited the hospital again and went to the doctor with the blood reports. The doctor inferred from the reports that I had a deficiency of certain vitamin due to which my body tends to develop boils in my eyes. The doctor prescribed me a capsule and an ointment to apply in my eyes. He asked me to visit him after two weeks when my dose of the capsules got over. He assured Khala that there was nothing to be worried about and my eyes would be fine in a few days. The doctor was true to his words, in two weeks my eyes fully recovered and we visited the doctor as instructed. After checking my eyes, the doctor declared me completely cured. His words fell like elixir on my ears. I thought that now that my eyes were treated Khala would send me back to my village as promised. I would reunite with my family and narrate to them exaggerated stories of Mumbai. On my way from the hospital to home, I kept thinking about the things I would say to my siblings and parents once I returned. As soon as I reached home, I told everyone that now my eyes were fine and that I can return to my village. I was overcome with a sense of thrill while informing them this. Just then Khala told me to stay back for the year because there was no one right now to take me back and when the vacations start in school the next year, she would take me to the village.

She also told me that she would get me admitted to the school her kids went to.

She also told me that according to my mother’s wish she will teach me how to sew and added that she had not enough money to pay for my travelling expenses then. She reasoned with me that if I return after learning stitching, I would be a financial support to my parents and it will help me personally as well. I couldn’t disagree with her and silently went and sat in a corner. It felt like the time had stopped and I was numb, my mind had stopped working. On one hand I desperately wanted to go back home and hug my mother while on the other hand, Khala’s words echoed in my ears. My mother also wanted me to learn tailoring, I couldn’t deny that. I was in a flux and didn’t know what to do. It was quite evident that Khala wasn’t sending me back this year. My hopes began to fade away and I thought if I were a bird I could fly off to my home that moment itself without a second thought. I couldn’t sleep that night. The thought of not being able to meet my family for a year was eating me up and I secretly kept sobbing the whole night.

**“My admission in school”**

The next day Khala took me to her kids’ school and got me enrolled in the third standard. It was a three-storied government school. The three floors were divided based on the dialect in which they taught. The first floor was for Marathi, the second for Hindi and the third for Urdu. All her kids and now me were on the third floor. Laila was in standard four, Jahida in the second and her younger son, Sami who was elder than Laila, probably in seven. Meher didn’t go to school and I had no idea till what standard was she educated. Elder to Meher was another brother who used to work in a factory whose name was Mohammad Nadeem. Her other two sons were already married and used to stay afar from Khala. The other three daughters had also been married off to different cities. So, including me, only the four of us went to school.

Being a government school, it charged no fees and the books were free too. Since I joined late I didn’t get all the books, just a few ones. All the other books were already given out to the other students. The teacher had asked me to buy the rest of the books from the market and also to get a uniform. He also asked me to buy a school bag, pencil, eraser and a geometry box.

The teacher noted down the list of the things to be bought and handed it to Khala.

The next day along with the other three kids I got ready for school. They had put on uniforms whereas I would go in casual clothes since I didn’t have one yet. For the school bag I had a plastic stuffed with the books I had got from school and a pencil that Laila had given me. We left for school on foot. I guess it took us 15 to 20 minutes to reach the school.

Laila and Jahida had a lot of friends already but since I had joined late, I had no one to talk to. I would feel very lonely and miss my friends back in the village. On my first day, the teacher introduced me to the class by announcing my name and telling them that I had come from a village and was new to the city. The teacher then asked them to behave well with me and help me out with the studies. He then took me and seated me beside a girl.

I was already feeling a fish out of water and when the class started, I couldn’t make out the head or tail of it and felt at a loss. Their way of teaching was way different than the village and hence I was unable to catch up. A few days went by in this manner only and I was still trying to adjust. Khala was yet to buy me the uniform and the rest of the books. Initially no one objected to me not wearing the uniform but soon the teachers began to ask me to wear a uniform else I wouldn’t be allowed in the class. Around two months passed in this ordeal only. I would sometimes tell khala what the teacher had asked me to do but she still didn’t buy it. Each time she would tell me she didn’t have the money to buy it then. I began feeling ashamed of going to school. I would have to face humiliation in front of the whole class everyday for not wearing the uniform and also for the books. When I have had enough of it, I declared one day that I would not continue schooling anymore but learn tailoring. Khala readily agreed to it and no one else tried to stop me from dropping out of school and explain to me its consequences.

**The advent of my tailoring schooling.**

Instantly after dropping out of school, Khala asked Meher to teach me the nominal stitching they did. Meher took up the job and it didn’t take me long enough to learn the skill. All of their kids had their own share of tailoring to do, distributed by Khala and each one had to do it on their own. Initially, she would give me a few things to stitch but when she realized that I was really skilled at it, she began loading me with more work. I never objected to it and would do all my work within a very less amount of time.

Apart from stitching, she began making me do other chores as well. Every morning, Meher and Sami would wake up at 4.30 and go to fetch bottles of milk. They would then distribute it in houses. They earned really well through this business because a lot of people bought milk from them. Now I began accompanying Meher every day. I would feel lethargic to wake up at 4 in the morning but I had no say in it. The bottles of milk would be really heavy and I would face a lot of difficulty in carrying them but I had no other choice. The milk centre was far from our place and we had to walk till there. She started sending me to deliver the bottles and then collect them back from the houses in the evening as well so that they can be used to deliver the next day’s milk. I would now stitch, run the milk errand and other chores as well. Everyone seemed to be happy with me learning the chores so quickly especially the kids since now they had to work less.

Sometimes I would go to play outside with Laila and Fahmida in the evening but would return early for the fear of Khala. Beside the place where we used to go to play was a huge warehouse of dried fish and later Laila informed me that it was my father’s when he used to live here. Whenever we would go to play there, on the sight of the warehouse I would start missing my father terribly and then I stopped going there to play.

Gradually they started talking about my father and Khala would talk about how good a man he was and how well his business was but he had wasted it all away by trusting other people. Their words would pierce through my heart and I strongly determined it in my heart that I will earn a lot of money and repay all of my father’s debt.

**Meher’s wedding**

Meher’s wedding had been fixed and the groom was from Mumbai only. She was quite lucky in this regard because her other three sisters had been married off to far away villages. The wedding preparations had already begun in the house. Rabab appa and her husband who we used to refer as Juju had come down from their village a few days before the wedding. I was meeting her for the first time. She was very beautiful too and was the most favoured daughter of Khala and Khalu. She was very efficient especially in terms of tailoring. She was only endowed with the job to stitch the wedding clothes for us.

One day, Khala sent all of us along with Rabab Appa and jiju to the market to buy clothes and shoes. This was the first time I was visiting a market far from Khala’s place. This market was called the Bhendi  Bazar. I was instantly taken by the charm and hub of the place. So many different types of clothes, shoes, bangles, earrings, everything amazed me. Apa bought us really nice clothes to stitch, sandals and earrings. Throughout our visit Laila acted like my tour guide. She told me everything about the market and after been done with our shopping we returned home. Even after returning home, the memories of the market stayed with me for a long time.

The next day, aapa began with stitching the clothes and soon we all had beautiful garments to wear on the wedding day. Meher’s wedding dress also came from the tailor and soon the day of her wedding came. She looked mesmerized in her wedding attire and the ornaments and make-up they put on her. It was a special day for her and it was made sure she looked special too. We wore our new clothes too and Aapa got all of us ready. I was very happy with my dress; Aapa had very marvelously stitched it. Everyone else around me complimented me a lot which made me feel even more beautiful and elated.

After being done with all the arrangements for the day, we began waiting for the groom to come and finally they came in the evening. The altar was set outside the home and it was decorated with bright lights. The groom was made to sit in a beautiful chair on the altar and his mother along with the priest and a few other elder members of the family came to Meher. Meher was made to sit in a different room where Khala and Khalu were also present. The marriage began and Meher was asked if she consented to the marriage. From behind the veil, in a very soft voice Meher consented. Right after she consented, everyone congratulated everyone and then dinner was served. After a lot of celebrations, came the time for us to bid farewell to Meher. Khala, Apa, Meher and the other relatives cried a lot while parting which got all of us very emotional. I couldn’t bring myself to cry maybe because I was too young to understand the pain or maybe because I wasn’t that close to her. They kept hugging Meher while congratulating her for her new life and finally the groom’s family took her with them. Everyone was too tired after the wedding and the emotional breakdown and we all retired early that night.

**The shift of responsibilities to my shoulders**

In a day or two, after the wedding the guests began to leave. Both the elder sons of Khala had come along with their wives for the wedding and they left the next day itself. They didn’t stay with Khala. Rabab Aapa also shifted to their rented house after the wedding. Rabab Aapa’s husband used to work in Mumbai only but they didn’t stay with Khala. A few days after the wedding they too left.

After Meher’s wedding, the house would appear to be missing of something all the time. After all the kids and Mohammad Nadeem brother used to go their own ways in the morning, Meher and I would spend all the time together. Now with her gone, I started feeling very lonely. All throughout the day, only khala-khalu and I would be left at home. The kids went to school and Ali bhai to work. Khalu used to remain sick all the time; hence Khala had taken upon herself all the responsibilities of the home. Beginning with the tailoring business, the milk business and a few rented houses, she would look after everything and thus earn money through it. She had skills of an efficient businessman and her efficiency was known to everyone in Pratap Nagar. People respected her a lot for her talent.

After Meher’s wedding, I was left with no one to share my work with. Initially Khala would accompany me to fetch the milk bottles and deliver them but gradually she pushed all the responsibilities on my shoulders. I started taking care of the entire business from fetching the milk bottles in the morning to keeping the accounts up to date. My stitching load increased too and I would help in the household works as well. I would wake up early in the morning and then go to bed till late at night. I wasn’t left with any time to go to play or even talk to Laila. When she returned from school, I would be engrossed in my tailoring and when I would be free, Laila and Sami would be doing their own share of stitching and would run away to play as soon as they would be done with it. I had to complete their unfinished work as well.

Gradually, I started looking after the entire household except for the cooking part which Khala had to do. Khala and Khalu, both were very pleased with my work. Sometimes it would lead me to wonder, how I was able to work so much here when back in my village I would spend my days playing outside. Ruqaiya would help mother in the chores but I never shared any responsibilities and here in khala’s place, I was responsible for all the chores. What tricks destiny plays!

As the days went by, I was getting more skilled at my duties and while handling the accounts had learnt to mess with it. Whenever I would go on my errands, I would buy myself food from the money I would earn especially eggs and banana. I loved eating eggs and it was my favourite dish but here in Mumbai I never got to eat them. So now when I was in complete charge I would satiate my stomach with my cravings using that money.

When Khala would question me about the deficit in the total, I would make excuses like someone paid less for the milk that day and that they will pay for it the next time. Khala would believe me and the next day I would ask any of the houses for an advance due to some crisis and when they would agree, I would present this money to Khala as the money which was due. Thus, very cleverly, I started sabotaging the accounts and no one could smell it.

Due to eating a lot of eggs and bananas, my health improved. People started noticing and complimenting me for my health. A priest used to come to our home to recite the Quran and even he started telling Khala that I have become very healthy and was even more skilled in reading the Quran than her other kids. I got well-versed with Quran in just a couple of days and could fluently recite the Siparey. The priest developed a keen interest in me since I grabbed hold of the content instantly. Sami didn’t like to study Quran and Laila and Jahida weren’t good in studies either, so the priest would put me as an example and ask them to be like me.  This agitated Sami a lot and he started messing around me to get me scolded. Their other son who worked in a factory was a botherance to khalu too. He was an alcoholic and every other day would not return the whole night thus ruining everyone’s sleep. He was a truant at work too. He would cause a lot of chaos in the house and would send Khalu to such a fit of rage that he would mercilessly beat him up sometimes. During those times only Khala could save him from Khalu’s wrath but he never improved. All four of their sons were of no financial assistance to Khala and Khalu and Khalu had no expectations from them either. Both the older sons lived in a rented house after marriage and would come to Khala once in a while for money. The only support which Khala and Khalu had was their daughters. They were very nice. After Meher’s marriage, Khala could be tension-free for a couple of years since Laila was too young then to get married. They had plans to arrange my marriage with Sami when I was of the right age and had written a letter to my abbu as well concerning this. But I didn’t want to get married to Sami. I didn’t like him and he wasn’t fond of me either.

**Letter from Abbu**

Abbu wrote two letters. One addressed to me and the other to Khala and Khalu. Khalu read aloud the letter and informed that back at home everyone missed me a lot and they wanted someone to take me back to my village. There was also a mention of badey abbu being in a very critical state and wanted to meet me. Hearing of bade abbu’s health my heart broke and I wanted to return home as soon as possible. I asked Khala to send me back home but she didn’t want to send me as soon as possible. She told me that she will take me along with her when she visits the village. I couldn’t do anything even when I wanted to run back home. No one in their house wanted me to leave early and it tore my heart. Khalu brought me closer to him and very lovingly reasoned with me that it wasn’t possible for them to send me back that year but they will do so in the next year. He also added that when I was of the right age, they would marry me to Sami and then bring me back to their home forever. I didn’t reply anything to him and listened to him quietly. With Khalu’s this declaration, Laila began teasing me with me being her soon to be sister-in-law and Sami started imposing himself on him. He told me that since he was going to be my husband, I was obliged to follow all his directions and orders. I hated all of this from the core of my heart. The only thing I was looking forward to was returning home.

Within a few days of receiving the first letter, we received another letter from Abbu which mentioned my badey abbu’s passing away. Before passing away, badey abbu missed me immensely. With this news, my heart exploded and I cried inconsolably for hours. Memories of him didn’t leave my thoughts even for a second for the next few days. My heart would ache at the thought of never ever being able to meet my badey abbu again. Little did I know then, that the same fate was awaited with the rest of my family too. Life seemed to return to the old pace once again, but in my heart I hoped of returning to my family as soon as possible.

**“Detection of Laila’s TB”**

Laila had caught a very bad cough since a few days and she had grown very weak too. Initially, she was prescribed a medicine for cold by a doctor whose clinic was close to our home but when her coughing didn’t stop even after taking the medicine and Jahida caught the cough too, Khala took them both to the Kasturbai hospital which was a huge government hospital.

The doctor prescribed them an X-ray for their chest and some blood tests. Khala brought them back home after getting all the tests done. The reports would come after a few days.

Meanwhile, Khala asked Rabab Aapa and her husband to live with us for a few days. A lot of tailoring work would be left pending and I wasn’t able to look after everything. There was too much already on my plate and now Laila and Jahida’s share of work too. Khala was also very tired of all this. Rabab Aapa took the responsibilities of cooking and tailoring as soon as she shifted. Other than that, all the other responsibilities were still mine like the milk delivery business.

After a few days, Khala took Laila and Jahida to the hospital to collect the reports and meet with the doctor and she took me along with her. Rabab Aapa had advised her to do so. The doctor deduced that Laila had T.B while Jahida was suffering from the same but on a lower scale. Khala was frightened with this news. But the doctor assured her that with proper food, timely medicine and regular follow-ups with the doctor, they would be healthy in just a few days. The doctor then took interest in me and asked Khala if I were her daughter to which she informed him that I was her sister’s daughter. The doctor then advised Khala to get my Blood test and X-ray done too since this disease was communicable. Khala followed his instructions and by God’s grace I was in a very healthy state. The doctor commented on my fitness.

Laila and Jahida didn’t take their meals properly and their health kept deteriorating. They started bunking out of school more than often now and I had to take upon their left over work of tailoring as well. I never complained to all this over burden of work. Rabab Appa began teaching me how to stitch Sal wars. I began taking these lessons with utmost interest with only one thought at the back of my mind that when I go back home, I will stitch clothes for all the ladies of my family. This thought motivated me to do all my work with complete dedication. I would finish all the other household chores as soon as possible and then Apa would teach me stitching with whatever time I was left with. In a short period of time, I could stitch the garments but still didn’t know how to take the measurements and then cut the cloth according to the measurements. I would insist Apa to teach me that but every time she would tell me that it would take time to learn. So, I had to let go.

**“The truth exposed”**

I was still going on with the little scam that I was operating on Khala with the milk-delivery money. I had managed to keep it a secret for a long time. Now along with eggs and bananas I started eating Malpua and Lassi too. Due to my growing greed for food, I had to now scam more money. With a huge amount of money in question, it started catching Khala’s observation. She began interrogating me on the deficit in money and asked me harshly that how was it possible that every day someone or the else was taking milk on loan. She asked me sternly not to do so anymore and also warn the people that if they do so further, she would stop supply off milk to their houses. Khala had enough of the loans.

I got very frightened. When I went to the houses to ask them for an advance they denied it on my face and I was in a great mess. I couldn’t think of any way to get myself out of this. From among the houses where I used to go to deliver the milks was the house of a taxi-driver. Every morning he would leave the door of his house open. He lived with his wife and a kid. So that the kid doesn’t get disturbed by my knocking, he left the door open and I was directed to quietly slide through the door, keep the milk bottle and leave.

The driver used to hang his coat behind the door and suddenly it struck me. I planned on lifting money from his shirt and thought that I would do it so discreetly that he wouldn’t be able to notice. So the next day I went to his house. With trembling hands, I put it inside the pocket of the coat and from a stack of notes took out one note and quickly ran away. All the while my heart was pounding with fear. That day itself, after collecting the money from the houses, I added that note to the money too and handed it to khala saying that this was the advance that that particular house had returned that day. Just when I thought I had got past this, that very day itself, someone informed khala that I keep asking for an advance and they would like to know the reason behind it. Khala was shocked to hear that and asked me if it was true, out of fear I didn’t say anything. The next day Khala asked Sami to accompany me the time when I went to collect the money, and directed him to ask everyone whether they had given me any money in advance or not. Sami found this as an opportunity to agitate me further.

Throughout the way home I kept pleading with Sami to not tell Khala anything but he was more than happy to get me into trouble. He was happy for the fact that the tables had turned and for a change I would get beaten up instead of him who got beaten up every day for being a snob. The truth was in front of him once we started visiting the houses and he narrated everything to Khala on our return. There was still some money left to be adjusted into the money I owed to Khala. Khala inquired me about the money due and I lied that the taxi-driver didn’t pay and would be paying the next day. I had made up my mind that the next day when I go to deliver the milk bottle to the taxi-driver’s home, I will once again steal some money from his pocket and present it to Khala as the overdue money and the whole matter would resolve. I also determined that that was the last day to all of this and I will never eat anything from outside anymore. All of this could only be possible due to Sami’s irresponsibility. By the time we had reached the taxi-driver’s place, it was already Sami’s play-time and he had left, thus saving me from Khala’s wrath. That night Khala bickered on me a lot and I couldn’t even object to it because it was justified. She told me that Sami would collect the money from then on and I would just collect and deliver the bottles. This made me very happy because I owed only a little money to Khala which I would arrange tomorrow and then I wouldn’t be answerable to her for anything.

If only destiny worked in my favour. The next day when I went to lift money from the taxi-driver’s home the way I had lifted earlier, his wife woke up just in time. She saw me with my hands inside her husband’s hung coat. She asked me the reason for it and having no answer to present I ran as fast as possible out of fear. I was afraid of coming back home too but somehow mustered up the courage and came back home and didn’t share this with anyone. All the while a cloud of storms was erupting in my heart. I was very perplexed and kept thinking about my fate if the taxi-driver tells Khala about catching me stealing money from his pocket red-handedly. I was wondering how Khala would react to it and somehow if it reaches my parent’s ears, how would I be able to face them.

At around 10 or 11 in the morning, the taxi driver along with his wife came to meet Khala. The sight of them sent me into a deep pit. They did exactly what I had feared all this while. They informed Khala about my robbery. That was a black day for me. Mohammad Nadeem was at home too. As soon as Khala got the news, she placed numerous slaps on my face and abused me a lot in front of everyone. She didn’t even wait to take the matter indoors and started the show outside only for everyone to see. People started gathering around us and Khala kept shouting that I was a thief and my father was a thief too. People tried to calm her down and reason with her saying that I was young and it might just be an innocent mistake but Khala was very mad and she had reasons to be mad too. I had the realisation that I had committed a sin and Khala’s reaction was justified since I was her responsibility. After everyone left, Khala kept taunting me. She told me that I had muddied their name and that she would send me back to my village as soon as possible after this. She would inform my parents about my doing too and it being the reason for my return. Her words crushed my soul. I couldn’t think of facing my parents after what I had done. How would they react to their daughter being a thief? I couldn’t even complete my mother’s dream of learning tailoring. All these thoughts kept me captive and now I was afraid to go back to my village. All these days I couldn’t wait to g back home and today when the opportunity had come to me itself, the situation was such that I never wanted to go back to my village and face my family.

When Khala was done with her bickering, Mohammad Nadeem started beating me up. Khalu tried to stop him but he kept beating me up. He tied my legs and hung me upside down for a long time repeatedly asking me if I would ever repeat my mistake. He humiliated me in front of everyone. I wanted to die in the moment. The only one who was affected by all this was Laila. She quietly asked me why hadn’t shared the truth with her. I couldn’t answer her. After getting beaten up so mercilessly and for the defamation, I was numb and couldn’t feel anything. Everyone took their lunch except me. No one even bothered to ask me to eat maybe because not eating was a part of the punishment too. After lunch, Khala-Khalu left for somewhere, Mohammad Nadeem and Sami left too, Laila and Jahida went off to sleep and Rabab Aapa went to the room to recite the prayer. I was sitting all by myself when suddenly the thought of running away crossed my mind and without giving it a second thought and without any proper planning, I picked up my sandals and ran out of the house. After running for a while, I reached an aunt’s place who used to adore me a lot and asked 5 rupees from her. I told her that I needed it to buy something. She gave me the money and I straight away went to the bus stop. I took the same bus we had taken along with Rabab Aapa when we had gone shopping. I boarded the same bus and asked the conductor a ticket for the last stop. I had noticed Aapa doing the same and it had brought us to Bhendi bazaar. Laila had told me the name of the stop and that day when I took the same bus and my stoppage came, I was the last one left to get down.

**Alone in the market**

After getting down from the bus I tried revisiting all those places I had gone to with Rabab Aapa. I kept roaming here and there and couldn’t realize when the sun had set. I could hear the calling of azan from a distant mosque. I think this was a Muslim-resident dominant area since I could see a lot of Muslims around me. I would go to different shops, stand in front of them for a while and keep staring at the things displayed there. I would wonder on how beautiful those things were. A few of the shop keeper who noticed me staring at their display would ask me what did I want and I would run away from there. Even if I wanted to buy something, I had no money to do so; therefore running away seemed to be plausible reaction. I spent my time in this way only, wandering here and there all alone. The night was falling and I have no idea where I reached after walking for a long time. There were fewer people on the streets now and I was clueless on what to do next and about my surroundings too. I was very hungry and thirsty too. I hadn’t eaten anything since morning and couldn’t think of any way I could get hold of some food. There were a lot of buildings around and I started knocking on a few doors. Whenever someone would open I would tell them I was very hungry and I was lost and had nowhere to go. Each one of them asked me the same question. They asked me where I stayed and when I told them I had ran away from my Khala’s place and had no idea how to go back, they wouldn’t take me in or offer food. They assumed that I was lying and maybe I was some beggar’s daughter and was making up stories to get an entry into their home and extract food from them.

I told them that I was a Muslim too, I was efficient in doing all the household chores and I knew how to recite the prayers. But they shut the door on my face too. They weren’t ready to take in someone else’s child and hence couldn’t shelter me. I tried convincing them by offering my fulltime assistance in their household chores, but they stayed adamant. All doors had shut for me. I didn’t even know my way back home.  I kept wandering here and there, the shops had closed down too and it was growing darker.

**“The night with an old beggar”**

The roads were emptier now and hardly one or two people were passing by. I was exhausted after walking for so long and having not eaten since morning had made me weak. My legs were trembling and I was feeling dizzy. Just then I spotted an old lady sitting outside a closed shop. Without thinking twice I went and sat beside her and started crying. She very lovingly caressed my head and asked me the reason for crying. She also inquired about the reason for me being alone at this hour of the night. I narrated to her the story of Khala and his son beating me up ruthlessly, then my escape from their place and not knowing my way back. She was touched by my story and hugged me instantly with all warmth and care. She then shared with me her story. She had no place to live in and survived on begging every day. At night, she slept on any place she found suitable. She had some food with her which she fed me with her own hands and then made me drink water too. She told me that she will keep me with her for always and would also feed me. Her kind gesture touched me so much that I stayed clutching on to her the entire night. It was after a long time that someone had hugged me so lovingly and I didn’t realize when I dozed off. When she woke me up in the morning, I found myself sleeping on her lap. She told me it was time to wake up because once the shops open no one would let us sit there. The first thought that crossed my mind when I woke up was who would fetch milk bottles for Khala that morning and that they must be worried about my absence too. I asked the old lady to tell me the way to go back to my home since my Khala might be worried about me, but she told me not to bother myself with all this and that she would take care of me always.

She took me to a nearby public toilet.  After done with my morning chore, she wiped my face and then took me to a tea stall. She asked for two cups of tea and handing one to me gave me biscuits to eat which she already had with her. She then began begging in every shop and wherever she went everyone would ask her my relation with her. I think all these shopkeepers were well acquainted with her because she begged there every day. She told everyone that I was her grand-daughter, but no one seemed to believe her lie. They lay their suspicious eyes on her and would ask her if she had kidnapped someone else’s kid. After this, any shop we went to, if someone asked about me, she would hurry out of the place without answering them. It was till afternoon that we begged and we were both tired, so we took shade under a tree. The shade was very soothing and this tree was alongside the footpath too.

After sitting comfortably under the tree, the old lady began narrating to me her story. She told me that she hails from Kashi and her son and daughter-in-law still stay there. Since their financial conditions were strained too, they couldn’t take care of their mother. The old lady had then somehow managed to come to Mumbai and now feeds herself through begging and saves some money too. She told me that when she returns to Kashi, she would take me with her. I was very happy to learn that she would keep me with her forever.

She started saying that she would teach me how to beg too and I would earn a lot of money which would suffice the both of us, but I denied doing so. I told her I wouldn’t beg because it would make me a beggar and I did not want to be one. She cracked on my reply. She told me that I was a very good orator but other than begging I had no other option to survive. She then began explaining me that begging was no derogatory work if done for a means of living. She was able to convince me and I agreed.

There was a taxi parked near the place we were sitting. The taxi driver was sleeping inside. The old lady pointed him to me and told me to walk up to him and tell him to give me some money stating that I was very hungry. Initially I denied, but she forcefully sent me to him. I walked up to him and very shyly called him “chacha.” He woke up to my calling and asked me what I wanted. Hesitatingly I told him that I was hungry and wanted to eat. He looked at me adoringly and then handed me a two rupee note. Clutching it in my palm, I ran to the old lady and handed her the money. The old lady was delighted at this. She told me that I was very lucky because I had managed to get money on my first try itself.

**“The police interrogation”**

After taking the lunch, we were sleeping on a footpath. Only a while had passed, when the old lady quickly covered my body with her sari and my face too. She told me that a policeman was approaching in our direction and if he enquires anything, she would tell him that I was her granddaughter. She directed me to keep my eyes shut and pretend to sleep and began pretending to sleep too.

The policeman caught up with her and with the sound of the stick woke her up. He started asking her a lot of questions. I could hear everything but out of fear didn’t dare to move. The policeman asked a lot of questions about me and asked her to reveal my face. The old lady told him that I was her granddaughter and because I was very sick, she had covered me under her veil. The police asked her if she was honestly telling the truth and hadn’t kidnapped someone else’s kid. She convinced the policeman that I was indeed her granddaughter and then revealed a part of my face to him after which he left assured. But before leaving, he warned her that if he ever finds out that she had been lying, he would imprison her.

Right after the police man left, the lady took me to a different place and told me it wasn’t safe for me to stay with her. She guessed that my Khala’s family might have reported my absence to the police and hence the police had been interrogating. She then informed me that although she wanted to keep me, since the police was after me she couldn’t risk going to jail by keeping me. Then she added that there were a lot of people around here and someone or the other will definitely shelter me. After explaining to me everything, she took me to a crowded market place. Before leaving, she assured me that I could beg here and maybe someone would take me under their roof too. She then planted a peck on my cheek and asked me not to panic because God would take care of me. She then abandoned me in the market and I kept standing there for a while with tears in my eyes. I scanned through the crowd looking for a face that would agree to take me under its refuge and take care of me.

**“Into the hands of the scrap collector”**

I was again back to where I had started. I started roaming here and there just like the night before. The shops were shutting down, night was falling, and the streets were getting emptier. I spotted a sweet shop just in time of its closing and asked for some sweets since I was very hungry. He denied giving me any sweet because he had already closed the shop. He then asked me to leave from there. I left the place and kept walking ahead disheartened. In my heart I was very scared because I couldn’t see many people on the road and an ominous silence covered the night.

Afraid and lost, I sat on a footpath. My legs were hurting, and I was dying of hunger and thirst. Suddenly, a man in very dirty attire came and stood in front of me. He asked me I was alone or waiting for someone. I told him that I was all alone and didn’t know my way back home. I also told him that I was very hungry and wanted to eat something. On hearing this, he quickly asked me to accompany him and promised to feed me. Elated, I agreed and began walking with him completely oblivious to the man’s identity and the place he was taking me to. In my innocence and unquenched hunger, I didn’t bother to think twice. He took me to a hotel and ordered food. It was time for them to shut down and they asked us to eat quickly and leave as soon as possible. I think this might be due to the shabby clothes he was wearing that they weren’t willing to let him stay longer in their restaurant. They asked him if I was his daughter to which he lied that I was his sister’s daughter and he was my uncle. The waiters serving there kept staring at me and seeing me gobble down the food like a hungry crow, smiled. I wasn’t bothered about anything then. I was just happy to have gotten to eat something. Although I don’t remember what I was eating, I remember having a lot of fun while eating and ate till my stomach hurt.

After finishing, we left the hotel and he started walking by holding my hand. He asked me my name to which I told him that my name was Aisha and he told me that his name was Parvez. It was too late at night and there was no one on the streets. He told me he was taking me to his family and we would stay the night there. This made me very happy because I thought I was getting a new home. If only did I know what was waiting for me. After walking for a long time, we reached some place where a lot of people were sleeping on the footpath. There were small kids, girls, women, young men and few other people that made this crowd. A few of them were still awake and taking me to them, he told them that I was their new property and would stay with them henceforth. I asked the man where his home was, and he informed me that this was his home and all these people his family. He shut me up and ordered me not to ask any further questions and to doze off in a corner. I was very tensed and terrified, because everything around me was very menacing. He spread out a sheet for me and directed me to sleep on it. While lying down, I kept regretting my decision of running away from Khala’s place.

I was missing my home terribly and had no clue of the place I had reached. I had lied down only for a while when that man came and lay beside me. Slowly, he started feeling me up on my entire body. I was feeling very weird, so I shrugged his hand off me to which he grabbed my hand with all this strength and climbed on top of me. He was completely naked. I started crying to which he cupped my mouth with one of his hands and told me that he was loving me and also it was pointless to cry since all these people were his family. While sobbing I told him that he was hurting me and pleaded him to get off me. To my surprise he agreed and after climbing off me, he went away and slept in another corner. I have no idea of when I fell asleep while crying.

When I woke up the next day I found all of them cleaning their hands and face there only. The man brought me a bowl of water and asked me to clean myself up on the side of the road. I hadn’t been able to clearly see all of them the previous night, but now in the broad daylight I could see all their faces clearly. They all stared at me and told me that I was very pretty. After telling them my name, the man informed everyone that I was going to stay with them from then on. One of the women made me sit beside her and made my hair. Then another woman made tea for everyone and gave it to everyone along with a chapatti. I was very quiet all this while because I felt myself in danger around these people. After a while, a few among them left to beg and other few to collect rags. The man asked me to accompany him. I agreed without any resistance. While walking, he began telling me that he lived on collecting rags and once in a while he chanced upon really nice things which he exchanged for decent money from the scrap buyer. I have no idea of the places he was taking me to and it was already afternoon. I was tired and hungry, but I didn’t say a word to him because I was intimidated by him. He began asking me about my family and I revealed to him honestly that I had run away from Khala’s place and my parents lived in a village and I didn’t know the way back home. He told me that he would find the address to my house and then take me back to my home.

**“Taking me to Manorama’s place”**

After listening intently to my entire story, the man told me that he is taking me to some woman’s house who would look after me. He added that he cannot keep me with him since he had no roof over his head and I would have to stay on the footpath, but if I stay with the woman, I would get nice food to eat, nice clothes to wear, a bed to sleep on and a roof over my head.

I was asked by the man to not tell the lady that I had ran away from home otherwise she would call the cops. The mention of police sent chills down my spine. He told me that he will tell the woman that I was his sister’s daughter and he was my uncle. Since his sister had passed away, he was keeping me with her and would come to meet me once in a month. He also asked me to lie about my name. He changed it from Aisha to Nusrat and asked me to introduce myself using the new name.

After explaining everything to me properly, he took me to the woman’s house. The woman’s name was Manorama. She was very fair, tall and beautiful. She directed us to sit in a corner and then gave me water and some biscuits. I gobbled down the biscuit immediately and in one gulp drank the entire glass of water given that I was very hungry and thirsty. The man then told her the exact lie he had worked upon while coming to her place and she asked how much money he wanted for this. I don’t remember the amount he had asked for but Manorama took out a few notes and handed it to him in front of me. He grabbed on the money quickly and promised that he would come the next month again to meet me and collect the money. Before leaving, he took me outside the door and threatened me to keep the truth hidden or else he would kill me. He then took me inside and after saying that from then on I would stay with Manorama madam, left.

After he left, Manorama madam asked me my name and I said it was Nusrat as planned. I was terrified and Manorama madam assured me that I had nothing to be afraid of; she would take good care of me. My only job would be to play with her young daughter and take care of her. After some time, she took me to the market and bought me a few new frocks, sandals, hair comb, ribbons to tie my hair and many earrings. After getting so many things, my happiness knew no bounds.

After being done with the shopping, she took me back home. Right after returning home, she took me to take shower in the bathroom. When I went inside the house, I saw that there were a lot of other girls there too and they had assembled near the bathroom to see me. Every girl was looking very pretty and was wearing beautiful clothes. From among them, Manorama called out a girl referring to her as Sreeja and asked her to clean me up properly. The girl started scrubbing me well inside the bathroom while the other girls kept standing outside. Someone would ask my name, someone else the place I had come from and whenever I would reply, they would laugh a lot. When I asked them the reason for their laughter, they told me that I was very sweet and they liked to hear me talk. On asking them if they were all blood sisters, they told me that they were friends and stay at Manorama’s place together. While bathing me, Sreeja commented that I was garrulous. After bathing me, she dried me properly with a towel, combed my hair, clothed me in new clothes and puffed powder on my face. On seeing me in new clothes, every girl complemented me that I looked very beautiful. After getting me ready, she took me to the outside room where Manorama was sitting with her mother. Manorama commented that now I was clean and that I would have to stay this clean every day. She then directed me to stay with her daughter, Archana and follow all her instructions. I was supposed to do as Archana wanted and take care of her. Leaving me in the room, Sreeja went to the room inside. Manorama ordered me to stick to the outside room from then on and if I ever dared to go to the other room she would hit me. I quietly nodded my head. She also ordered me to not talk to any girl from the other room. She then brought me a suitcase to keep all my clothes and belongings and made a place for the suitcase in the balcony. I was elated by the fact that now I owned a suitcase and new clothes. I quickly followed her orders, stuffed the suitcase with my clothes and belongings and kept it in the allotted spot in the balcony.

I began looking after Manorama’s daughter from the next day itself. I spent all my time with Archana. She was very sweet and would indulge me into games all day long. My job was to keep her entertained and at the same time clean up her mess. Whatever toys she would scatter in places, I would have to collect them and keep them in place. She used to drink milk from a bottle and over time, Manorama taught me how to sterilize the bottle in boiling water for her use. With learning this, I was allowed to enter another part of the house, the kitchen since the bottles had to be boiled there. I was doing my job with all dedication. Impressed with my commitment, Manorama sometimes took me and Archana out along with her.

With passing time, I began noticing that throughout the day numerous men would visit the house. They would go to the inside room upon Manorama’s mother’s direction, checkout girls, come out and tell Manorama’s mother which girl they liked and then the man would go to that girl’s room for a while and before leaving paid Manorama’s mother some money. I used to think that all these visitors were guests but the next moment would ponder over the reason these men went to the girls and later paid money before leaving. In my innocence, one day I asked Manorama’s mother, who I used to refer as Ma ji, were these men her guests and if so why did they go to the girls and later paid money before leaving. Initially she chuckled and then asked me to not bother myself with these thoughts. But I had more doubts to clear. I then asked her if all these girls were her daughters since they called her Ma ji too. I was received with reproach on this. She asked me to refrain from asking so many questions and after that day I stopped asking her questions much.

With time I was getting used to Manorama’s home. She taught me a lot of things about Mumbai. She familiarized me with the names of the roads, the names of theatres, different hotels they liked to dine in, etc. She would take me out very often and I started gaining a lot of knowledge. She crafted me very skillfully and started trusting me too. She would send me on errands alone now.

Now I was well acquainted with all the hotels and shops around the home. Whenever the girls would feel like having food from the hotel, Manorama’s mother would send me to buy food from the hotel and I would be more than happy to oblige. In some occasions they would ask me to fetch tickets for the movies. The cinema hall was near their place too. Whenever a new movie would release, Manorama’s mother would ask me to get tickets for the girls for the night show and they went to the movies accompanied by Manorama’s elder sister and her husband. These girls weren’t allowed to go out alone. Whenever they returned from the movies their face would be lightened up. In total there were four of them. From among them, Sreeja was from Manorama’s village too because she used to speak to her in her native tongue, Malyalam. Manorama and her family had migrated from Kerala. She was eldest of all of them and was responsible for the cooking. The rest of the girls looked after other chores of the house. Their names were Sangita, Naina and Kajal respectively. Sangita was the fairest of them all and tall too. She resembled features of a north-eastern girl. The other two girls were from Kolkata out of which, Naina was a bit short while Kajal was tall and slim.

I was the first one to be served the meals every day, although I didn’t know the reason for this but that is how things were. Ma ji used to instruct Sreeja to serve me food the earliest and Sreeja would serve it to me in the kitchen. Their usual menu was mutton curry, rice and vegetables and Sreeja always served me a little extra. I would gladly munch on it. We had no restrictions on food there. Whenever I was left alone with Sreeja she would quietly tell me to run away from there because this wasn’t the right place for me. I didn’t use to like it whenever she would advice me so. I was very happy there, I got good food to eat, new clothes to wear and they allowed me to go outside too. I couldn’t think of any reason to escape from this place. I couldn’t contemplate why Sreeja and the other girls wanted me to run away from there. Once Sreeja tried to make me understand that if I stayed there, once I grow up Manorama and her family members wouldn’t let me go out.

They would captivate me inside the house and I would have no freedom to come and go at my will. Even after Sreeja’s lecture, I didn’t want to leave from that place.

As I was growing up, Manorama started trusting me even more and more. One day she took me and Archana to a house. Although the house was empty, it was well furnished. The house had beautiful sofas, beds, curtains, and everything else was very beautiful too. The kitchen was nice too. Manorama informed me that this was her second home which she seldom visits. From her conversation I could make out that after marriage she used to live here but after having Archana, she and her husband began having fights and they separated. She also told me that it was for Archana she was staying at her mother’s place and only visits this place. In my childhood innocence I couldn’t make much of whatever she was saying. She began taking me to this house more than often. We would have to take a taxi from her mother’s place to this. She would ask the taxi driver to take us to Kolaba. All through the way she would ask me to keep track of the roads and familiarize myself with them. By now I knew her mother’s place was in Lamington Street while hers was in Kolaba. The Kolaba house was in a tall building which had a sea view. Initially for a few days, she used to take Archana along with us. On reaching there, she would ask me to the dust and sweep the house because it would be covered in dirt due to being shut for so long. So every time we went I had to dust and sweep but then after that she ordered nice food and along with a few people from the building who knew Manorama, we would eat the food and have a nice time. Everyone would adore Archana. Around evening, we would return back to her mother’s place.

After a few days, Manorama asked me if I could travel to the Kolaba house all by myself. I nodded in affirmation. She told me she would pay the taxi fare, give me the keys to the house as well and all I would have to do upon reaching is clean the house. She was to join me after a while and then we would return at night together. She gave me the taxi fare and directed me to tell the driver that I wanted to go to Kolaba and explain him the building and the directions to get there. That was the first day ever I was travelling alone in a taxi. I informed my destination to the cabbie and kept navigating through the roads all the time and finally I reached the building without getting lost. It was an achievement for me to realize that I could travel alone. I took the lift all by myself, opened the door of the house with the key and then as directed locked it from inside. Manorama had asked me not to open the door for anyone except her and she would call out my name when she comes.

As directed, I cleaned the whole house and then sat on a chair in the balcony. I started noticing the kids of the building playing in the building compound and it drove me back to the times of my village days. I started daydreaming that I was back in my village and playing with my friends there. Suddenly there was a knock on the door and before opening I asked who was on the other side. Manorama confirmed it to be herself and I unlatched the door. She was quite impressed with my work and handing me a plastic of food gave me further instructions. She informed me that she had got me restaurant’s food and I was supposed to eat it and sleep on the kitchen floor on a mattress till she comes to wake me up. She had visitors coming and it would be already night by the time we will be leaving. Since Archana was at her mother’s place, we would have to leave at night at any cost. Manorama had kept her and her visitor’s food in the kitchen and told me she will eat it later. I gobbled down the food and after doing so she asked me to go to sleep. Following her orders, I made myself a bed on the kitchen floor and lay on it. Manorama locked me inside the kitchen from outside and even when I wasn’t sleepy I couldn’t go out. It wasn’t even bed time then. I kept contemplating while lying down that why had Manorama locked me inside the kitchen. After a while, the doorbell rang, Manorama opened the door and some man entered the house. I could hear the man and Manorama talking, but since they were speaking in a different language couldn’t understand the context.

After trying to listen to their conversation I have no idea when I dozed off and suddenly I heard Manorama’s voice trying to wake me up. When I opened my eyes, she told me to get up fast since we had to leave. I woke up half asleep, my eyes were partially shut, and I wore my slippers and got out of the house. After locking the door, me and Manorama came downstairs using the lift. There was a fat man in his fifties or sixties with Manorama and when we reached downstairs his car had been waiting for us. He dropped us at her mother’s place.

This became the ordeal for the next few days. Manorama would hand me the keys to the apartment, I would do the needful on reaching there, and then the same man would leave with us late at night. Sometimes there would be another man. He was some sort of a highly designated police officer. He had a government sanctioned car and I would be terrified of climbing into his car. Initially, I would take time to wake up whenever Manorama would call out in the middle of the night, but gradually I got accustomed to it.

One day I was boiling Archana’s milk bottles in the kitchen and Sreeja was cooking. Manorama and her sister Sheila were not at home at that time, their brother Shyam had gone out too and their mother being sick was sleeping outside in a deep sleep. Manorama had taken Archana along with her and this was the first time she hadn’t taken me along. I couldn’t understand why. Sreeja saw this as an opportunity and started speaking in a hushed tone with me. She told me that this place wasn’t good for me and my life would be ruined if I stayed here. She told me about Manorama that Manorama had left her husband and the case for their divorce was in the court. The reason she didn’t take me along with her that day was that she had gone to court with Archana where her husband would also come. She was trying her best to make me understand, but I wasn’t able to make the head or tail out of anything she was preaching. The other three girls also joined in the conversation and were trying their best. These poor girls were trying to protect me by endangering themselves but I was so foolish that I couldn’t understand it then. Ultimately, Srija tried to use the trump card. She told me this was a dirty place and they were made to do dirty things which I would also have to do once I grew up. Manorama’s mother got up suddenly and started calling for me frantically. I shouted from inside the kitchen that I was boiling the bottles for Archana. In a hurry,

while removing the utensil from the oven, it slipped out of my hand and hot boiling water spilled all over my body. I let out a loud shriek which scared the girls as well as Manorama’s mother. I had severe burns all over my body from tip to toe. Manorama’s mother came to inspect and asked Sreeja to apply Burnol all over my body. She did as told and in a few moments I had blisters all over my body. My whole body was burning and it hurt too. When Manorama returned after a while, her mother informed her that I had poured the hot water on myself while boiling the milk bottles and broke the milk bottles too. Instead of being concerned about me, Manorama started shouting at me. Their ignorant attitude towards me while I was in so much pain deeply grief-struck me and in that moment I realized I should actually run away from there. But the reality hit me sooner; I had no place to go. Even after being severely burnt, Manorama sent me outside in the sun to buy something. I was unable to even wear my slippers for the blisters. But Manorama was least bothered. When I reached the shop, the shopkeeper was taken aback. He asked me how I had got so many burns on my body and told me it wasn’t good for me to be out in the sun in this state. I. told him how I had spilled hot water on myself by mistake and he felt so much pity for me that he gave an ice-cream to eat. Even he started telling me that I shouldn’t be staying at Manorama’s and then began enquiring about my parent. With the mention of my parents, I got very scared and telling him that I knew nothing about my parents, I left from there.

Over time, my burns began healing. Poor Sreeja, she would apply Burnol to my burns everyday and pray for my recovery. I think it is for her prayers and love that I recovered so fast. I developed an innate bond with Sreeja during this time because she was the only who took care of me. Every time she would serve me food, she would serve the best dishes to me and ask me to eat it fast. It was due to her care and proper diet that I regained my health in no time.

**‘Escaping from Manorama’s house’**

After recovering from my burns, Manorama began sending me to her home every second or third day. I would take the taxi, reach the house, clean it and then later she would join me with food. She would keep scented things in the washroom, take a long shower and get ready. The man would come at night, she and the man would stay inside the room doing God knows what and would lock me in the kitchen after giving me the food.

At midnight, she would as usual wake me up and we would come back to her mother’s place. The same man didn’t come always. Two or three men came but on different days.

One day, Archana was irritating me a lot. She was pulling my hair with all her strength. I pleaded with her repeatedly that it was hurting me but something had gotten into her that day. She kept pulling my hair and started beating me too. Manorama wasn’t at home and her mother was least bothered with what Archana did with me. When I couldn’t bear anymore, I slapped her. She let go of me and started crying. Manorama’s mother saw me slapping Archana and she slapped me twice or thrice for it. The matter didn’t end there. When Manorama returned, her mother exaggerated the whole incident and told her that I had hit Archana really hard. Manorama lost her temper and started thrashing me and abused me a lot. She kept telling me that how dare I raise my hand on her daughter. No one tried to know my part of the story. I kept sobbing in a corner, anyway I couldn’t say anything. That day I determined that the next time she sends me to her home in a taxi, I would run away and never return.

That very day, Manorama had to go to her home but she didn’t send me alone. She accompanied me. I was grieving. I wanted to burst into tears but I couldn’t. I was missing my parents tremendously, but I couldn’t say anything to anyone. After reaching, as usual she ordered me to clean the house and went to take a shower. It then occurred to me that I had the opportunity to escape then since she took an hour long shower but the next moment I was petrified by the thought. I kept wondering where I would go if I ran away and it was already dark outside. At the same moment, Sreeja’s words and the thrashing I had got that day made my determination stronger. One part of me wanted to run away but then I speculated that if the rag-picker gets hold of me once again, he would beat me up too. I was in a weird dilemma and was still making up my mind when all of a sudden I was filled with full resolution to run away promptly. Manorama always kept her purse inside the cupboard, locked it and took the keys with her inside the washroom. This left me nothing to carry along with me. So I took a blanket, quietly slid out of the door and locked the door from outside so that she isn’t able to catch up with me.

I quickly entered the lift and after reaching the ground floor began walking at a high pace. After covering a distance from the building I began running. While running I had no clue as to which direction I was running in. When I was tired of running, I sat on some spot. After relaxing for a while, I began walking again and then I noticed that there was a bus stop where a familiar man was standing. This man used to bring men to Manorama’s home occasionally. On sight of him, I ran as fast as I could. I had never run faster in my life. I entered a building while running and hid under the staircase. The security guard noticed me and asked me who I was and why was I so scared. Slowly a few more people from the building gathered around me. Everyone started asking me my identity and where I had come from. I told them I used to work in a lady’s home who beat me up mercilessly so I had run away from there. The people told me that I cannot stay in their building like that and asked me to leave. I left from there and reached a garden. Outside the garden a lot of people were sleeping on the footpath. I spread the bed sheet I had picked from Manorama’s home beside a lady and lay on it. Due to being tired, I dozed off instantly.

When I opened my eyes, I saw that a lot of kids were playing in the garden and a lot of people were walking on the streets. I sat up and found that the woman I was sleeping beside wasn’t there anymore. The others, who had been sleeping there, had gone too. Now I began pondering on where I should go! I got up from there, entered the garden and after stacking my bed sheet to a corner began swinging on the swing. I played on all the rides that were meant to be played on. I was feeling hungry and thirsty but had nothing to eat or no money to buy food. I picked up my bed sheet and came out of the garden. A lady was selling guavas just outside the garden. I went up to her and asked her if she would give me a guava since I was hungry. She asked me if I had the money to pay for it. I told her I had no money but I was ready to exchange my bed-sheet for a guava if she is willing to do so. She looked at my bed-sheet and took it instantly because the bed-sheet was pretty and brand new. She handed me two guavas and asked me to leave immediately. The last possession I had, the bed-sheet was now gone too. I kept walking and had no clue as to where I was going. The sun was blazing over my head, and I was so tired that I sat down in any place I got and started crying.

**The factory worker’s home**

Beside the place where I was crying, a man was sleeping covering his face with a handkerchief. The moment he heard me crying, he sat up and then coming closer to me asked me lovingly the reason behind crying. I told him that I wanted to go home to my parents but didn’t know the way. He wiped my tears with his handkerchief and told me not to cry because he would take me to my parents’ home definitely. He then asked me to stay there only while he would go inside the factory and inform his boss. He told me he would take me to his home after that. The place I was seating in was around a factory where this man used to work. He was probably 20 or 22 years old. The people who worked in this factory used to take a nap in the afternoon outside the factory after taking their lunch. The moment I had began crying in that spot was the exact same moment this man had lay down to take his afternoon nap. My memory is failing me in helping me recall the man’s name.

When the man went inside the factory to inform his boss, I thought of escaping from there quickly but then I had no strength and no place to go to. And that man had assured me that he would re-unite me with my family so I quietly waited for him outside. After a while he came out of the factory and along with him a few other men came out too. All these men took a look at me and then left one by one. The man then took my hands into his and told me that his house was nearby. It was just a few minutes’ walk from there. He had his parents and siblings at home who would take care of me. Scared and tormented, I quietly walked holding his hands. After walking a while, we reached a “chawl” where many houses were built side by side. Among all these houses, one house was his. He took me inside his house and told his parents everything about me. His parents were sorrowful on hearing my story and they told me they would keep me in their home and would adopt me as their daughter. His mother brought me food and asked me to eat sumptuously. I was eating after two days. The food tasted heaven. After eating, his mother scrubbed me well and gave me her daughter’s clothes to wear. Her daughter was probably my age only. After leaving me there, the man returned to work but to take a look at me, almost everyone from his “chawl” came to his house. After knowing my story, everyone felt bad for me and everyone offered to keep me with them. After receiving love from so many people I was feeling really happy.

These people were not financially strong; they all lived in little houses, but had a heart of gold. I think I stayed for two days at his place but in those two days all the member of his family treated me with such affection that my heart hadn’t felt in a long time. They treated me like a part of their family. This family was such that they had taken care of me without any ulterior motive or malice. I will forever be indebted to them for their hospitality.

Most people living there were Marathi. I was completely oblivious to what being a Marathi meant till I was sent to the rehabilitation centre. After staying for two or three days at their place, the family’s neighbours tried to convince them to file a report in the police station concerning me or else they might fall into trouble. They might get charged for abducting me and keeping me in their home illegally. This might land them up in jail as well. After a lot of discussions everyone consented to taking me to the police station. With utmost affection, they convinced me that it was for my benefit that they were taking me to the police station and that after filing the complaint they would bring me back along with them. The mere mention of the police would send chills down my spine and then these people were planning to take me to the station. I freaked. The man’s family and he himself assured me that they wouldn’t leave me alone and wanted to have my custody legally.

**Visit to the Police Station**

The next day, a lot of people from the chawl arrived at the man’s home and his family got ready too. They gave me a splendid breakfast, dressed me up properly and then took me to the station. My heart was beating fast and streams of tears had been running down my face, but since so many people were accompanying me, I felt a bit secure. The station wasn’t far from their place. On reaching there, they told a policeman that they had to talk about me, who they had found on the street and who had forgotten her way back home. He directed us to another officer.

When we approached the other officer, he made me sit beside him, while the man and his parents sat opposite to him. He asked the others to wait outside. The first question he asked me was my name. I was so petrified that I didn’t tell him my real name. I told him I was Nusrat, the name the rag-picker had asked me to tell to Manorama. The officer didn’t ask me any further questions but shifted to the man and his family. After gathering additional information from them, he informed them that they cannot keep me anymore since it was illegal. He informed them that a case would be made under my name and till my parents aren’t found they would send me to an orphanage. Meanwhile, they would look for my parents and if nothing comes out of the search, the man’s family could legally adopt me. But till the time the investigation goes on they cannot keep me at their place. Their hearts broke on hearing the words of the inspector but nothing could be done now, I was under police custody. He then asked them to go back home and if they wanted, they could go to meet me in the orphanage.

They were shocked to hear the policeman’s words. They couldn’t understand what to do next. They reassured me that they would go to world’s end to bring me back to their home as soon as possible. It hurt me to think that I wouldn’t be able to go with them and I started crying. The inspector asked them once again to leave. On seeing me cry, the man’s mother flushed too. She embraced me in her arms and told me that God would make things right. With a heavy heart, they exited the station. The people waiting outside were asked to leave too. I was sitting next to the inspector all by myself now. To keep me happy, he was trying to talk nice things to me. He got me chocolates and biscuits from a shop outside and gave it to me to eat. The food cheered me up. Opposite to the inspector’s cabin was a huge room where a lot of people were put and the room was locked from outside. The room was grilled, so these people could see outside but had no option of coming out of it.

These people were making weird sounds and faces at me when they saw me sitting beside the inspector. A few of them tried to scare me by telling me that now I too would be locked up with them by the police. The inspector didn’t tolerate this, and rebuked them. He asked me to pay no heed to them because I would meet no such fate. The inspector informed me that those men were thieves and some of them had done terrible things, therefore they were kept behind the bars as a punishment. He also explained to me that since I was a child and had done no evil, I wouldn’t be locked up. His words restored my spirits and I started teasing back those men. I started sticking out my thumb and tongue at them which sent all the inspectors on a laughing spree. The men behind the bars mere amused too.

During lunch time, the inspector took me to a restaurant which was right in front of the police station. Everyone was eyeing me because I was sitting with the police. I have no idea what might be going on in these people’s head, but at that moment I was engrossed completely in enjoying my meal. Majority of the people there were speaking in Marathi and the inspector also responded in the same language. After finishing our lunch, he took me back to the station and on the way bought me more chocolates.

After sitting for a while, he informed me that in awhile he would take me to the orphanage. With utmost affection, he told me that there would be other kids in the orphanage too who I could play with. I would have nice toys and the caretakers there took care of all the kids. He also told me that there was a school where I would be taught well and would get nice food to eat. He told me more things about the orphanage and then added that meanwhile they would precede with the search for my parents and upon finding them, would take me to them. I kept nodding to everything he said because I couldn’t make much of it then. The sun had set by now. Another inspector came and informed him, that the car was waiting outside and he could take me to the orphanage. Picking some files, we got seated in the car. Another policeman was driving the car and I was sitting on the backseat while the inspector looking after me took his seat next to the driver.

I think the orphanage was quite far from the station because by the time we reached it was already night. When we reached there, I saw that the building was enclosed with huge walls, with a huge gate at its entrance. On spotting a police car, the security guard opened the door and we were permitted entry. Most of the people had already gone to bed since it was night. They took me to an office where a few other police men were present. He handed me and the files he had carried with him to the officials there and told me that everyone there will take care of me.  This wasn’t the orphanage. They would take me to it after one or two days. This orphanage was for older women. I was brought their first because there was a court here where the proceedings of my case would be carried out and after it was done, I would be shifted to the orphanage. After explaining everything to me that inspector shifted his hand on my head affectionately and left.

**A new beginning**

A lady officer came and fetched me inside the orphanage. The silent of the night echoed in all corners and only the tall walls could be seen. The lady officer put me in charge of another woman upon taking me inside. I think she was the caretaker of this place. She handed me the orphanage’s frock and asked me to hand over my earrings and clothes to her. I followed her instructions without objecting. She took my belongings, put them in a plastic and wrote something on top of it. She then took me to a room where many older girls were sleeping; there were a few women among them too. The lady took me to one of the girls and asked her to let me sleep beside her for the night, and feed me as well. The woman left soon, after giving the instructions.

That girl took me to the kitchen. After feeding me, she took me to her room where a lot of other girls and women were present too. She spread a bed sheet for me beside her and directed me to sleep on it. Everyone started asking me how I had landed up in the orphanage. All of them were very affectionate towards me and pitied me, calling me a poor girl. They were saying other things too which I couldn’t keep track of because I fell asleep as soon as I lied down.

Everyone woke up early in the morning and then woke me up too. The same girl from last night was given my responsibility. She took me to the bathroom and giving me the toothpaste asked me to clean my teeth using my fingers and then wash my hands and face. She asked me to use the lavatory as well. After I was done with my morning chores, she bathed me properly, gave me a new frock to wear and made my hair. After everyone was done bathing, we were made to sit in a queue and served nice, hot breakfast. I was taken to the court after a while. The court-room was storming with people, there were kids too and God knows for what purposes those people had gathered there. A lady inspector had accompanied me and was explaining to me the procedure. When my name is called from inside, she would go along with me and present my file to the lady judge who would then ask me a few questions. She asked me not to be nervous and answer all the questions honestly. After sitting there for a while, I noticed that that Marathi family had come to the court too. They waved at me and assured me that they were with me. When my turn came, the police took them inside too. A middle-aged woman in a white sari was seated on a chair inside; she was wearing a black coat too. She was the Lady Judge I was supposed to be presented before. She smiled at me and then asked me my name. She asked me to sit on the chair opposite to her while the others kept standing. She kept asking me different questions and then moved on to the Marathi family. She kept noting down something on her paper while talking to us. I was very impressed by this action of hers because this was the first time I had seen someone write so fast. I determined in my heart that when I grow up I would write this fast too.

That Marathi family tried to convince the judge to let them take me with them but it was against the law. They were granted permission to meet me in the orphanage I was being sent to. Heart-broken and disappointed, the family left after hugging me and handing me some biscuits and chocolates. The Judge told me that I would be called for the next day too. After the session was over, the lady officer handed me to the girls inside the orphanage once again and left. I think I stayed there for another two or three days after which I was sent to the “Children’s Home” in Maankhurd.

**“A new life in the Children’s Home”**

I was accompanied to the children’s home by a few new kids too. We were commuted to the home in a police car which was fenced with a mesh on all sides. The uncertainty of the new place was troubling me once again. After reaching the orphanage, all of us kids were made to sit in the office for a long time. They were making our files and once done with it we were sent to the orphanage. The orphanage had two phases. One phase was for the boys and the other for the girls. There was a door on one side too which was mostly kept locked.

All the office work used to happen in the boy’s phase of the orphanage. Food for everyone was cooked there too. The cooks were all men. All the substantial work was carried out in this phase only. This phase was huge and the rest of the orphanage was spacious too. There was a huge school operating in two dialects, Hindi and Marathi in this part of the orphanage only. They had a carpentry division for the boys and few other divisions as well. There was a huge playground with a lot of equipments to play on. And my most favourite feature of all, tall tress of mangoes, guava, aamla, tamarind, etc. The sight of them made my heart leap with joy, thinking that now I could climb on them once again.

When I reached the girl’s phase, there were a lot of girls there, old and young. A caretaker, whose name was Babita, took me and the other kids inside. On sight of the new kids, the old ones gathered around us and started asking our names. I was still a little scared and so didn’t talk to anyone. The caretaker asked them to leave us alone then and that from tomorrow we would play with them. She asked them to befriend us and take care of us. The kids left to play on her instructions. This phase also had an office where a lady superintendent was seated. Babita aunty escorted us to her. The superintendent was an old lady who wore a white sari. She had long white hair which she had braided. She asked us our names and a few other information in a very warm tone. She noted something in the files too and then directed Babita aunty the groups we were to be put into. For me she chose the Nalanda group and for the others Kaveri and Yamuna. These three groups were like three different halls. The participation to these groups was based on the age of the child. After choosing the groups for us, their leaders were called into the office and we were handed to them.

The leader of Nalanda was a girl named Sohini, Kaveri’s was Kavita and Yamuna’s Seema. These girls probably belonged to the age group of fifteen to twenty.

I think in Nalanda, kids of the age group of seven to ten were kept while in Kaveri, up to five years of age and Yamuna, ten to fifteen. When these girls grew eighteen years old, they were probably sent to the orphanage in Dongri. All the older girls and women lived there.

Sohini took me to Nalanda and showed me the place the blankets and clothes were kept. She then briefed me other rules and regulations of the group. She introduced me to the other girls of the group too and asked me to live in harmony with them. I was elated on mixing with girls of my age and everyone was very nice to me too. I made friends with them very quickly and all my terror and insecurity passed away. I liked it here and they include me in their games too. I finally got back my childhood, now I could play like I used to play in my village. Since the day I had left my village, it felt like I had left behind my childhood too, but the orphanage restored it back for me.

We kids didn’t have to do much work other than cleaning our own plates and making our own beds. The rest of the work was done by the elder girls.

On my first day, the girls taught me how to wash my plate after eating and how to make my bed. They used to pray before sleeping. Every kid stood in a queue in the evening and recited their prayer while I stood there not knowing what to do. The kids slept in three rows. Two rows on both side of the wall and one row in between. Sohini assigned me a place in the middle row and told me that I would sleep on that spot only thenceforth. I slept like a baby that night, but in the middle of the night was woken up to urinate as per the rules. The girl sleeping next to me informed me that this was repeated every night so that none of the kids urinated in bed.

Waking up in a half asleep state appeared difficult to me but the rules had to be followed.

We were made to wake up in between 5.30to 6 in the morning. After brushing their teeth, the elder girls bathed the younger ones, girls of my age too. I was bathed by one of the girls too and some other girl made my hair and dressed me.  When everyone would be done bathing and getting ready, all girls would have to form a queue for the breakfast and after receiving the breakfast would go and have it sitting in a group with their friends. Some girls included me in their group and I had a lot of fun eating with them. After breakfast, all the kids left for school. The school was at a distance from the orphanage in another block. It was a long walk.

For the younger kids, a nursery was constructed right behind the orphanage only where they were taught nice things. The other new kids and I didn’t go to school. On seeing the other kids go to school, I desired to join them too but being new to this place I had no idea if they would enroll me in a school or not.

The kids of Kaveri used to have a lot of fun in the nursery. For a while Babita aunty made us sit in the nursery to keep us engaged. In the afternoon, the elder kids came to the orphanage to have food. They left again after lunch and then came back at 3.30 p.m. After coming back, they changed their uniforms and were served tea and biscuit after which they got two hours to play. The huge space behind the orphanage was the playground, where a lot of equipments were put up to play on. After play-time, all the kids would come inside, freshen up and then sit down to finish their home-works and learn their lessons. Then they all gathered for prayer time in the evening, following which dinner would be served and finally the time to go to bed.

This routine was strictly followed from Monday to Friday but Saturdays and Sundays were a bit different. The kids relaxed a bit on Saturdays and on Sundays from 12 in the afternoon till evening, their parents and relatives came to visit them. A lot of kids, though not orphans, stayed here for stringent financial conditions of their parents who could not afford a healthy lifestyle for their kids and during holidays would take them home.

There were some kids who were orphans and their relatives were unable to look after them, a few other kids had either a mother and no father or a father and no mother. Every kid had its own story. There were a few kids like me who were lost and some of them had run away from their homes and then there were others who had no one to claim as family. On Sundays, a few rich people would come down to donate outside food for the kids which varied from ice-creams to chocolates to sweets and other things. Every kid rejoiced whenever food from outside was delivered and munched on them hungrily.

Almost a week had passed since my stay in this orphanage. The paper work for my investigation was still going on. They would frequently call me to the office in the boy’s phase of the orphanage and ask me questions about my village and I would tell them whatever I could recall. A picture of me was clicked in the office too. I was taken to a hospital for a full body check-up, after which my age was presumed. Since I didn’t know the date of my birthday, they documented a birth certificate for me and dated it 7thJune, 1969. Now even I had a birthday. They informed me that my photo was published in the newspaper and if someone from my family comes to take me, it was well and good, otherwise they would send police to my village and further investigate. Everyone in the office loved me and wanted to re-unite me with my parents as soon as possible.

One of the official’s names was Mr. Rawat who was from Uttar Pradesh, another one by the name Mr. Sahai and a madam who was called Revati Madam. All these people talked really nice and sweet things to me. Rawat sir would say that if my parents were never found, he would adopt me and Revati madam would say the same. Only Sahai sir was optimistic of definitely finding my parents.

I had the least idea then if I would be able to go back to my home or not, but I was happy in the orphanage. I had gotten my childhood back, didn’t have to work, got nice food to eat, got to play a lot, had made lots of friends and nothing bothered me there.  All the aunties were nice too. I couldn’t fathom a place better than this. This place was like heaven for me. It seemed like this was the reward for all my hardships. When I would see all the kids going to school my heart would pine for accompanying them and then one day I communicated this to Babita aunty. To my desire, Babita aunty informed me that the schools inside the orphanage operated in two dialects- Hindi and Marathi both of which I wasn’t familiar with. She then added that the officials wanted me to join school too and were looking for one operating in Urdu dialect. If they find any school in close proximity with the orphanage, they would enrol me there. My heart leapt with joy on receiving this information and then I shared it with all my friends.

There was a sewing room inside the orphanage which had a lot of sewing machines operating.  A teacher would come to teach the girls a few years older than me to work on these machines. Mostly all the garments of the kids were sewn by them only, like the frocks and under wears. The teacher would cut the clothes in patterns and the girls stitched them. There were two to three older girls who had already finished their education and were now learning tailoring.

One day when the other kids had left for school, I requested Babita aunty to let me sit inside the sewing room. Babita aunty agreed and then took me to the room and instructed the teacher to let me sit there. After sitting for a while, I told the teacher that I knew how to stitch and if she cut me patterns of the cloth I could sew it. The teacher at first let out a comic laugh because she thought I was speaking anything and then she asked me where from I had learnt stitching at such a tender age. I informed her that I had learnt it at my Khala’s place and that I did a lot of stitch-work for her. One machine was idle and the teacher handing me a place of cloth asked me to occupy the idle machine and run straight stitches on it. Happily I went to the machine and quickly stitched that piece of cloth. The teacher and all the other girls kept staring at me. The teacher then commented that it was indeed true that I knew how to stitch and then asked me to come there daily. Upon the teacher’s instruction, I started going there every day and according to the teacher’s instructions started stitching a frock. Due to my speed, I began learning faster and better than the other girls. Gradually the news spread that I knew how to stitch and was really good at it. The news reached the officials too. Whoever came to know about it was left shocked at my expertise at such a young age. Soon I became everyone’s favourite. Being from a village my way of speaking was quite different from the others and every one adored me for that and now for my stitching efficiency too. One day Mr. Rawat called me to his office and told me that it was a nice thing that I was quite efficient at stitching but once they find me a school, I should go to school because education is a crucial part of life and I could continue with stitching whenever I was free. I asked them when they would enrol me in a school and he assured me that as soon as possible.

**“The Marathi Family’s visit”**

It was my first Sunday in the orphanage and every kid whose family was about to visit, looked immensely happy. Mostly almost every kid had a visitor except a few of us. The thought of receiving no visitors on that day because of the separation from my family, deeply saddened me.

In the afternoon during the visiting hours, a lot of people came and were made to sit in the games area. Every visitor had brought with them lunch, chocolates, biscuits and a lot other things for their kids. A few of the kids introduced me to their visitors as their friend by my name.

All of a sudden one of the aunties came looking for me and informed me that I had a visitor. I couldn’t believe my ears and ran with all my strength towards the door, and to my astonishment found the Marathi family that had sheltered me and cared for me, standing in front of me. I was overjoyed at their sight and holding the man’s mother’s hand, directed them to the visiting area. After they took their seats, they took out the things they had brought for me. I was on the verge of tears at their thoughtful gesture. The man, who had taken me to his family, informed me that they were trying their level best to gain my custody, but that the court wasn’t permitting to it, and might not even allow them to meet me further. The news broke my heart, but it seemed like I had no say in this. His parents adored me, and consoled me saying that God will make things right. They also told me that they adored me to life, and will always pray for me so that I re-unite with my parents as soon as possible and return home safely. When the visiting hours were up, aunty reminded me that it was time for them to leave. They were sulking while leaving because of the realization that this might be the last time they would ever see me. With tearful eyes we parted. I kept standing there staring at their disappearing silhouettes for what might seem to be an eternity, but there was no turning back from the reality. They were gone and my last hope to grow up in a family might have gone with them.

Gradually, everyone else’s visitors left too, and being kids we soon got over the pain of separation and immersed ourselves in games. We showed our gifts to each other and shared the eateries. With this, my first Sunday in the orphanage was spent well.

From the next day, the usual routine resumed. All the kids went to school and I went to the sewing class, in the evening when the kids sat down to complete their home-work, I sat with them too. Sohini, Nalanda house’s captain was writing some alphabets in Hindi on the blackboard for some new students and they were instructed to spell it aloud while she wrote them. When the kids pronounced the alphabets I would do so too, and when she would teach them how to write those letters, I would try to learn that too. I continued doing this for another few days and soon was better at it than most of the learners. After having learnt the basics, I began reading books of the first standard. I was fluent with numeric and the tables as well.

Noticing my passion for studies, Sohini discussed about it with the superintendant who was left stunned. In her experience, no one had learnt a new language in such a short time so to see it for herself, she attended the class and began noticing me while studying. Amused with my dedication, she asked me to read out an excerpt from the book and then to recite the tables. I followed her orders happily. After I had read out the passage and counted the tables fluently, she showered me with praises, and encouraged me to continue learning. She narrated the whole episode to Mr. Rawat who then informed me that if they fail to find an Urdu medium school for me, they would enrol me in Hindi medium. He encouraged me to share my opinion on the matter, and I responded in affirmation with his decision. It was then decided that after final examinations for this session was over, and the admissions for the new sessions begin, they would admit me in the Hindi-medium school in the first standard. Having admitted to the first standard would make me elder to my classmates, and sir was worried that I might be embarrassed by this, but I assured him that my main motive was going to school and nothing else mattered to me.

When the new sessions began, as planned, I was enrolled in the first standard of the Hindi medium school which was located inside the orphanage itself. Whole-heartedly, I began going to school with the other kids. I was the eldest in my class and would sit on the first bench upon the instruction of the teacher. She wanted to take care of me and give me personal attention to ensure my smooth learning. She was well aware of the fact that I had received education in the Urdu vernacular up until then, and due to the non-availability of an Urdu school in close proximity to the orphanage, had to be enrolled in the Hindi medium. This awareness led her to be extra cautious towards me. I was learning well under her guidance.

In only a few days of joining the classes, I was done learning the whole book and the entire syllabus in another two or three month. The teacher began deliberately giving me difficult questions to solve to evaluate my learning capability, and on failing to answer them, she would explain it to me and I would grasp it quickly. I was way ahead than the rest of my classmates and after a while the teacher couldn’t come up with any new topics for me to learn.

After two months they made me sit for the qualifying exam for the first standard. I took my exam very confidently answering all the questions correctly, and qualified it with great grades. I was then promoted to the second standard based on the result. I found the syllabus of this standard very easy too, and in just a few days was at par with the other kids in my class only exceeding them in another few days. Noticing my learning capacity, they made me take the qualifying exams for the second standard too and as predicted, were promoted to the third standard. I didn’t like the third standard much because of being the only girl in the class and the youngest of them all. I used to sit alone in the first bench. The teacher would present my learning passion as an example in front of the class because everyone else lacked it completely. The boys got scolded all the time because of me. In a few days I appeared for the qualification test for the third standard and once again excelled it. I was promoted to the fourth standard. I liked the syllabus of this standard and once again became at par with my fellow classmates in no time. I was the most favoured student, and in the orphanage all the aunties and officials loved me. My heart would warm up upon receiving so much love and admiration. Those were some good days I still cherish.

**“Arrival of Zaheda in the orphanage”**

One day, for my court hearing one of the aunts took me to the orphanage in Dongri along with a few other kids who had their session as well. When they summoned me inside the court, the same judge addressed to me. She reviewed my file and asked me if I fared well in the orphanage. I responded that I was very happy with my stay there. Convinced by my reply, she informed me that according to the description of my village that I had narrated to the police, the police had tried to find my village using whatever resources they could, but had neither been successful in locating my village nor contacting anyone from my family. No one has filed any missing complaint from my Khala’s family too.  Given the circumstances, they would put me up for adoption, and only after I wilfully get adopted by that family, the court would sign the papers. She asked me not to be scared because they would make sure I got adopted by a decent family.  In the innocence of childhood, I couldn’t make much of what she was explaining, so kept nodding to everything she said.

While returning to the orphanage, a new girl accompanied us. On visits to the court, a huge police van with two police-women and a policeman was used by the orphanage. The new girl sat beside me and aunty informed me that she was our new friend and would stay with us in the orphanage.

The distance between the court and the orphanage gave me enough time to interact with this new girl. I loved meeting new people and talking to them so I started the conversation with her. I asked her, her name and she informed me that it was Zaheda. She was quite older to me and was very beautiful. She asked me my name too and we instantly bonded. Within a few days of her stay in the orphanage, she was admitted to the English-medium school since she had received her preliminary education from the same. She belonged to a rich family and shared with me her story. After her mother had passed away, her father had remarried. She didn’t like staying with her step-mother, and her father beat her up a lot. Unable to bear the tortures, she had run away to her Khala’s whose family in turn had put her in the orphanage for a few days so her father doesn’t find her. She was due to leave soon once the whole matter cools down. Her Khala’s family was rich too.

On Zaheda’s first Sunday in the orphanage, her Khala and Khalu came to visit her. They brought her a huge box of food, fruits, chocolates, biscuits and a lot of other stuff too. Zaheda took me along with her to meet them and told them about me receiving no visitors. They asked me to join them, and then along with Zaheda fed me too. After a long time I got the opportunity to eat mutton for the orphanage was strictly vegetarian. The food was delicious and Zaheda shared with me all the other things they had got her too. Her Khala, Khalu and brother were very nice people. They promised me that every Sunday from then on, they will bring food for me too and they kept their promise.

Zaheda soon gained popularity all across the orphanage. She was appointed the captain of the Nalanda house and was assigned the job of managing the files in the office as well. Since she was fluent in English, all the officials respected her a lot and after coming from school, she would be immersed in office work. My memory is failing me here, but she was probably in standard ten then. Due to her influence in the orphanage, my status also elevated because she kept me with her at all times. At night also she would make me sleep beside her keeping her hand under my head so that I had not the slightest difficulty while sleeping. She was affectionate to me like an elder sister, and promised me that she would always take care of me. It felt like God had sent her to me as an anchor to protect me. Without her, I would never know what it felt like to hold on to somebody. She began taking care of the minutest details of my life and started teaching me basics of English too. With her arrival, I began walking with my head high up in the air and an aura of authority around me.

Everything was going smooth when one day, I fell very sick unpredicted. I vomited frequently and lost my appetite. I was rushed to the infirmary and a blood test was conducted. My reports revealed that I was suffering from jaundice after which I was instantly admitted to the hospital. I couldn’t even meet Zaheda because when they took me to the hospital, she was in school. I desperately wanted her to be by my side at that moment and my eyes kept searching for her, but ii wasn’t possible.

**“Admitted to Kasturba hospital”**

For my treatment, I was admitted to the Kasturba hospital. I don’t remember who from the orphanage had taken me to the hospital, but whoever it was left as soon as I was registered as a patient there.

I was kept in the general ward for kids and there were a lot of other kids there as well. I have not the faintest idea if all the other kids were suffering from jaundice too, but all of them were sick. All these other kids had someone or the other sitting beside them except me. I was all alone here too and the pain of not having a family came haunting again.

In the hospital too there were a lot of aunties, nurses and doctors. On the day of my admittance only I had to go through a series of blood tests, urine test and plenty of other tests. Every staff of the hospital knew that I had come from the orphanage, and took extra care of me.

When the doctor would visit me to examine me using the stethoscope, I would break in a fit of giggles because it felt ticklish. The doctors would love it whenever I would giggle. I would engage myself in a lot of notorious and flirtatious acts, and would burden them with a lot of questions. I would request them to let me use the stethoscope the way they did, and for my sake, they would plug it in my ears and make me listen to my heartbeat. I used to enjoy myself a lot there and liked everything there except for the part where they would use injections on me. I was mortified of injections.

For my breakfast I was served milk and bread everyday, which I loved to munch on. The food didn’t have any spices, and the nurse informed me that due to suffering from jaundice, I was supposed to eat bland food and the spices were harmful for my body then.

I lost my sense of time while being admitted to the hospital and have no clue how long I had been there, but having to guess I would say probably three to four weeks.

The aunts would notice that I never had any visitors in the hospital, and out of pity would shower me with love. As my health started improving, they began taking me to the kitchen along with them and would give lots of milk to drink and bread to eat. They would also bring me food from their home and feed it to me secretly. In a few days, I regained my health and maybe it was all because of their unconditional love and care. When the visitors of the other kids would come, they would bring food for me too because even they knew that I had come from an orphanage and no one to call family. Belonging from an orphanage, everyone from the doctors, nurses, aunties to the visitors, tried to shower me with as much love they could.

A few of the aunties used to take me along with them to the other wards and the other sections of the hospital too. One day one of the aunts took me to the section where women after their childbirth were kept, and showed to me the new-born babies. I requested the aunt to let me hold one of the kids in my arms, but she told me I was too young to hold them properly. On hearing my request, one of the mothers, made me sit beside her and assisting me gave her baby in my arms. I felt like a bundle of happiness had been snuggled in my arms and I kept staring at the peaceful expression of the baby. I was happy that the baby would have a family unlike me. The aunt interrupted my safe haven with the question whether my desire to hold the baby had been fulfilled and I responded in affirmation. She then quickly took me back to my ward and on reaching asked me to promise her to not mention any of this to the doctor and I kept my promise.

During the doctor’s visit, I would lie on my bed quietly and while lying down would continue with my childish acts of mischief. Everyone called me a flighty baby. The hospital had become a home for me in just a short span of time. I received unlimited love and affection there and a variety of food to eat. It was like an extravagant holiday for me.

**“My return to the orphanage”**

After I had fully recovered, I had grown plump due to the extra care in my food habits by the aunties. This time when the doctor came to examine me, the nurse informed me that I was perfectly healthy and the orphanage had then had to be intimated of my recovery so that I could be discharged.  I was both happy and sad at receiving this news. I was happy to go back to the orphanage because I had been missing my friends and wanted to play with them in the garden once again and was missing school and Zaheda too, but at the same time it saddened me because everyone at the hospital loved me and I had been receiving special care from them.

On the day that was fixed for my discharge, all the aunties and nurses came to meet me. The visitors of the kids who were still in the ward got me biscuits and chocolates. When I occupied my seat inside the orphanage’s van, everyone had tears in their eyes including me, and after showering me with love and blessings they bid me farewell. On my way to the orphanage, their faces and the memories made with them kept repeating in my head, and I kept weeping.

When I spotted the orphanage from a distance, all my pain vanished for the thought of re-uniting with my friends. As soon as I reached the orphanage, all my friends gathered around me and began telling me how much they had missed me all these days. The aunties were happy too and everyone complimented me for my improved health from the stay at the hospital.

Having cured of my illness, I resumed my classes devoting myself to studies. Zaheda began taking extra care of me because she didn’t want me to fall sick again. Things resumed their normal course and I was chosen for a dance performance. I had no experience in dancing before that and the teacher had done the selections without conducting an audition. I began panicking and requested the teacher to withdraw my name, but he assured me that along with the other kids, he would train me how to dance. This dance performance was a part of the celebration for some big day. The kids from the orphanage were asked to participate too. Hence, the teachers had selected a handful of kids including me.

Along with studies, the dance practices began too. Among the participants were four boys and four girls. I think the dance form was “tribal dance form” which celebrated the return of the hunters in the village. It dated back a long time ago and its back story amused me. This was a beautiful dance form and the teacher began training us rigorously. From among the four of us girls, Sakhshi and Mitali were good dancers and although I don’t remember the name of the third one, she was an amazing dancer too. I was the only girl who had no experience in dancing but the dance teacher had taught me well. The four boys were exceptionally good and danced effortlessly.

The venue for the dance performance was Shanmukhanda hall. Early in the morning we were taken to the hall and then were made ready there only. We were clothed in the adivasi attire; our hair was made like them and the make-up too. The idea was to make us resemble the adivasis who started the dance form to make it look more authentic and we aced at it. Before the performance, the dance teacher motivated us to dance with all our heart and win the first position. We did as we were told and ultimately fulfilled his wishes by winning the trophy. This was my first dance performance while the others had performed before as well. The eight of us together performed it with coordination and expertise. We didn’t miss any beat or make any mistakes and ended up winning the first prize. The dance teacher was very proud of us and in that very instance, selected us for another dance performance on the “Maharashtra Day.” The news came as a proud moment for all eight of us. We were happy that we had been able to gain the teacher’s trust. Back at the orphanage, we were greeted with much enthusiasm and respect for having been returned as winners.

**“The preparation for my adoption”**

One day Dattar Sir summoned me to his office and aunty accompanied me. He shared with me the news that a foreigner couple was coming to meet me the following day, and if they like me and if I like them to, they would adopt me and then take me with them. They would educate me, take care of me and I would be able to lead a good life. The news grieved me more than excite me. I told him that I didn’t want to be adopted and wanted to stay either at the orphanage or if possible then with my parents back at my village.  Dattar Sir was a really warm person. He read the pain in my eyes and very lovingly made me understand that they had tried with all their means to find my family but couldn’t and if I grew up in the orphanage, I would be trapped in its four walls forever. My only chance to life was getting adopted. He made me understand the advantages of the adoption, and after a lot of pestering; I finally agreed to meet the couple.

The next day, the expected visitors were made to sit in the office for a while before letting them meet me. Aunt got me ready for the meeting. After a while, I was taken to the office and they gestured me to sit beside them. With trembling feet, I took my seat beside them. I was feeling really scared because both the man and the woman were well built and exceptionally fair. They weren’t Indians. They made me sit on their lap and very affectionately placed a peck on my cheek. Having never experienced such a gesture from a stranger made me jump out of their lap in terror. I started running with all the strength I could gather and hid myself in a dark corner. Aunt came looking for me and on finding me, assured me that there was nothing to be afraid of anymore since the couple had left, and only with my consent would I be let adopted by a family.

A few days after this incident, Seema aunty made me sit beside her and made me understand that further if any family wishes to adopt me, I shouldn’t deny. If I got adopted I would have a comfortable life, would belong to a family and all my needs would be personally taken care of. But if I chose to stay back at the orphanage, after growing up I would be sent to the orphanage for older women and would have to spend the rest of my life there. I would have to work there a lot and would never be allowed to leave the building. My whole life would be spent trapped in the four walls.

After aunty’s advice, I determined that I will approve of adoption by any family that visits next. After a few days, another couple came to adopt me and Dattar sir summoned me to his office once again. When I entered the office, I say a couple sitting opposite to Dattar sir. Dattar Sir asked me to come near him and taking my hand into his told me that that couple was looking for a girl to adopt and asked me if I consented to go with them. Initially I didn’t say anything and kept staring at the couple. I don’t know why, but I felt a strange connection with them and after a while whispered into Dattar sir’s ear that I was ready to go with them. He wanted to know the reason to why I had consented and I narrated to him the whole advice Seema aunty had given me including my genuine liking towards the couple especially the lady. Dattar sir looked very lovingly me at me and then introduced the couple to me. The man’s name was Atul Bhogale and the lady’s name was Rita Bhogale. He introduced me as Nusrat. The couple gestured me to approach them and then chatted with me for a while. The lady asked me to refer to her as “didi” and assured me that they will take care of me.

Dattar sir was very transparent in the dealing of the matter. He informed me the reason they wanted to adopt me which was the failing health of Rita didi and her loneliness. If I agreed to go with them, she would have a company and I would be able to help her with the chores as well. They would pay for my education, bear my personal expenses and when the time would come they would arrange my marriage too. I would be a family member to them and receive all the love, attention and care from them. The couple was Hindu and I was Muslim. In this context, Dattar sir informed me that since I wasn’t eighteen yet, they wouldn’t be able to change my name legally to a Hindu one and once I turned eighteen it would be solely my discretion whether to change my name and religion or not. I was too young to understand all these technicalities then and the only thing that mattered to me was that Rita didi seemed a very nice human being and that she would take care of me.

Dattar sir informed me that the couple would leave in a while for the day and once the court orders the procession of my case, the judge would decide whether this couple would be allowed to adopt me or not. Rita didi and her husband bid me goodbye and after returning their gesture with a wide grin, I ran to my friends to narrate to them the whole episode.

Zaveda was very elated with the news and was happy for me because I would have a family and a comfortable life. At the same time we were sad with the thought of having to part our ways.  Zaheda was due to leave the orphanage in a few days and had been worried about me lately for the reason that with her withdrawal from the orphanage, I would lose the protective shelter from above my head which she used to provide. The news of my adoption came as a relief to her. We were not related by blood, but the way she used to worry about me and take care of me created a bond much stronger than blood relations. She was a mother, an elder sister and a close friend to me. The aunties were also happy for me. Everyone in the orphanage wanted a good life for me, even my teachers wanted me to study and reach great heights. I think it was because of their prayers that I was going to get a new life outside the orphanage.

**“First court hearing”**

I was informed a day before that I had been summoned to the court in Dongri along with Rita didi and her husband. The next day, before leaving, aunty instructed me to answer truthfully whatever the judge asked me, to attentively listen to all the instructions given to me about the adoption and to also keep a keen ear towards everything the couple told to the judge. Seema aunty presented herself as a very cold person, but deep in her heart she had the heart of gold.

After waiting outside the court for a while, the judge summoned the couple and me inside the courtroom. When we entered, the same judge from the previous processions greeted us. She still remembered every minute detail about me even after so many months and I was taken aback at the sharpness of her memory.

With a smile on her face, she asked me how I was doing and if I was happy in the orphanage or not. I assured her that I was being looked after affectionately in the orphanage. I had many friends and Zaheda took care of me and loved me a lot. I attended school and loved studying too. I narrated to her everything in one breath. The judge was very pleased with my answer. She made me stand next to her and taking my hands into hers, asked me lovingly if I was ready to go with the couple. I nodded in affirmation. She then enquired whether anyone from the orphanage had forced me to consent and I shook my head in negation. She also asked me the reason for consenting when I loved my stay there and I recited to her all that Dattar Sir and Seema aunty had made me understand in all these days, about how the couple would provide for my education, marry me off when the time comes, make me a part of their family and take care of me always.

The judge shared the views of Dattar sir and aunty and was convinced with my explanation. Dattar sir had himself inspected Rita’s home and had assured the court of them being well established. The only reason they wanted to adopt me was Rita’s declining health and her need of a company. So if they adopted me, I would fill that void in her life and she wouldn’t feel lonely anymore. She also assured me that after shifting with them if I don’t like living with them or if they tortured me, I had every right to demand them to take me back to the orphanage. I would be provided with the orphanage’s number and address which I was supposed to keep with me at all times. If I am treated otherwise from what they had promised, I could call the orphanage and return.

The judge explained everything to me in front of the couple and then after finishing asked the couple if they consented to everything. They nodded their heads in assertion and guaranteed the judge that I would be looked after with care in their home and they wouldn’t give me any chance to complain. The judge then made them sign some papers. After which she declared to the couple that once my exams were over and the results were out, then could they take me to their home. Turning to me she wished me luck for my exams and asked me to study with all my heart. We were taken outside the court room. The couple bid me goodbye and Seema aunty took me back to orphanage in the orphanage’s car.

As soon as I reached the orphanage, all my friends gathered around me and began questioning me about how everything went. I recounted to them the whole proceeding and also informed them that till my exams get over, I would be staying in the orphanage only after which they would take me to their home. After that day everyone in the orphanage began taking extra care of me including Zaheda. Those were the best days of my life.

After a few days the final examination of all the standards began. Our playtime was also reduced and we were made to study in the evening instead. A few kids who didn’t like studying would get scolded a lot. Time flew by and in a blink our exams were over. The day for my adoption was approaching near and it would make me weak in my bones for the fear of change. I would gulp down my anxiety, and would try behaving as normal as I could.

**“My last day in the orphanage”**

As soon as the exams were over, the kids who had relatives or parents left with them to spend the holidays. Only a few orphan kids who had no other place to go except the orphanage stayed back and I was one among them. Zaheda’s khala and her brother came to fetch her too. Zaheda hugged me and then caressing my head assured me that she would come back soon and then resume taking care of me. With this assurance and hope we parted our ways. Least did I know then that that would be the last time Zaheda and I would see each other ever. With her gone, I used to feel very lonely and I began wishing for the day of my adoption to come as soon as possible.

“Maharastra Day” which was celebrated on the first of the month of May was approaching and five boys and five girls along with me had to go to Shanmukhanda hall to perform. The dance teacher had made us practice every day till the final day. He knew that I was due to leave the orphanage in a few days so even he was very considerate towards me and would advice me to dance with all my heart given that would be my last performance representing the orphanage.

It wasn’t long before the first of May, Maharastra Day was here. That day early in the morning, we reached the hall. We wore our costumes and then our make-up was done. Kids from different schools had come there for the dance competition. The entire hall was filled with people and slogans of “Jai Maharastra” echoed from every corner. After a while, the competition began. Meanwhile our dance teacher kept instructing us to dance with all our heart and to not commit any mistakes. Our dance performance was a hit and the entire hall echoed with claps. We were awarded the second position this time and made our teacher proud of us once again. After receiving the prize, we returned to the orphanage. As soon as we reached, the aunties took off our makeup and changed our clothes. At the same time, Rita didi and her husband came to take me along with them. I had no clue that I was supposed to go with them that day itself and aunty informed me that the court had informed the couple that they were allowed to take me with them that day. All my friends felt very sad because I would have to leave all of a sudden without a proper goodbye. Even I wanted to spend that day with my friends in the orphanage, but couldn’t. The court had already made its decision and the family had come to take me too. I had to leave with them.

**“My first day at Rita didi’s home on May 1st, 1981”**

Aunty made Rita didi and her husband sit in the office while she put on nice clothes on me. She then took me to them and handed me the packet of clothes I had been wearing the day I had come to the orphanage and the earrings Manorama had bought for me. I was supposed to take everything along with me. They noted down the orphanage’s contact number and address and handed the note to me. After all the formalities, all the aunties and my friends bid me farewell with tears in their eyes. Aunty asked Rita didi to take care of me and bring me to the orphanage once in a while to meet them. They assured the aunty that they would genuinely take care of me and definitely bring me to the orphanage to meet them. I was very happy to hear that I would be able to come back to visit because then I would be able to meet Zaheda too. Before leaving I told the aunties and my friends that when I comeback I would donate Rs. 10,000 to the orphanage. I have not the faintest idea what made me say so when I had no clue how much of worth Rs. 10,000 held back then. I thought Rita didi and her husband would make that donation on behalf of me, but nothing as such ever happened. It sill pinches me that I could never make that promised donation. After saying good-bye to each one of them, I came outside the orphanage with Rita didi and her husband. The orphanage’s door shut and I was left with only memories of the place to carry along with me. That was my last day in the orphanage and today after 36 years I still haven’t been able to visit that orphanage even once.

May 1st, Maharastra Day became a milestone in my life that I will cherish forever. That was the day a new journey began for me.

**“A new journey in Bhogale family”**

In Rita didi’s family, she had a mother-in-law, father-in-law, brother-in-law and a sister-in-law. In total, there were six members.

Rita didi and her husband had been staying in a 3-BHK flat in Shiv apartments located in Kandivali’s Dahanukar wadi and took me there from the orphanage. The rest of their family used to stay in Dadar’s Hindu colony.

It was already evening by the time we reached home from the orphanage. She quickly cooked food for us and then the three of us sat down together to have it. The food was delicious. After a while, Atul jijajee, made the bed for us and made me sleep with them. I didn’t want to sleep with them for I wanted to sleep alone but they didn’t allow me to sleep alone so I had to comply.

The next morning, I freshened up and Rita didi served me tea and breakfast. After finishing my breakfast they explained to me that everyday Rita didi would cook while I would do the other chores like cleaning, dusting, washing the utensils and the clothes. For a demo, didi showed me how to do all the chores and I quickly learnt it. The next day, her husband admitted me in a government school in Kandiwali. The officials in the orphanage had handed all the papers required for my admission before leaving the orphanage, hence my admission was done very quickly. The school was due to open in a few days since it was their session break at that time. After my admission Atul jijajee informed me that till my school opens, the three of us would go to stay at his mother’s place in Dadar. He also added that his parents and siblings would be delighted to meet me. I kept nodding my head in affirmation, and was happy to meet the rest of the family who were going to be my family too.

**“The naming ceremony”**

After we came home from the school, Rita didi told us that they would call me Aruna because if her husband’s mother comes to know my real name, she would know that I was a Muslim and then she wouldn’t like me. She was a very orthodox Hindu and caste differences mattered to her a lot. So I was to never reveal my true name to anyone, and instead introduce myself as Aruna. She also added that she would introduce me to everyone as her aunt’s daughter that would make me her cousin and a part of their family. From that day onwards I was known by the name given by Rita didi but in my school everyone continued to call me Nusrat. This was because of the certificates that were submitted for my admission. According to law, till I was 18, no one had the right to legally change my name or religion and in all my certificates I was Nusrat, a Muslim. The relation of names with religion never struck any cords with me and I never bothered to ponder upon it. I knew that she was my family now and that I would have to follow every instruction of her.

**“My entry into the Dadar house”**

After explaining everything to me, the three of us came to the Dadar house. Atul jijajee’s mother opened the door, whom everyone referred to as “Aai”. She welcomed us inside. They had a huge home with six rooms, and once inside I was acquainted to Rita didi’s father-in-law, her brother-in-law Manoj and sister-in-law Astha. These people were Maharastrian and conversed in Marathi. Since I wasn’t familiar with the vernacular, they used to talk to me in Hindi. Each one of them greeted me with a smile and asked me my name, to which I told them my new name, Aruna. Everyone already knew that Rita didi had brought me from the orphanage, but even then they talked to me very nicely. Only her mother-in-law maintained some distance from me since she was a very religious woman and believed in caste differences. I quickly won their hearts with my jolly and playful nature.

From among all of them, baba was of the coolest temperament and used to talk lovingly and respectfully. Atul jiju’s younger brother, Manoj was a professor in some engineering college. He was very loving too and took a liking towards me since the first day. His younger sister Astha was well-natured too but I think being the youngest she was pampered a lot and didn’t want anyone else to be adored the way she was. Aastha was a student in college; the family ran on Aayi’ decisions.

We stayed there for another few days till my school re-opened, and then we went back to the Kandiwali flat.

**“Journey in a new school”**

On the first day of school, Atul jiju took me to the school in a bus. We boarded the B.C.T buses that used to leave from near his place and dropped us right in front of the school. I was a little scared because I had no clue about how the teachers would treat me, how my class-mates would turn out to be and whether anyone would befriend me. All these thoughts were running in my head the entire time.

On reaching the school, we directly went to the principal’s office and from there he took me to the class of standard five to make me meet my classmates. We went inside the class and he introduced me as Nusrat to the entire class. He also informed them that I was their new classmate and endowed them with the job of helping me adjust. He then instructed Atul jiju that he could leave then and turning to me he said that I could occupy my seat. Atul jijajee before leaving instructed me to take the same bus back home and to take care. The Principal left for his office too. As soon as they left, all the girls began insisting me to sit beside them, but the class teacher, Sinha sir made me sit beside a girl called Naina. There were only six to seven girls in the class, and rest were boys. I made friends with everyone on the first day itself. Not even for a split second did it feel like my first day in that school. Everyone was very welcoming and friendly and all my worries vanished. Naina was very happy to have gotten me as her bench-partner and we became really close friends since the first day. The other girls were very good too, Seema, Rekha, Alka, everyone became my friend.

Naina used to stay right beside the school. Her father used to work in the railways, as the train driver and they were given the railway quarters to live in. These quarters were nearby to the school and the railway line was nearby too. When the bell for the lunch break rang, Naina took me to her home. She informed me that she always does so and takes her lunch at home only. The other kids who lived a little far away either carried a lunch box or bought food from the cafeteria. I had neither brought the lunch box nor had any money to buy food. Atul jijajee had only given me money for the bus fare to travel back home. When I went to Naina’s home, her mother served me hot parathas with curd and pickle. Her mother also asked me not to shy away from eating. Her mother was a very generous and loving woman. Feeling her mother’s warmth and care took me back to the memories of my own mother. After a long time someone had served me food with so much affection just like the way my mother used to. Naina’s entire family, her father, elder sister Meena and two elder brothers, everyone was very nice. Naina was the youngest and was adored by everyone. She was two to three years younger than me too.

After finishing our lunch, we came back to the school. Before leaving, Naina’s mother asked me to come to their home every day from then on for the break. I kept thinking in my head how lucky Naina was to have gotten such an amazing family. I was considering myself to be lucky to having befriended Naina on the first day itself. After reaching the school, the Principal called me to his office and then provided me the books which were given to every student for free. I was very happy to receive the books since I loved reading books.

The first day at school wasn’t hectic. At the end of the day, Naina bid me goodbye and went to her home while I boarded the bus to Rita didi’s home. After reaching home, Rita didi served me food. After finishing my food, I washed the utensils and cleaned the house. When I got a little time to myself, I began reading my books. Atul jijajee put covers on all the books and I wrote my name on them. Later in the evening Rita didi took me to one of her relative who used to stay in the same colony. She introduced me as her aunt’s daughter and gradually I began knowing a few people from the colony.

In school, I had made good friends with both the girls and the boys. Among them a boy whose name was Rohit, was the best in studies. He was a very loving and genuine person. We became good friends. When the classes began in full swing, everyone got to know that I was at par with Rohit in studies. The teachers also began taking a liking towards me and so did the rest of the class. Naina was a bit weak in studies so I would help her with it. The other girls were weaker than Naina, so I would help them too. Time passed in a jiffy and it was time for our final examinations. All my papers went well and I had helped Naina a bit too. Our vacations began right after our exams ended. After a few days the results were announced and while I secured the second position, Rohit first. Naina also passed with good numbers.

**“The Vacation”**

For my vacations, the three of us went to live at Atul jijajee’s parents’ home. Atul jijajee’s mother began making me run errands for her, and given my quick adaptability, I got familiar with all the technicality of the work very quickly. They would ask me to fetch things from the market as well. Slowly, Aayi got used to my presence. I used to play carom and badminton with Aastha, Atul jiju’s sister, which was one of the work assigned to me, but I liked playing them too. Baba used to adore me a lot. Being the only one with a playful nature, an atmosphere of fun and frolic would spread in their home because of me.

After a few days, Aayi asked Rita didi and her son to shift with them forever along with me. She wanted the whole family to stay together. Atul jijajee agreed while Rita didi was a bit hesitant, but given her circumstances couldn’t express it. Atul jijajee didn’t earn and baba used to bear their expenses. They were fully dependent on baba for their living and hence she had to comply with her in-laws decision. Amidst all of this, no one thought about the inconvenience it would cause me to reach school. The school was almost one and a half hour away from Dadar. In another few days, we packed all our luggage from the Kandiwali flat and moved to Dadar forever. We were now seven inhabitants in this house.

As soon as we shifted to Dadar, Rita didi took up a job in an office that was in Kandiwali. She would leave in the morning and come back in the evening. I had to do all the chores of the home. Rita didi cooked and I used to do the rest of the chores. Aayi would deliberately give extra clothes and utensils to me to wash. She wanted to burden me with work all day and I never complained too. I was only eleven years old then and no one cared to wonder even for once that how I would be able to do all the work at this age. But I never complained or objected to any orders. I knew just one thing that I had to oblige to whatever they asked me to do because I had no other option. Many a times I had wanted to run back to the orphanage, but I had lost the address a long time back. I had never thought then that it would be necessary. I had believed all the promises made to me. I was scared of the uncertainty I would face with if I ran away from there. I was a little older now so my sense of judgment had improved too.

The first two times I had run away, I hadn’t thought much about the consequences. But this time I was scared, so I determined that no matter how much I had to work or struggle, I would face all of it and not elope. Probably because of this determination, God had provided me with immense strength to fight against all odds and persist. The neighbours would be shocked to find me working all day without the slightest crease on my forehead. Another thing that was shocking about me was that I was never tired; I used to look fresh all the time.

When my school reopened, I had to wake at five in the morning because the school was at least an hour away from Dadar. Baba used to alarm me at 4.30 a.m. in the morning and then woke me up at five. After freshening up, I would make rotis for everyone. Meanwhile, baba used to make tea and serve me bread and butter with it. After making the rotis, I would drink the tea with the buttered bread, and then get ready for school. I would leave home at around 5.45 a.m. It took me 15-20 minutes to reach the station. Atul jijajee had made me the pass for the train so I didn’t have to stand in a queue for the ticket. I think I used to board the 6.10 train for Kandiwali and would reach school by 6.50. The school used to start from seven and I would always reach early. Even after shifting to Dadar, no one would pack any food for me or give me money for it. It didn’t strike them that I might feel hungry in school and how it would make me feel when all the other kids would have their food during recess and I would have nothing to eat. But God had been thoughtful. He had already made arrangements for my hunger in Naina’s home.

I studied in that school for three years from standard five to standard seven, and all those years Naina’s mother served me hot chappatis. They had become my extended family. Rita didi also began visiting their home once in a while. Naina’s elder sister and Rita didi made good friends too. I excelled in academics and Naina’s grades also improved due to my influence.

After the school hours would be over, I used to come back to Dadar by train. I would reach home around 2.15 p.m. Aayi and Astha didi used to be at home at this time. When I would ring the bell to the house, Aayi would open the door and then both the mother and the daughter would sleep till the evening. Aayi used to keep the list of chores to be done ready for me which included two to three buckets full of clothes to wash, a lot of utensils to clean, wiping and dusting of all the six rooms, and buying vegetables from the market in the evening. I would have to do all these chores after coming from school every day. Aayi never hesitated while ordering the chores to me and she used to serve me the leftovers in a broken plate, but I never objected. Whatever she would serve me, I would eat it with a smile. It was due to God’s grace that I would never fall sick even after eating stale food.

**“Trip to Nagpur with Rita didi and Atul jiju”**

After my exams of the sixth standard, Rita didi informed her husband that she wanted to visit her family in Nagpur. Atul jijajee then conveyed this to his parents to which Aayi asked them to leave me behind. Atul jijajee couldn’t comply with this because he knew that some official from the orphanage might come on rounds when they were away, and on finding me there running errands for his mother might land them into legal trouble. Dattar sir had visited me once after leaving the orphanage, and had taken me outside for a while to talk in private. He had tried to find out if I was happy in the house and whether I was attending school regularly or not. He also tried to convince me to reveal any problems I might be facing in the house and assured me that I could do so without any hesitation. But I lied to him and told him that I was happy there and had nothing to complain about. He had no further questions to ask, so he dropped me home again and promised to come to meet me sometime in the future again. Understanding the situation, his parents abided by his decision and let them take me to Nagpur.

In a few days, we left for Nagpur. Rita didi’s step father and mother used to stay there. When Rita didi was six or seven years old, her father had passed away after which her mother’s family had brought them home and then married her off again. Rita didi’s mother’s second husband denied taking up the responsibility of Rita didi and her younger brother. Her step-father had a son and a daughter from his previous marriage. Rita didi’s aunt had taken her to Mumbai with her while her brother was adopted by some other relative. They would come to visit their mother once in a while only.

Rita didi’s aunt didn’t send her to school and made her do the household chores while her cousins attended elite school. When she turned 19 or 20, they married her off to Atul jijajee. The wedding was performed in a small temple and they didn’t even give her anything to take with her to her husband’s home. No one was invited to the wedding except her aunt’s children who were elder than her. Even Atul jijajee didn’t call anyone from his family and directly after marriage took her home. He had informed no one in his family about his wedding. When he took her home, his parents accepted her as their daughter-in-law.

After her wedding, she was going to visit her mother for the first time with her husband and me. I think it had been two to three years to her wedding. When we reached there, the daughter-mother duo cried a lot initially and after a while everything was fine. We were treated with grandeur. Didi’s step-father looked after us well. Her mother adored me a lot. I think we stayed for 15-20 days in Nagpur. We visited a lot of places and had food at her numerous relatives’ place. I was feeling amazing after visiting so many places. I didn’t have to work and was given nice food to eat. In my heart I wished we could stay there forever, but only if things worked out the way we thought them to. Soon our day of returning to Mumbai arrived. Didi’s mother made a lot of things for her in-laws. While leaving from there, Didi and I felt very sad. Didi was sad for parting with her mother while I was sad for the thought of returning to the Dadar home again. I didn’t like living there very much because I had very little freedom on my wishes there. Aayi’s command was everyone’s action in that house. On the contrary, Atul jijajee was very happy to return to his home and so we left. Finally, we were back to Mumbai.

**“The beginning of school”**

When we returned, Aayi was the happiest because her blissful days would be back with me taking up the responsibility of completing all the chores again. Aastha was happy too because her playtime partner was back and she wouldn’t have to be bored anymore. Astha didi had no friends. She had a small hump on her back because of which she was a little stooped and probably for this reason she didn’t make any friends. When I had come to stay at their place she used to study in Ruiya College. All in all, everyone was happy with my presence in the Dadar house because I used to do all the work without complaining and would make them laugh with my notorious actions.

The holidays were over and it was time for me to start school again. It had already been 3-4 days since the school had re-opened but after coming from Nagpur, Aayi loaded me with too much work and assured me that it was no issue if I joined school late. I joined school late and when I finally began going to school, everyone especially the girls were happy on seeing me. Naina was the happiest and she informed me that a new teacher had joined who would be our instructor for the seventh standard. She also added that while marking the attendance, the teacher had inquired about me and when the whole class had told him about me, he has been keen on meeting me since then.

When the teacher Naina had been talking about entered the class, he recognized me at once and asked me to confirm if I was Nusrat. He directed me to come near him and then asked me all about myself and after chatting with me for a while told me that he wanted to see me successful. That was the first time I had felt that someone was enthusiastic about my success. I liked the teacher a lot and after meeting him my self-confidence developed. I don’t know his full name but he was famous with the title of Mr. Sen.

As the days went by, the teacher noticed that I was smart and he began paying extra attention to me. He began encouraging me to participate in different events and would motivate me too. The teacher had interest in music and drama and he had organized a lot of events in the school. He was a renowned teacher of a Hindi medium school in all of Mumbai. Everyone liked him. He loved kids and kids loved him too. He used to always advice us to work hard and excel in our goals. His one advice still reverberates in my ears that, “if you want to be an actor be one like Amitabh Bacchhan, and if a dacoit then one like Mangal Singh.” What he implied with this proverb was that whichever profession you choose, be the best at it. He was the best teacher of my life.

**“My Training for the Oration Competition”**

Our teacher was very famous for writing speeches. In his previous school, students used to win such competitions all the time. In that school, he used to train a girl for her competitions and she always used to achieve the 1st position. This time, it was a new school and, his reputation being at stake, he had to be very careful when choosing a student to train. Since, it had been a record of his students winning; this time couldn’t be an exception. Every year, this competition used to be held in Mumbai, for all the government Hindi medium school. The teacher wrote down an essay and, handed it over to me and some of my other classmates. He asked us to memorize it and, narrate it to him. Although, my essays were good and, were always appreciated, there is a difference between writing and, speaking. I was a very shy person and, giving a speech in front of a crowd was the last thing on my mind. Naturally, I wasn’t prepared for the speech but, I still memorized it to save my teacher from any disappointment. The following day, he called the three of us and, asked us to narrate the essay in front of the whole class, turn by turn. I was terrified and, I requested him to allow me to be the last one to speak; he agreed. The other two boys recited the essays one by one. They even forgot a few lines. Everyone in the class was listening intently, and were even making fun in between. My teacher asked them to listen quietly. When my turn came, I got scared and, recited the entire essay in one breath. I wasn’t aware that I remembered the essay so well. All my classmates applauded and, my teacher patted my shoulder, happily. He asked the entire class’ opinion on who should be chosen from among the three of us. The entire class exclaimed “Nusrat!” in unison. Even he had selected me. It was decided that I would be taking part in the contest and, my teacher would be training me. I was unable to decide, whether, I should say yes or no. I was very afraid thinking whether I’ll be able to speak in front of a crowd or not. But, my teacher assured that there is nothing to be afraid of and that, he would help me become a fearless and, confident girl. He also said that he would make me practice daily and he would also teach me how to recite each line perfectly. After his assurance, I couldn’t say no and from the next day, he started training me for half an hour daily.

In the evening, I told everything to Rita didi and her husband, Atul. They said, that it was a good thing but, they enquired about the venue of the competition. I didn’t know the venue so Atul Jijaji said that if it was in Kandiwali then it would be fine else there would be a problem. Next day I informed my teacher about this and he assured me that he would convince my Jijaji. The competition was a month away.

Every morning he used to make me recite the essay during the assembly, thinking that it might help me overcome my fear of talking in front of a crowd. With every passing day, my voice, speech, and self-confidence improved, and the fear was long gone. My teacher was confident that I would win the competition. One day he called my Jijaji and told him that the competition would be held in some big school near Goregaon. I am not aware of the entire conversation between the two of them, but later my teacher told me that he had convinced Jijaji. Anyway, there was no reason to deny as he didn’t have to pay and, it was in Mumbai.

One day before the competition, my teacher explained everything to me and, he asked me to come 10 minutes early so that I could rehearse one last time before leaving. He also said that he would accompany me to the school in Goregaon which was only 15-20 minutes away from Kandiwali. I went back home happily. Aayi was amused to see me recite the essay while working. At night I even narrated it to Rita Didi and Jijaji. Jijaji looked a bit upset. On enquiring, he said that, I should have brought a letter from the school stating that they would take me to some other school for the competition so that if something were to happen, the school would hold accountability for it. I told him that he should have informed me about this earlier. To this, he didn’t say anything and, went off to sleep.

**“Denied from attending the competition”**

That night I asked Baba to wake me up early the next morning since I had to reach school early. The next day I woke up with a wide grin on my face, made the chappatis and then got ready for school. I had pressed my uniform crisp and creaseless, and had polished my shoes shining black. While I was having my breakfast, Atul jiju woke up and enquired whether I was ready for school. I replied in affirmation and after quickly finishing my breakfast wore my shoes. I thought that jijajee had woken up early to wish me luck for the competition, but as soon as I approached to wear my bag, he instructed me not to wear it and also denied me from attending the competition since the school had not sent any consideration letter. He started blabbering a lot of things and snatched my train pass too. I began crying because he was being unreasonable and my teacher’s and my reputation were at stake too. I kept requesting him to let me go that day and promised him to never take part in any competition further. He turned a deaf ear to all my pleas and even after Baba requested him, didn’t budge from his decision. I began crying loudly which woke up Rita didi and she came out to enquire what the whole commotion was about. While sobbing, I explained the whole situation to her, and after her persistence, he finally let me go.

My eyes and face was all red due to all the crying. I quickly washed my face and left for the station. I covered the usual ten to fifteen minutes distance from my place to the station in just seven to eight minutes that day and leapt on the train. Throughout the way, the whole incident of the morning kept echoing in my head. I wanted to burst into tears, but had to console myself. I didn’t want to make a scene in front of so many strangers.

On reaching the school, I found my teacher and the others waiting for me. I think I was ten to fifteen minutes late. My teacher taunted me for arriving late than usual when being specifically asked to come early that particular day. I didn’t respond and even he didn’t waste any further time on the topic. The only thing he told me was that if I would have come early I would have been able to practice one last time in front of the school, but now it was too late for that.

Taking me along, we hurriedly left for the venue. Having sensed my unusually quiet behaviour, on our way, he enquired the reason for my sadness. I fabricated the story of me being sick which had led jijajee to stop me from coming to school today which was followed by a heated argument between us and caused my sadness. The teacher then patted my back and asked me to not dwell on that topic but move on. He assured me that everything would be fine and if need be, he would talk to my jijajee. We reached the venue. A lot of students from different schools had come and the student from my teacher’s last school, whose name was Mitali, was also there. As soon as she spotted him, she approached him and took his blessings by touching his feet. He introduced me to her after which she joined the teacher from her school.

After she left, the teacher told me about her being the best orator and having been winning the first prize since three years. He also informed me that he used to write the essays for her while teaching in his old school. After this, he encouraged me to perform with all my heart and win the first position this time. He had full confidence on his training and believed that I could win the prize, but I was sceptical about it. I was feeling heart-broken due to the morning’s episode and was unsure whether I would be able to speak fluently or not.

Soon the competition started. All the participants were sitting next to their teachers. The names started being called out and turn by turn everyone gave a good performance. When my turn came, I spoke fluently and the entire hall thundered with claps. It felt like I had chances of winning the first position after all, but the feeling soon turned sceptical when Mitali took the stage. She had a very charming voice and the same thunder of claps could be heard for her too.

When the results were declared, I had secured the second positing and Mitali first. I was sad for having let down my teacher’s expectations, but to my surprise he was rather content with the fact that I hadn’t made any mistakes while presenting the speech. He assured me that it was due to Mitali’s charming voice that she had won the prize and not the speech, but securing the second position worked well for us too. It was a matter of honour for our school to have secured that position among so many schools.

After the whole event was over, we returned to the school. Every teacher praised me a lot, and since that day I became one of the favoured students. Naina was so excited that it felt like her personal achievement rather than mine. While returning home I kept wondering what Atul jijaee would tell me and how the atmosphere of the home would be, but to my surprise, everything was normal at home. Like every day, aayi opened the door for me and then handing me the list of things to be done went off to sleep. In the evening when Baba returned, he asked me about the completion and jumping with joy I informed him that I had secured the second position. He congratulated me and Manoj jiju and Rita didi too, but Atul jijajee didn’t say a word. Rita didi asked me not to worry about him and assured me that he would come to terms with it in time. After this incident, I never took part in any competition.

In a few days our session for seventh standard was due to get over, and it would have been time for us to part ways. This school was only till the seventh standard after which we would have to take new admission into another school till standard ten. Naina’s family got her admitted to some private school while Atul jiju looked for some other government school for me since the books and education was provided for free there.

After a few days, our examinations got over and our vacations started. I could meet Naina very less now since it was only seldom we went to Kandiwali. For further education, I was admitted to some government school in Lover-Parel a few miles from Dadar. It would take me 30-40 minutes to reach to school and I used to cover the distance on foot. I made good friends in this school too. My best friends there were Sanjana and Rati. Sanjana was very good in studies while Rati was mediocre. Sanjana was Jain and her two sisters and a younger brother used to study in the same school. Rati had no mother and her father had re-married. Her elder sister was of marriageable age and from her step-mother she had two half-siblings who were quite younger to her sister and her. Sanjana and Rati lived closed by. While returning from school, their homes would fall on the way and we would part ways on reaching their home, while I would continue to walk back home. Sometimes on Sundays, I would finish all my work quickly and then taking permission from didi and jijajee, would go to their homes for a while. Sanjana’s mother used to love me a lot and would serve me a lot of delicacies. Rati’s elder sister also adored me. I was of a jolly nature and whenever I would laugh, she would comment that my smile seemed to be hiding a lot of pain. She used to ask me all the times, if everyone treated me well at Rita didi’s house, and each time I would divert the topic after nodding a yes. The thought of having no one to call family would eat me up from inside, but I never shared it with anyone. All my friends had a home, family and siblings while I had no one. This was the reason I liked staying in the orphanage because around kids with similar background as mine never made me bother about the absence of a family.

In a few days Manoj jijajee got married. His wife’s name was Sara and she was very beautiful. The initial days after his marriage were spent happily, but in a few days tension began erupting in the house which kept increasing with time. One day when I returned from school I was informed that there had been a huge fight in my absence and Atul jijajee and Rita didi were packing their bags to leave for the Kandiwali apartment. They instructed me to finish all the work as soon as possible and then pack my bags as well. I couldn’t understand anything that was happening around me and simply obeyed the order without questioning. Baba was sitting numb on a chair in the hall, Manoj jijajee had gone out with his wife and Astha didi was untouched by the whole event out of habit. Only Aayi showed signs of distress. When I was done with my work, Aayi made me sit beside her, and in a very low tone asked me to tell Rita didi that I wanted to stay in the Dadar house with everyone. She began crying in front of me and began telling me that if I shifted to the Kandiwali flat, she would be very upset. Her sobbing affected me emotionally and I requested didi and jijajee to let me stay with Aayi. They didn’t comply with my requests stating that my responsibility was upon them and Aayi only wanted me for all the work that I did.  I was left with no other option, but to go with them. My biggest worry was the distance I would have to cover to reach school, but then who bothered about my inconvenience anyway in that house. It was always me who had to adjust according to everyone else’s whims and fancies. Aayi tried her level best to convince them to leave me behind, but Atul jijajee didn’t budge from his decision, and we shifted to the Kandiwali flat that day itself.

After shifting, I would have to travel from Kandiwali to Dadar to attend school. It took me thirty minutes on foot to reach school from Dadar station. The session of standard eight was going to end soon and that is when I decided that I wouldn’t attend school for the next class, instead would take up private classes and appear for the matriculation exam directly. This would help me save a year and pass junior secondary early. They counselled with Manoj jijajee after which they withdrew my name from the school and admitted me to private classes which run by the name “Sunhat’s Classes.” These classes were attended by older people too and I think I was the youngest among them. I had to attend classes four days a week. Although I didn’t like the idea of attending classes their much, but all I cared about was to get done with my board’s exams as early as possible. Not much was taught in these classes and a lot of students depended on private tuitions after the class. Even after preparing for the exams on my own, I came out with flying colours. My determination and passion won each time.

After finishing my intermediary, I began persisting Atul jijajee to allow me to attend college. He told me that he would have to consult it with Aayi and Baba, since he had no money to pay the fees of the college. If Baba agreed to bear the expenses, he would enrol me in some college with minimum fees. Atul jijaji was always in between jobs and Baba had to bear all his expenses. That time he wasn’t even working; hence he had to depend on Baba for all his financial decisions. Baba had made fixed deposit accounts of all his children in the bank. He himself owned a garage and Atul jijajee used to go there sometimes.

When Atul jijajee discussed this matter with his parents, Aayi reacted repulsively. She was totally against of me joining college. That day, there was a huge argument in the house over the matter and it was finally decided that Baba would not pay my fees since Aayi didn’t support the decision. Atul jijajee gave up too and declared that it was beyond his capability to pursue the issue further. My heart was shattered and my dream of attending college shattered too. Right when I was about to give up my friend Nishtha, who used to stay in the same colony, informed me that Dr. Murlidhar, who had a clinic in the colony and lived right in front of our house, needed a compounder to assist him. She told me that if I was willing, she could arrange my meeting with the doctor. I would have to work from 5.30 p.m. to 10.30 p.m. This would enable me to earn some money which I could further use to pay my college fees. She also told me the name of the college where I could study in minimum amount since it run on charity. I discussed it with Rita didi and jijajee, and they told me that if I was willing to pay my fees with my own earnings, they had no issue, but had only one condition. Before leaving for college, I would have to finish all my work. I readily agreed to it, and then quickly went to meet Nishtha. She took me to the doctor who after asking me a few questions, asked me to join work from the next day. He instructed Nishtha to explain me all about my job role and the medicines too because she had been working there since a long time and thus had experience. She used to work there in the morning and the evening shift. The clinic used to stay shut in the afternoon. She was a meritorious student just like me, but due to financial problems had to work to support herself and her family. Her father was terminally ill and unemployed. Her mother’s health was no better, and she used to earn some money by cooking in one or two houses. However, this earning wasn’t enough to run the family. Nishtha being the eldest among three siblings, a sister and a brother, had taken up the entire family’s responsibility on her shoulders.

After passing standard ten she had joined as a compounder under the doctor working on one or two other jobs on the side. In all the years I had known her, I had never seen her rest even for a while. She was probably my age only, but was very tall and lean.

Nishtha explained my entire job role to me which included the information of the medicines and what was kept where, how to sterilize the needles, read the prescription and make packets of medicines and few other things too. I acquired everything in a short span of time and it was fun working with Nishtha. Everyone knew me as Aruna there, and Nishtha managed to get me an advance to help me join the college on time.

**“The beginning of college”**

Atul jijajee accompanied me to the college and admitted me there. It was a girl’s college. I took up commerce. The college’s fee was Rs.250 and my salary at the clinic was Rs. 300. The 50 rupees that I saved went for my train’s ticket and personal expenses.

The first day when I went to the class, I found that every girl was wearing nice clothes and had groomed themselves well. On the contrary, I had no new clothes to wear. Never before that day had I felt the need for new clothes because in school we used to wear uniforms, but that day made me realize of my scarcity. I determined in my heart that I will adjust no matter what the situation might be.  Every professor that came to our class asked all of us to introduce ourselves to the rest of the class. Everyone introduced themselves after which the classes began. The medium of teaching was English and it left me wondering how I would be able to cope with it. I wasn’t familiar with English hailing from a Hindi-medium school. All of this was very new to me.

When I returned home after college, didi and jijajee asked me about my first day and I told them it went well. After drinking tea, I left for the clinic. Nishtha was already present there and when she asked me about my first day, I shared with her everything. She consoled me saying that gradually I would understand everything, and would adjust.

It used to be eleven by the time we would be able to shut the clinic. Everyone from the colony went to this clinic and it remained crowded all the time. Nishtha and I would be tired after making so many packets of the medicines. After closing the shop, we would talk for a while since we never got any time to talk amidst all the rush while working. I used to go to bed at around twelve and then wake up early the next morning, finish the household chores and leave for college. Right after coming from college would rush to the clinic leaving me with no time to sit and study. My days passed following the same routine every day.

**“The decision to drop out of college”**

Even after a few months, I wasn’t able to adjust in the college. I used to feel lesser than the other students because they were very different from me. I never had new clothes to wear and my sandals weren’t proper too. The thing that troubled me the most was the break time. All the girls used to roam here and there and go to different places to eat. They would insist me to accompany them too, but due to shortage of money, I used to avoid their invitation making excuses. Once or twice I had accompanied them at which instance each one of them had divided the expenses among themselves, but having no money on me one or two among them had to bear my expenses. My self-esteem was greatly shook and it killed me from inside. After that episode I stopped accompanying them and would instead sit in the class all by myself.

To make matters worse, when the tests were conducted I couldn’t answer anything properly. I couldn’t understand the question and hence was clueless about the answer too. While in school, I had never faced such loss of words, but due to not knowing English and not having any time to self-study, I had to face that day. I was in a dilemma and couldn’t think of what to do next. Then after calculating a lot, one day I decided to drop out of college. When I declared my decision to didi and jijajee, they wanted to know the reason for such a drastic step. I lied to them saying that it was due to my inability to manage college and job at the clinic at the same time, and quitting the job wasn’t an option because it helped me pay my fees, hence the decision. They agreed to my decision without any further inquisition. I couldn’t share with them that the real reason for dropping out of college was the misfit that I felt among the other girls. They had nice clothes and sandals to wear, fancy bags to carry and money to spend while I had none of those things. I felt embarrassed among them. On top of it, I was clueless about English and had no time to myself to learn that language.

I think I had attended classes for just a month or two after which I had finally decided to drop out. Both the doctor and Nishtha were heart-broken by my decision. But I felt at peace because now I wouldn’t have to go with the trouble of worrying about how my day would go in the college or how I would face everyone that day or what excuse I would make to not accompany them during lunch break. A whole lot of burden was off my shoulders.

**“The beauty parlour course”**

When I had mentioned that Nishtha was very efficient, I had actually meant it. She knew stitching, would deliver milk in houses early in the morning, worked as a compounder and applied mehendi for money. When the clinic closed in the afternoon, she would spend her time doing all this extra work. One day she took me to one of her friend’s house whom she was supposed to apply mehendi. On seeing her henna painted hand, even I wanted to have it applied on my palms. She applied it to me as well and the next day when my palms glowed with the colour, I felt happy. I requested Nishtha to teach me the art and that was when she informed me about her friend Sakshi, who run classes for beauty parlour and mehendi courses.  She had a lot of students in her classes and I insisted her to take me there.

I informed about it to didi and jiju and they asked me to take Nishtha along and enquire about the course. The next day, in the afternoon, Nishtha and I went to meet Sakshi. When we reached there I noticed that she had used her home’s hall as the parlour where many girls were training on the job. I liked the atmosphere of the place and Nishtha enquired about the mehendi course.

Sakhsi informed us that for the Mehendi course, she would charge 300 rupees while the entire beauty parlour course would cost me 1200. It was a three to six months course. After gathering all the information, we returned. On our way, I disclosed to Nishtha that I was inclined towards the beauty parlour course, but it was too heavy on my pockets. She advised me to discuss it with Atul jijajee.

On reaching home, I informed didi and jijajee about the fees of the course. Like always, Atul jijaee denied bearing the expenses using his unemployment as an excuse. I began pestering Rita didi to convince him to give me the money, and it was then that she advised me to approach Mano jjijajee instead given his stable earnings.

After a few days, Manoj jijajee came to the Kandiwali apartment to visit us. It was then that I discussed with him about the beauty parlour course and its fees. He wanted me to assure him with the guarantee that I would be able to bag a nice job after completing the course, only then would he give me the money for it. I convinced him that I would definitely get a good job after doing the course and after a few days, he gave me the fees and encouraged me to learn well. I was elated and thanked him with all my heart. The next day itself I enrolled myself to the course and began my classes from the same day. I took my classes from 10 to 1 and then in the evening continued at the clinic.

In a few days, I became very skilled at the course. My mehendi applying skill was the best. Sakshi used to take me with her to the homes of the would-be brides to assist her while doing their make-up and would sometimes let me apply mehendi to them too. While I was learning there, a lady called Babita joined the mehendi course. She used to notice me whenever I would apply mehendi and one day approached me with a job offer in her soon-to-be established beauty parlour in our colony itself. I quickly accepted it saying that it being in my colony itself would work in my convenience.

When the beauty parlour opened, as promised she hired me. It gave me a platform to practice and I made acquaintance with a lot of people. I left my job at the clinic, but Nishta and I were still friends. Babita aunty was a well-natured woman and I liked working under her. She was of a calm temperament. Another girl, Tashi, who was the senior hair-dresser also worked under her. She was really good at her job. This parlour was the biggest one in our colony and we used to receive a lot of customers. Babita aunty began giving out classes too, and many girls and women joined the classes. Babita aunty handed most of the teaching job to me. The class used to remain crowded with students among whom one particular girl whose name was Soniya was an exception. She was garrulous, and was attending the classes just to pass her time. She had completed her college and was staying at her aunt’s place for a few days while looking for a job. Her parents used to stay in Lonawala. Her father worked in the Navy and in every two to three years he got transferred. Taking all these things into consideration, Soniya had come to Mumbai to her aunt’s place to hunt for a job. Our parlour was right next to her aunt’s place, and because her aunt’s children were way younger than her, she had no one to pass time with and had taken up the course to keep herself occupied till she found a job. She wasn’t very keen on learning the skill. I became really good friends with her and we began visiting each other’s house. Soniya became friends with Rita didi too and they became our family friends. Soniya’s aunt and her husband were very humble and generous people. I loved visiting them because they were full of warmth and care. Rita didi used to accompany me too. In a few days, Soniya was offered a job in a company and at the same time her father was transferred to Mumbai. They got a house in Kolaba’s Nebhinagar and Soniya left to live with her parents. Kolaba was very distant from Kandiwali and thus our meetings became less frequent. Rita didi and I used to visit her sometimes. Soniya’s family was very nice too. She had a brother who was two years younger than her and a sister who was ten years younger than her. Her brother’s name was Gopal. All in all she had a very sweet family.

One day, Soniya casually let it slip into her parent’s ears to get me and Gopal married. Initially, I took it as a joke, but as time went by, Gopal and I became really good friends and started liking each other. It was then mutually decided by both the families that Gopal and I would be married when the right time came.

Meanwhile, I quit my job at Babita aunty’s parlour and joined another parlour called “Megha’s parlour”. The salary was better there since it was located in Andheri’s Lokhandwala complex. This was a posh area where all the rich people and film stars lived. In Babita aunty’s parlour, a client named Meera used to come who was very happy with my work. She would often invite me to her home and gradually I developed a bonding with her as well. Meera aunty’s husband was a very jolly person. His name was Philip John and he was an accountant by profession. He was the accountant for Megha’s parlour too. Both of them adored me. It was due to their recommendation that I had been able to get the job at a higher pay. The parlour was named after its owner, Megha.

Meera aunty and Philip uncle came as angels in my life. They helped me a lot. In times of need, they were the first people I would approach to. Rita didi befriended them too and they became our family friends too. Atul jijajee never liked visitors nor liked visiting others. He had inherited this from his mother who took the same disliking to visitors and visiting. Only Manoj jijajee and his wife shared our liking to visiting people and inviting them to our place due to which we got along well. After the birth of their daughter, I became more close to them. Her name was Komal and she was very lovable. On an off day, I would go to the Dadar flat to meet her because I loved spending time with her. Aayi-Baba used to be pleased on my visits too, and Rita didi and Atul jijajee would also come to Dadar to stay for two to three days very frequently. With Komal’s birth, everyone forgot their differences and re-united. We still lived in Kandiwali only and visited Dadar on holidays.

Aayi was happy with the news of me dropping out of college. She still wanted me to shift with them and work for her just like before. She also needed me to accompany her to the temple. She was a devotee of Lord Dattatray and every day spent two hours from 10 to 2 reciting the shlokas and worshipping him. By observing her every day, even I learnt the prayer and became devoted to the same God. Aayi used to fast on Thursdays and I began fasting on the same day too.  However, whenever she used to take me to the Datta temple, she would make me wait in the verandah because she knew I was a Muslim and wasn’t allowed to enter a Hindu temple. But I was no less either. As soon as she would begin with the rounds around the temple, I would run to the priest, take the Prasad from him and then munch on it eagerly finishing it before Aayi finished her rounds. I was very cautious to not reveal my small rendezvous to Aayi and she never found out too.

From the day we had shifted to Kandiwali, Aayi had no one to accompany to the temple and my absence had started bothering her. Astha didi wasn’t very keen on prayer. Baba never visited any temples. Manoj jijajee and his wife were a bit religious, but never accompanied Aayi.

After a few days, they sold the Dadar flat and shifted to Bandra where Manoj jijajee’s wife’s parents also lived.

When I used to work in Megha parlour, I used to visit the Bandra house often. Komal was growing up and I was her best person. She would be elated at the sight of me. I had developed a deep bonding with Manoj jijajee, his wife and their daughter. It was getting tougher for me to stay in Kandiwali with Atul jijajee. He would lose his temper on silliest of issues. Sometimes he would say such mean things that I would feel like storming out of the house that very moment, but would gulp down the humiliation and move on. He knew that no one from the orphanage would come for inspection since I was above 18 years of age and legally an adult. He would pick fights with Rita didi too. I think unemployment and staying at home all day had messed up with his brain.

Whenever the fight would reach an escalated level, Rita didi would leave the home and go to Shabnam bhabhi’s house. Shabnam Bhabhi used to live in the apartment above ours. She was Muslim and was a very decent woman. Everyone from the entire building respected her and her husband. Two to three women from the building including didi used to hang out at Shabnam bhabhi’s home.  Shabnam bhabi never shut the doors of her home. Her husband used to bring fresh fruits and bhabhi would distribute it to us; especially mangoes and litchi.

Shabnam bhabhi was very adept at stitching. She would stitch salwar kameez for me many a times. She had two sons; the elder one - Shamim and the younger one- Arbaaz whom they used to call Ari. Bhabhi’s family was also just like my own family. Sometimes I used to share my thoughts with her. Everyone in the building knew about Atul Jijaji’s behaviour, and that is why no one used to visit our house much. He didn’t even approve of me talking to Nishtha. Ever since I had started working at Megha parlour, I used to give a part of my salary to Rita Didi. All the people at the parlour, including Megha Didi were very nice. Megha Didi always treated us like friends. She used to get extra food and mostly we used to eat more than half of it. We never felt that we worked under her. I worked there for a couple of years and, I really enjoyed working there. In the parlour, there were six girls including me; Swati, Srishti, Aditi, Sonal and Bhawna. I was the youngest of them all. I was close to Srishti and we were friends for many years after that. Swati was the smartest of us all and, she was firm too. She was married and had two kids. Sonal was Chinese and, she was also married and had two kids. Bhawna had a daughter and, so did Srishti. It was just me and Aditi who were still unmarried. I used to like Swati a lot as she was a humble soul. She was very straightforward and if something would go wrong, she would say it upfront. The rest of us were a little mischievous. Many a times I used to visit her house. Her husband, Prabhat Bhai was also good. Most of our clients were also very friendly and they often ordered food along with us. Megha didi had hired a lady, Rachna Bai, to clean the parlour and, also for making tea. She used to keep smiling even when she was loaded with work. All the clients used to like and respect all of us.

**“A job offer from Dubai”**

Srishti and Bhawna had started working in Dubai. The lady, who had helped them get the job, was staying in Mumbai at that time. She was planning to open a parlour in Dubai. She asked Srishti if any friend of her wanted to work at the new parlour. Srishti called me and told me that, if I wanted to work in Dubai then I must go and meet that lady. That lady went by the name of Mrs. Kapoor.

I told Shristi that I was interested to take the offer, but my family especially Atul jijajee wouldn’t agree to it. She asked me to let her know after taking permission from my family. Apart from this issue, I didn’t have a passport too. I consulted with Swati if this would be a judicious decision and she responded in affirmation. She also told me that while working in Dubai I would be able to save some money too.

That very day in the evening, I conveyed the information to Rita didi who agreed to it and then promised me that she would try to convince Atul jijajee for it. Initially he was reluctant, but after a lot of pestering gave in. Now I was left with just one issue, the passport.

Amidst all of this, I went to meet Manoj jijajee and Sarla Bhabhi in Bandra. I told them about the offer and Sarla bhabhi told me that only after they meet Mrs. Kapoor, they would take any decision. I called up Mrs. Kapoor and let her know that my family and I wanted to meet her. She gave me her address and informed me that she was ready to meet us. Then one day, Manoj jijajee, Sarla bhabhi and I went to meet her. Sarla bhabhi asked her a lot of questions after answering which she convinced them that I would be safe there and that there was nothing to worry about. When Sarla bhabhi was completely convinced, she agreed to send me abroad and then we left from there. On our way back, she told Manoj jijajee that everything looked fine and she sees no harm in sending me with her. After this, Manoj jijajee applied for my passport while having to struggle a lot for it. With my Muslim name on the birth certificate, my passport was issued under the name Nusrat Hussain.

**“Convincing Gopal and Sonia”**

I shared the news of the job offer with Sonia and Gopal. Both of them were very sceptical towards it. One of their relative’s wife had gone to Bahrain a few years ago and never returned after marrying some other man there. They were worried that their parents might never agree to send me to Dubai after that incident. I requested them to convince their parents. I told them how foul-mouthed Atul jijajee had become and made them understand that it was getting difficult to adjust with him as days passed. I painted a glorious picture of the future in front of them proposing that while I would be away, Gopal can work towards settling down, and then when I return we could get married. We couldn’t marry then because Gopal had just passed out of college and we weren’t of marriageable age either.

Soniya was aware of all the troubles I was going through, but she had no say in these matters. She assured me that she and Gopal would try their best to convince their parents. I also asked her to reveal it to their parents that I was Muslim. They shrugged off the idea stating that it wasn’t necessary then. They would disclose it to them after marriage. I wasn’t in favour of the idea. I didn’t want to start a new life on the foundation of a lie. Gopal convinced me saying that when the right time would come, he would disclose it to them and anyway the wedding wasn’t going to happen anytime sooner so they had time for such conversations.

Soniya and Gopal were successful in convincing their parents. Before leaving, I went to meet them. His parents gave me their blessings and asked me to take care. Gopal’s younger sister, Sonal hugged me and told me that she would miss me a lot and their dog, who would always be elated at the sight of me, would miss me too. I told them that I would miss them too, but it was just a matter of two to three years after which we would live together. Gopal was gloomy, thinking of the little time had with me before my departure. I tried consoling him talking about the happy future we would spend together after I would come back.

In another few days, my passport was issued, and Mrs. Kapoor applied for the Visa. She was taking along three of us, and paid for our air fare too. Every formality was over and we were completely ready to leave for Dubai.

**“Dubai”**

Before leaving, I met with all my friends and relatives. Each one of them had their own series of advice to lend and I just kept nodding to all their suggestions. In my colony I had a very close friend whose name was Nishi More. She used to stay in the building next to ours. She was of my age only and in her childhood her parents had left her with her uncle and aunt. After the death of her uncle and aunt, her cousin sister began treating her very badly. She didn’t let her continue college after class 10 and would keep her as a maid in her house. I made friends with her through her cousin sister who used to call me to her home for parlour work. We used to have heart-felt conversations with each other whenever we would meet. The news of me going to Dubai grieved her. After I would leave she would have no one to talk to and would be lonely. Her cousin didn’t approve of her befriending anyone. I consoled her saying that if I settle well in Dubai; I would look for a job for her there and then we could stay together. She hugged me and wished me luck.

After bidding farewell to Rita didi and Atul jijajee, I came to the Bandra house from where Manoj jijajee and Sarla bhabhi were supposed to drop me to the airport the next morning. Mrs. Kapoor was to meet us directly at the airport. The next day, when we reached the airport, Mrs. Kapoor with her husband and two other girls were already waiting for us. Mrs. Kapoor introduced me to the two other girls, Joyce and Mary. Mary was elder to me. I was thrilled to meet her because she was from my colony in Mumbai. While I was working at the clinic she and her husband would come there to visit the doctor. She and her husband used to have a friendly conversation with Nishtha and me. Having a known face as my colleague in Dubai came as an assurance to me of my well stay there and even Manoj jijajee and Sarla bhabhi were relieved with the news. I still remember the date of that day, 31st October, 1991. After hugging Manoj jijajee and bhabhi, Mrs. Kapoor and the three of us went inside the airport. No one other than the passengers was allowed to enter the airport, so they had to stay outside only. As soon as I went inside, jijajee and bhabhi left for home. After checking in, we boarded the flight. It was the first time for me and Joyce while Mary had travelled by air before too. I was both scared and excited. When the plane left the runway, Joyce and I were dead scared. Mary who was sitting in between both of us kept assuring us that there was nothing to be petrified of. It was a three hours journey and while the plane was in air, we felt calm, but our fears returned once the plane began preparing to land. We clutched the arm of the seat with all our strength and sat tip toe. Mary couldn’t stop laughing at the sight of both of us. The fear subsided once the plane landed on the runway and we finally reached Dubai.

**“31st October, 1991”**

When we left the airport after landing in Dubai, an Arab man received us with a huge car. He was along with his wife who was probably a Russian. They took us to a hotel where Mrs. Kapoor had booked two rooms for a few days. One room was to be shared by the three of us while she and her husband checked-in the room right beside ours. Mrs. Kapoor had quite many acquaintances in Dubai. People would come to meet her all the time especially the girls working in parlours. She had sent a lot of girls to Dubai to work in parlours over the past few years.

The parlour where we were supposed to work wasn’t ready yet. The man who had received us at the airport was responsible for the establishment of that parlour. I think he used to fly to India quite very often and was like a brother to Mrs. Kapoor. He respected her too. A few days before the parlour was inaugurated, Srishti came to meet me and meeting her felt good. Our parlour was located in the Karama area where Srishti and Bhawna’s parlour was located too.

When the parlour finally inaugurated, Mrs. Kapoor arranged a room for the three of us which we had to be shared with a Christian family. The apartment was right beside the parlour. This was my first time living in a shared apartment and I was both excited and sceptic. When the parlour picked up business, Mrs. Kapoor handed all the responsibility to Mary instructing her to handle the accounts well and look after me and Joyce. She gave us some advance to help us support our daily necessities, and had also appointed a PRO to assist us and deal with government matters. After briefing to us all our responsibilities, Mrs. Kapoor and her husband returned to India.

**“The first visit to a church”**

We started our new life in the apartment. The three of us shared the responsibility of cooking and cleaning among ourselves equally dividing all the work. Joyce and Mary were Christians from Goa and used to converse in Konkani. I could grab only a few things from their dialect and hence preferred Hindi while conversing with them.

They were accustomed to non-vegetarian food while I mostly preferred vegetarian. So they took up cooking while I would help them chop and cut the ingredients. They made delicious food and soon I got accustomed to eating non-vegetarian every day. Mary was friends with four to five people who were Christians too.

On Christmas, both of them wore new clothes and got ready to visit the church in the middle of the night. Mary invited me to join them. Being clueless about how the church looked from inside or how things operated there I was a little hesitant, but Mary assured me that I had nothing to trouble myself with and just had to have faith in them. She was going to take us to a Christmas party at her friend’s after the visit to the church. Without much thought, I agreed to go with them. When we reached the church, it was very crowded. We had to stand in the church ground along with a lot of others. Although I couldn’t see anything inside the church, I could still hear everything that was being said inside. Melodious songs were being sung in English which didn’t make sense to me but I was drawn to the music. It was so peaceful and soothing. The program ended at 2 a.m. after which Mary’s friend picked us up and took us to his place. This was the first time I was visiting someone’s house in Dubai.

The whole house was decorated and a few others guests were there too. The first thing they offered to us was a slice of cake with red wine. Haven’t had tasted wine before, I told Mary about it and she told me it was customary to drink wine on Christmas. She also told me that it would taste like juice and wouldn’t affect me. Everyone cheered with their glasses and then took a sip. Initially it tasted weird but after two to three sips, I got used to the taste. Loud music was playing and people were dancing. They dragged me to the dance floor as well and even after I confided to them about not knowing how to dance, they made me dance with them. We had dinner after that and her friend dropped us home. From the way they celebrated Christmas I developed the idea that Christmas was all about drinking wine and other types of drinks, dancing, eating nice food and wearing nice clothes. No one explained to me the purpose behind visiting the church. The Church’s that we had visited was named St. Mary’s Church.

Even after Christmas, Joyce and Mary continued going to Church and I would accompany them sometimes still not knowing the real purpose of doing so. They never introduced Jesus or Mother Mary to me and I wasn’t interested either. I was a devout Hindu then. No one in Rita didi’s home had ever forced me to accept Hinduism. I had devoted voluntary to it and anyway with my marriage to Gopal, I would be a Hindu. Even after being a devotee of Dattraya idol, I hadn’t been able to visit a temple after shifting to Dubai.

The family we were sharing the apartment with were Christians from Kerala. Their family comprised of a couple and two daughters. They were decent people and never bothered us. I was the only non-Christian among them. Keralite Christians were different from Goan. While the family lived a very simple lifestyle, Joyce and Mary wore fancy clothes, and attended a lot of parties.

**“Friendship with the Pakistani family”**

Mrs. Kapoor had hired me for my Mehendi applying skill. Before taking me to Dubai she had made me apply mehendi on her palm to test my prowess and having been impressed by my skill had handed me the job. But here in Dubai people didn’t like the Indian style mehendi that I was trained at, they wanted the Arabic style. So clients wouldn’t approve of my work. Joyce and Mary didn’t know how to apply mehendi and since the clients didn’t like my henna work, they would leave the parlour disappointed which would hurt me because it was due to my inefficiency that the parlour was suffering loss. The parlour right beside ours offered them Arabic style mehendi and their hairdo was better than ours as well. This parlour grabbed all the customers’ attention leaving us with very few clients. That was an old parlour while ours had recently opened. Each time Mrs. Kapoor would call from India to enquire about the business we would have to break the news to her about it running on loss. It broke our hearts to do so but we were helpless.

One day, a Pakistani woman came to our parlour. I made her eyebrows which didn’t hurt her even a bit. Happy with my expertise she began chatting with me. She enquired about the girl in charge of applying Mehendi in our parlour and I informed her that it was I. She then shared with me that her daughter applied beautiful mehendi designs too and that they went to Arabian’s houses to apply mehendi. Seeing a ray of hope, I instantly asked her if her daughter would train me in that form, to which she complied but with a fees of 300 Dirhams. I told her that I would let her know after consulting with my boss. She noted down her address and phone number and asked me to call her up to let know if I was interested. The next time when Mrs. Kapoor called I told her about the course and she agreed. In the afternoon when the parlour closed I was to take this course and pay the fees from the parlour’s account. I informed the Pakistani woman whose name was Shireen and she asked me to join from the next day.

As planned, the next day I went to Shireen aunty’s home at 2.30 p.m. Her daughter answered the bell and received me with a warm smile. Their house was very pretty and well organised. Her family comprised of her husband, an elder and younger son, her daughter and a house-help. Her daughter introduced herself as Aafreen and informed me that she was the one who would deliver the course to me. They were fluent in Urdu while I conversed in Mumbaiya Hindi. My dialect amused them a lot.

Aafreen got me seated me in the living room, offered me refreshments and handed me the cone and asked me to apply my style on her palm. She wanted to test my skill and to analyse where I stood. My hands were trembling while applying the mehendi because I was petrified. Afreen lightened the mood by commenting that she weren’t a ghost whom I need to be afraid of. Shireen aunty also joined her to inspect my skill and after I was done concluded that my grab at the form was very refined because of which it would require a lot of hard work from my side to learn their form.

Her younger brother was very flighty and notorious. As soon as he returned from school, he came and sat beside me and told me that if I wanted more Pepsi I needn’t feel shy and just ask him to get it. I broke in a fit of laughter at his innocence. He was very cute and garrulous. His name was Abram. From the first day itself he started calling me “Baaji” (Didi). Shireen aunty began asking me about my family and the place where I stayed in Mumbai and when I informed them that I was an orphan, she was despaired. She tried making me feel better by offering me to treat her as my mother and her family as mine. Aafreen too asked me to consider her as a younger sister. She was two to three years younger than me. She introduced me to her father who after knowing my story offered me to call him dad as well. Their elder son, Faisal wasn’t a very talkative person unlike the rest of his family, but even he asked me to consider their home as my own and feel free to visit them whenever I felt like. Abram had already begun calling me his Baaji so there was no further need of his affirmation. Their gestures lit up my heart and it felt like I finally had a family of my own.

**“Are Pakistanis and Indians really enemies?”**

The entire journey back home from Shireen aunty’s house, I kept wondering how misled my idea of Pakistan’s and India’s strained relationships had been. Before this I had never met a Pakistani family to develop my own conceptions on the topic and all that I had gathered from people’s opinion was that Pakistan and India didn’t see eye to eye. This was the first time I had met a Pakistani family and thus was able to formulate my own perception. They were as human as we were. They were very generous and loving towards me and made me feel home.

We cannot generalize people based on the actions of handful of them. Just like a nation is made of both good and evil people, across religions too there are both bad and evil people. I began visiting Shireen aunty’s house twice or thrice a week. Aafreen would train me diligently and we became very close. I started considering them as my family because they were very hospitable towards me.

One day, Aafreen invited me for a night stay on the Thursday of that week. I accepted the invitation and went to their home that night after finishing my duties at the parlour. They had cooked Pakistani delicacies for me. It was the first time I was trying it and it was mouth-watering. That was also the first time I was sharing the dining table with the entire family and hence was a little awkward, but Abram’s non-stop chattering soon led my awkwardness slip away.

He was a very lovable kid and was the apple of everyone’s eye. As my friendship with them began growing, I began spending every Thursday night at their house. Aafreen and I would share the room and watch Hindi movies all night. Her entire family loved to watch Bollywood movies. Some nights we would spend talking about ourselves or our families. Our bond kept growing stronger with every passing day. They would take me along on family outings and to restaurants too. I owe it to them for I was able to tour the entire U.A.E. We used to go for outings on every Thursday and Friday. Aafreen’s father treated me like his own daughter and being short-heighted I would get lovingly teased by the name “Choti Duniya” by them. I never minded whenever they would refer to me with this nickname. It rather made me feel like a part of their family. Often people give nicknames to only those who they actually love and care about and therefore it actually felt nice for a change.

**“Two new parlours”**

Mrs. Kapoor began flying down to Dubai in every two to three months. Whenever she would visit, Mary would give her the account statements of the parlour. She would always meet us individually and encourage us to disclose any worries we might have with her without hesitating. On one such visit, she also informed us that she was planning to open two new parlours, and was bring a lot of girls from India to work there. One of the two parlours would be located in the market area and hence would grab a lot of customers which the first parlour couldn’t due to its inferior location. It would take time for her to get all the Visa’s approved, but wanted to start the parlour on this visit only. That parlour was an already established one which Mrs. Kapoor was only taking over and hence wanted to retain its old clients. She instructed Joyce and Mary to run the new parlour while leaving me to handle the operations in the old one all by myself because it didn’t have many customers. When the Visa of all the girls would be ready which was to take two months, she would bring all of them to Dubai and then open the third parlour too.

From the time I had started visiting Aafreen’s place, Joyce and Mary wouldn’t talk to me much. They were closer to each other than with me. They conveyed my night stays at Aafreen to Mrs. Kapoor too and when Mrs. Kapoor enquired about it, I explained to her that I only left after finishing my work and join duty sharp at four the next day without any delay ever. She seemed convinced, but advised me to be cautious because it was a foreign country and she was responsible for my safety there. I assured her that neither was I involved in something illegal nor will be in future so she had nothing to worry about.

In a few days, Joyce and Mary began handling the new parlour while I dealt with the old one all by myself. Mrs. Kapoor had endowed me with the responsibility of handling the accounts of the old parlour while Mary would handle the new one’s. After a few days of the commencement of business in the new parlour, she left for India.

Mary began visiting the old parlour once in a while and would sit and chat with me. On her each visit, she would run her eyes in all directions while talking and then would enquire about the business and the clients. I would fill her with all the happenings. Most clients came for Threading and a few of them for facial. Mary used to behave very nicely with me on her visits and I used to think that it was out of her concern and care for me but least did I know that she had something else on her mind which would reveal in time.

**“Malfunction in accounting”**

On her next visit, Mrs. Kapoor brought 5-6 girls with her. Three girls were to work in each parlour. As planned the third parlour would open now. Since the whole accounting system was to get remodeled, Mrs. Kapoor asked me and Mary to clear all the accounts and give her the statement. I disclosed the account statements for my parlour, and she asked me if there was any muddling in it. I assured her that there wasn’t any such thing and then out of curiosity asked her the reason behind her inquisition. It was then that she confided in me that Mary had been making frequent calls to her all these months, and complain to her about the mismanagement in the parlour I was responsible for. She had informed her that on her each visit she had found threads scattered on the floor, and had also tried to imply that I might be earning more than I was showing in the books. I was shocked at the news and couldn’t believe my ears. I told Mrs. Kapoor to fire me immediately and deport me to India if she had the slightest doubts on my credibility, but she handled the matter efficiently shrugging it off as something that keeps happening between colleagues. After this incident, I lost my interest in working there. Just around that time, I got the news that Mary had been caught mishandling the accounts. I guess Joyce had secretly confided to Mrs. Kapoor that Mary had been sending enormous amount of money to India which she had been stealing from the business by not writing a lot of business in the books. Mary was in big trouble. Mrs. Kapoor called her to the old parlour and asked me to check her books. Mary was scared to her wits and whispered to me to correct the books anyhow. The sponsor of our parlour had also accompanied Mrs. Kapoor this time.

It was mandatory to have an Arabic local sponsor to set up a business there. Without the sponsor’s signature, no government work could be sanctioned and the sponsor had to be paid a certain amount each year. Our sponsor was an Indian lady married to an Arabic businessman. Mrs. Kapoor knew her really well and hence had trusted her with the sponsorship. When Mary was being interrogated, the sponsor took her off guard with the threat to hand her over to the police if she didn’t spill the beans. Mary was trembling with fear and it broke my heart to see her that way. I think after that she had apologized to Mrs. Kapoor who had decided to give her another chance with an admonition to not repeat the mistake ever.

Things went to normal after that. Mrs. Kapoor bought a 3-BHK flat and all the nine girls shifted there. We left our old apartment. The old parlour’s responsibility was handed to Mary, Nancy and I. Joyce handled the other parlour with two new girls and the third parlour was under the responsibility of three new girls. The six new girls were Goan Christians too. I wasn’t being able to adjust with them at all. I began spending most of my time at Aafreen’s. Sometimes I would stay over at Srishti’s, but since she had been sharing the room with three other girls, I would have to face a lot of problems there. I wrote a letter to Manoj jijajee that I wanted to return to India having not been able to adjust. They agreed with my decision considering my unhappiness. When I shared this with Srishti, she informed me that if I left without completing my contract, I would have to bear the entire air fare and also would have to give a notice 2 month prior to leaving to Mrs. Kapoor and the Labour Office. She convinced me to complete my contract period and then leave. My contract was for three years and only one and a half year had passed. I couldn’t understand what to do and called up Manoj jijajee to counsel. He advised me to talk about it to Mrs. Kapoor the next time she visited and if the fare had to be borne by us, they would send it with Mrs. Kapoor.

The next time Mrs. Kapoor called I asked her to ask the sponsor to cancel my visa since I didn’t want to work in Dubai anymore. She informed me that unless I completed the time period on my contract, she wouldn’t let me come to India. She explained to me the same technicalities that Srishti had informed me about. I assured her that I would pay for the ticket, but even then she didn’t comply. She thought that I wanted to work with Aafreen and hence wanted to leave her parlour. Aafreen’s family run the business of mehendi applying and Mrs. Kapoor was convinced that I would return to Dubai to work for them after leaving my job at her parlour. I tried to convince her a lot explaining to her how difficult it was becoming for me to adjust with everyone but she didn’t budge even an inch from her decision. She hung up on me saying that she would make any decision after evaluating the situation with her own eyes and also she was to visit soon so I wouldn’t have to wait much for her decision.

I had kept my notice/resignation letter ready before Mrs. Kapoor’s arrival only. As soon as she arrived, I handed her my notice letter, but she denied from accepting it saying that she had no intentions of cancelling my visa. She wanted me to complete the tenure of my contract, and then leave. Mrs. Kapoor was a very generous woman and never tortured us. I had no issues with her, all I wanted to do was to go back to India and settle down with Gopal. But everyone there was convinced that my motive behind leaving the job was pestering of the Aafreen and her family to join their business. After Mrs. Kapoor denied from accepting the notice, I submitted it to the Labour Office. I had submitted my notice in the first week of January, 1993 and it was due to end in the first week of March. If Mrs. Kapoor still didn’t cancel my Visa after the notice period, I was free to complain about them to the Labour Office. I was determined to leave by whatever means it took.

**“Meeting Kiran at the party”**

Around the first month of my notice period, Nancy celebrated her birthday on 22 February which was also her uncle and aunt’s marriage anniversary. Her uncle had asked her to invite all her colleagues to their home because he had arranged for her birthday/ his anniversary party. She invited us all. Her boyfriend Jose and his friends were to attend the party too. Jose used to work in Aviation Club. All the girls agreed instantly except me but she convinced me saying that this would be the last time I would be doing so since I was due to return to India in a month. Everyone else began convincing me too assuring me of my safety. I was bound to oblige and agreed to accompany them.

From the next day, the holy month of Ramdan for Muslims and Lent for Christians was to start. Mary educated me that during Lent, the Christians fasted too. This time I was going to fast too because Afreen and her family members were. I was going to fast for the well being of my family especially my mother. Out of curiosity I asked Mary that if Lent was to start from tomorrow why had Nancy’s uncle arranged for a party the previous night. Mary explained to me that for the next forty days there would be no celebrations, hence the choice of that day.

While everyone else was wearing Western clothes, I dressed up in Indian attire. Everyone looked modern and I was feeling a little out of place among all of them. By the time we reached the venue, a lot of guests had already arrived. Her uncle welcomed us and then introduced us to other guests. Suggesting us to enjoy ourselves he left to attend to other guests. Nancy’s boyfriend and his friends were drinking and dancing. They offered drinks to us and all the other girls accepted it except me. I asked for a soft drink and they began asking me the reason for not boozing. I shrugged off the matter by saying that I wasn’t used to drinking after which they let me alone.

The boys and girls began dancing with each other while I occupied a seat in a corner. After a while, Jose’s friend Kiran began pestering me to join them on the dance floor. I tried to avoid him by saying that neither did I know how to dance nor was I interested. He enquired that while everyone was enjoying themselves on the dance floor, why was I sulking in a corner. I relied to his question with my silence. He offered to teach me how to dance, and dragged me to the dance floor. He started teaching me how to dance step by step, but I was terrified inside. I followed one or two steps and then ran to the chair shrugging off his hand. Everyone stood enjoying the show.

After I occupied my seat, he approached me and while standing next to me tried to start a conversation but I turned a deaf ear towards him. After trying for a while, he left and joined his friends on the dance floor. I had a very ominous feeling about all of this and kept cursing the moment I had agreed to come to the party. I wanted to leave straightaway, but it was too late at night and I couldn’t have left unescorted.

Mary and Nancy would come to me every now and then and ask me to feel at home but I couldn’t share my fears with them for the thought of ending up ruining their mood. I kept staring at people dancing on the floor and couldn’t even enjoy the music it being in English. Kiran was the only one who would stand by my side every now and then while I sat mum on my seat.

People were taking photographs and I was least interested in being clicked so didn’t join them for any photograph. After the drinks and music stopped, everyone dined and then sat together to gossip.

Everyone noticed how desperately Kiran was trying to befriend me and how uncomfortable it made me. At last I approached Mary and pleaded her to return home. We thanked Nancy’s uncle and then bidding everyone farewell, left. The boys accompanied us till the ground floor, especially Kiran. I ignored his presence and as soon as we got the cab, we left. Once inside the cab, all the girls started suggesting that Kiran might be interested in befriending me. I shrugged the topic stating that I was least interested in returning his favour since it was my last month in Dubai and as soon as I would return to India, I would marry Gopal. They didn’t dwell on the topic further.

That night I couldn’t sleep properly. I felt a strange dilemma inside my head. I kept cursing myself for attending the party and was troubled at the idea of Gopal’s and Manoj jijajee’s reaction on my visit to the party.

After two to three days of the party, Jose came to show us the photos from the party. Mary brought the album to me and told me that someone had captured me and Kiran in a frame and we looked good together. When I saw the photo in the album it sent jitters down my spine. In the photo, he was standing right behind me with both his hands on either edge of the chair. It looked like we were posing for the photo. I quickly took the photo out of the album, and tore it into pieces in front of Mary. When Nancy noticed the photo missing she assumed that I must have kept it with myself, and narrated the same to Jose. They delivered this information to Kiran who called me in my parlour the next day proposing to befriend me. I rebuked him a lot and warned him against calling me further declaring that I was least interested in befriending him, and having made myself clear, disconnected the call. I had said really mean things to him in anger.

The next day, Jose rang me up and informed me that my words had disturbed Kiran to such an extent that he had lost his balance while playing Volleyball and broke his leg. He was admitted in the hospital and giving me the number to his accommodation asked me to ring him up when he returns from the hospital. I couldn’t understand what to do. I rang up Kiran’s accommodation, and his friend informed me that he wasn’t home yet and once he comes back he would ring me up himself. It was eating me up thinking that my words had had such drastic consequence on him. After a few hours, Kiran called me up and I apologized for my behaviour. He forgave me instantly and consoled me saying that we could talk like friends. He was advised complete bed-rest for fifteen to twenty days.

That time he used to work as a bartender in Aviation club which required him to stand throughout the day. Due to the fracture, he wouldn’t be able to join work till he completely recovered.

He began calling me every day from then having nothing to do while at bed rest. Being the month of Ramdan, the parlour used to stay shut during the afternoons. All the other girls would go home and I would lock myself in the parlour.  I had started keeping Roza during that time and arranging lunch was no issue. So I would stay in the parlour and take my afternoon nap there. When Kiran started calling me, we would talk for hours. He loved to sing and would always sing me a song whenever he would call. I loved listening to his voice. I used to talk to him about me and Gopal. I informed him that I was serving my notice period then and in fifteen to twenty days when my visa gets cancelled, I would return to India and marry Gopal.

When he fully recovered, he came to meet me at my parlour. I felt at a loss of words with him physically present in front of me. We chatted for a little while outside the parlour and it was then that he informed me that his brother was visiting Dubai on Visit Visa to look for work. Before leaving he promised to take me to lunch one day along with his brother.

As promised, he took us to lunch one day. His brother, Stephen talked to me about his wife who used to stay in Bandra around Manoj jijajee’s house only. I was meeting a stranger for the first time, hence couldn’t talk much. After lunch, I returned to my parlour and they left together. We continued our conversations over the phone. Even after I served my notice period, Mrs. Kapoor didn’t cancel my visa. Out of rage I walked out on her letting her know my decision of not joining work from the next day. The next day, I rang up Kiran and informed him that I might not go to work from the next day and stay at Aafreen’s from where I would go to the Labour Office. That same afternoon, he came to meet me because I had informed him of my final decision of returning to India as soon as my visa gets cancelled. He hadn’t informed me about his visit and when he came, I talked to him for a while in the stairs. I declared to him that I wouldn’t further meet or talk to him and while going to India would call and let him know. Before leaving, out of nowhere, he kissed on my cheek which left me flabbergasted. Just then the building’s watchman who was passing by saw Kiran kissing me.

Kiran instantly left after that and I returned to the parlour. That night I went to Aafreen’s to stay and narrated the whole story of Kiran to her. Her family offered me their home to stay in as long as my visa doesn’t get cancelled. I had determined in my heart that I wouldn’t return to work from the next morning.

**“The watchman narrates the incident to Mrs. Kapoor”**

The next day Mary called me up at Aafreen’s place and informed me that Mrs. Kapoor wanted to meet me right away. I rushed to meet her and on meeting me she informed me that the watchman had told her that Kiran and I get intimate on the stairs. She accused me of pretending to be an innocent girl in front of her and then indulging in vulgarity as such behind her back. Her words came as a shock to me. I tried to explain to her the whole situation but she maintained her stand. The parlour’s sponsor and the other girls were also present there and I felt very insulted wondering what they must be thinking of my integrity. I stayed resolute and demanded her to cancel my visa the very moment because I wasn’t interested in working there anymore. Out of rage, she agreed and asked me to come to the labour office the next day for the cancellation. She also informed me that she wouldn’t pay me the month’s salary which she would use to pay for my air ticket. I was just happy to hear the part where she agreed about the cancellation and didn’t bother about the next statement. I could go home finally.

**“The shocking turn of events”**

The next morning I reached the labour office. Aafreen dropped me to the office and I had carried the copy of the notice letter with me. In my knowledge, after the cancellation of Visa, I would be given a period of twenty-one days to arrange for my departure. I had planned to leave within two to three days of the cancellation itself and hadn’t packed my bags yet. Half of my luggage was at the parlour’s accommodation and the other half at Aafreen’s. I had thought that before booking my tickets, Mrs. Kapoor would consult with me the date but things such a turn I had never even dreamt of.

While I was contemplating all of these things, Mrs. Kapoor arrived at the office with the sponsor. When our turn came, the sponsor took me inside the office. She spoke to the officer in Arabic after which he enquired about my reasons to quit the job. I told him the truth about not being able to adjust in Dubai. The next thing he asked me about was the clearance of my salary and I told him Mrs. Kapoor had decided to book my tickets using the last month’s salary. The officer was convinced and informed me that I would get twenty-one days from thence to arrange for my departure. He asked the sponsor to present a proof of the booking of my ticket for which she showed him a ticket that was booked for that day itself. The officer then told me that since my ticket was booked for the day, I would have to leave that day itself. I tried explaining to him my situation. Neither had I packed my bags nor did anyone in India know about my arrival, but he was helpless. He suggested that whatever time I had till my flight; I use it to pack my bags. He instructed the sponsor to take me to the immigration office to get the stamp on my passport and then arrange for my drop to the airport.

The sponsor along with her daughter and her son-in-law took me to the Immigration and God knows what they talked to the police there in Arabic, which led them to confiscate my passport and lock me up. The sponsor soon left with her family without conveying anything to me about the reason of arrest. The whole event left me out of my wits. I kept asking the lady police who had locked me up to let me know the reason at least, but no one spoke a word. The only thing they told me was that it was the sponsor who had asked them to keep me locked and in the evening the police would take me directly to the airport. Meanwhile, my entire luggage would be deposited in the office by them. The lady police asked me to maintain my calm because no one would lay even a finger on me inside the lock up. She let me know the time they had allotted for phone calls by the prisoners and gave me the chance to ring up anybody I wanted.

My brain was completely numb and I kept weeping. The other girls, who were of different nationalities, sharing the cell with me, kept asking me the reason for my arrest. I didn’t answer anything to them and kept standing near the gate. I was terrified at the sight of those girls who looked weird and didn’t sit even for a split-second. After a while, all of us were given food and I didn’t touch mine.

In another few minutes, the lady police approached me to ask me if I wanted make ant calls. I gave her two names who I wanted to call. She then let me out of the lock up and took me to the telephone. The first call I made was to Afreen’s family. They were shook by the news and promised to bring me my stuff and some money as soon as possible. The next call I made was to Kiran. He was taken by the same horror, but was equally helpless. He enquired about the flight’s time and the time I would be taken to the airport. I asked the police for the information, and they told me that they would take me to the airport at six.

When I conveyed this to Kiran, he promised me to try to come at the airport. The police informed me that it was still two to three hours to six and till then I would have to remain locked up. I complied having no other option and took my place near the door once again. After a while, Mrs. Kapoor along with Mary came to drop off my luggage. Mary was devastated at the sight of me behind the bars and Mrs.

Kapoor blamed my adamance to leave against their wishes for my situation. I was quivering with anger, and didn’t speak a word to her. They left soon after that. A few moments after their departure, Shireen aunty and uncle came to visit me with a suitcase. They had bought new clothes for me and gave me some money too. Shireen aunty kept weeping all the time and tried giving me strength to fight the adversity. I asked them to inform Manoj jijajee about my arrival so that he could come to pick me up. They stayed for a while and then the police asked them to leave. I was then instructed by them to change my clothes if I wanted to. I packed my luggage sitting on the same spot I had been standing at, and didn’t change my clothes because I didn’t want to go further inside the lock up. The whole incident was very humiliating for me and hurt my self-esteem deeply.

**“Meeting with Kiran”**

Around six in the evening, the police instructed me and three other girls to board the vehicle parked outside the station. Before taking my seat I requested the police to let me make another call. They agreed. I quickly dialled Kiran’s number and let him know that I was being escorted to the airport and my passport and ticket was with them too. After hanging up, I took my seat inside the vehicle.

Two officers were escorting us. One of them was driving and the other one holding our documents. I think they knew my situation and were very understanding towards me. One of them confided in me that he knew I hadn’t committed any crime and it was only for the sponsor that I was in the situation. He assured me that they would cause me no trouble and safely help me board my plane. He also asked me to be cautious the next time if there is ever a next time. Sobbing I told them I would never return to Dubai ever after this incident and they consoled me with a light chuckle.

When we reached the airport, I found Kiran waiting for me at the entrance. He approached me and the police asked me if he was a friend. I nodded a yes after which they took him inside the airport too. They left us alone to talk while they completed all the formalities for my departure.

Both of us felt at a loss of words initially and all of a sudden, Kiran proposed me to marry him. I denied his proposal straightaway stating that I was due to marry Gopal as soon as I returned India. He showed real determination and even after my rejection promised me that he would wait for me till my marriage. He strongly believed in his heart that I was destined to marry him only. I didn’t say anything further, and just then the police officers came to take me for the boarding. They asked Kiran to leave too. Kiran bid me farewell and I left with the police to board the flight. I rang up Aafreen one last time to enquire whether they had informed my jijajee about my arrival to which she assured me they had and he would be there to receive me in Mumbai airport. I boarded the flight soon after that.

I couldn’t think of any way to narrate the whole episode to jijajee and the rest of the family. This was only one among the many things that was bugging me. The purpose behind meeting with Kiran and our friendship in Dubai and his unexpected marriage proposal was bothering me too. I was also troubled about the letter Gopal had written to me a few days earlier. In my absence, there had been Hindu-Muslim riots over the Babri Masjid incidence and he had written to me about the horrendous situation of the country at that time. A lot of people had lost their lives and he had himself missed a near death situation.

While travelling in a car, he had been surrounded by some Muslims who would have killed him had the driver not used his presence of mind to escape the situation in time. His letter had panicked me. All I could think was his parent’s reaction after coming upon the truth of me being a Muslim. I had determined in my heart that the first chance I would get after reaching India, I would convince Gopal to inform his parents about my true religion and only after that would I marry him.

It hadn’t even been a month to the whole Babri Masjid fiasco. I felt trapped from all sides. All these thoughts were suffocating me.

The uncertainty of my marriage with Gopal after the revelation of truth to his parents and even if they did would we stay happy together was eating me up. The thoughts of Kiran added dilemma to my already confusing situation. It felt like that life was mocking at me and I couldn’t even strike back. I was completely at life’s mercy.

With all these thoughts running in my mind I had no clue when I reached Mumbai. I had made up my mind to stay strong in front of Manoj jijajee and not tell him about all the humiliation the sponsor had caused to me and about Kiran too. I had no clue on how he would react and thought it better to keep it hidden.

**“Sharing things with Sarla bhabhi”**

Manoj jijajee had been waiting to receive me at the airport.

He drove me to the Bandra house. Komal started jumping with joy when I reached home. Everyone was happy with my return except Aastha didi who was stoic. Aayi asked me how my stay in Dubai was and I lied to her that it was alright.

Sarla bhabhi asked me to change and freshen up. She served me snacks and then asked me to rest for a while to get rid of the travel fatigue. I behaved completely normal in front of them without giving them the slightest of hints of the fatal incident.

In the evening, Manoj jijajee and bhabhi sat with me with a cup of tea to gossip about Dubai. Komal went off to play. It was then that bhabhi asked me if I had been keeping something from them. Upon her inquisition I couldn’t control myself any longer and narrated to them the whole incident at the immigration desk along with my friendship with Kiran.

Bhabhi showed immense faith on my credibility consoling me that befriending someone doesn’t make me a bad person or that going to jail wasn’t my fault. She suggested me to move on and focus on my future. Talking to her took a weight off my chest. I felt very light and satisfied.

I called up Gopal and let him know of my safe arrival. He invited me to visit his house the next day and I accepted the invitation. I informed bhabhi of my plans for the next day and she advised me to ask Gopal to talk about our marriage with his parents. Bhabhi was well aware of Aayi’s disliking towards me and the unnecessary chaos it would lead to if I extended my stay. So the only way to stay happy would be to get married and settle down. Taking permission from jijajee, I informed Aafreen and Kiran of my safe arrival.

**“Meeting with Gopal and his parents”**

The next morning, I went to meet Gopal and his family. They used to stay in the Navy Nagar of Kolaba. I took the train from Bandra to Church Gate from where Gopal picked me up. The sight of him gave butterflies in my stomach and he felt the same. He had come in his scooter to pick me up and when I climbed behind him, I kept my hand on his shoulder. I felt a strange sensation in my heart which led me to think about my possible inclination towards Kiran. He informed me that

Sonia had married her boss in my absence and was leading a happy married life. She too had come down to her home to meet me.

Grabbing the opportunity, I conveyed to Gopal what Bhabhi had asked me to do and my decision about letting his parents know my religion before marriage too. We reached home before Gopal could reply anything.

Sonia, their parents, Sonal and their dog had been eagerly waiting for me. I touched the feet of his parents and took their blessings. Sonia’s face was glowing after marriage. Sonal also hugged me. I stayed there for two to three hours and we gossiped a lot. Aunty had cooked delicious food and after having my lunch I rested for a while after which Gopal took me back to the Church Gate station. Gopal’s parents treated me as family and deep inside my heart I lived with the fear of getting rejected by them after gaining knowledge of my religion.

On our way to Church Gate, Gopal informed me that he would talk about our marriage to his parents soon, but won’t reveal my religion then. He explained that since at that moment he had no stable job and steady income, his parents wanted him to get financially stable first and then think about marriage.

Gopal’s grounds to stall the marriage were justified, but how could I have shared with him the dilemma I was in, and how difficult it was for me to spend the days in Bandra or Kandiwali. I kept all my worries to myself and after dropping me at Church Gate, he left. I confided in bhabhi and jijajee and they comforted me saying that they would talk to him and his parents soon.

That night I couldn’t sleep, and kept tossing and turning on my bed. Numerous thoughts were flooding my brain at the same time. Kiran’s last words about me destined to get married to him echoed in my ears. I couldn’t understand what to do and found myself inclined towards Kiran. The next morning, bhabhi could see through my worries and enquired the reason behind it. She was the first person I declared my decision to. I had decided to marry Kiran because marrying Gopal would make me start a relationship on grounds of falsity. Even if his parents didn’t mind me being Muslim, they would have to keep it hidden from their relatives and during any tension among the Hindus and the Muslims, I would have to suffer the dead stare from all of them.

Bhabhi advised me to first let them talk to Gopal’s family and only after that come to any conclusion.

The next day I went to visit Rita didi and jijajee. After having food, Atul jiajee talked to me about Swara, Rita didi’s cousin who had replaced me in the house, and was taking care of Rita didi in my absence. Rita didi’s health was failing her and Swara had been a constant support in my absence. Swara was 15 or 16 years old and her parents had sent her to Rita didi’s house knowing the fact that she was childless and would bear the expenses for their daughter’s education, and then marry her off too. Rita didi wanted me to stay with them too, but Atul jijajee wanted me to stay in Bandra to look after his mother. His words saddened me deeply and I left for Bandra the next day itself.

Manoj jijajee took the trouble of convincing his parents to let me stay with them till I got married. Baba was elated with the news while Aayi wasn’t that keen, but seeing Baba’s happiness she didn’t object. I began staying in the Bandra house from then on. Sometimes, Rita didi and jijajee would come to stay with us and other times I would go to their place to stay for two to three days.

**“The decision to marry Kiran”**

I called up Gopal and let him know that I had started living in

Bandra and if he didn’t arrange for our marriage soon, staying there would become difficult too. He had discussed the matters with his parents, but they had asked him to wait for at least one or two years. Even he couldn’t share my worries with his family so they had no idea what I was going through.

Meanwhile, I called Kiran and asked him to call me back on the same number. When he called back I asked him if he had genuinely meant it when he had proposed me for marriage and he said yes. It was then that I told him that I wanted to marry him too. My words shocked him out of his wits and he asked me the reason for my sudden change in decision after having been so persistent in rejecting his proposal in the past.

I shared my feelings for him with him which I was unaware of till the moment of realization and marrying Gopal even after realizing my love for him, would be cheating him. He was convinced with my reply, and told me that he would inform his parents about our marriage.

After that day, he began calling me every day. I declared my decision to Manoj jijajee and bhabhi too and when they enquired me about him and his family’s background I had nothing to share with them. The only facts I knew about him was that he was from Bangalore, worked as a Steward in Aviation club and was a Christian. Bhabhi was concerned about me and asked me the reason for my decision to marry him even without knowing anything about him. I convinced her that it was the calling of my heart. They asked me to ask Kiran to write them a letter about him and his family’s background after which they would go to meet his parents in Bangalore and enquire about things in person.

The next day I conveyed jijajee’s message to him and he sent us a long twelve page letter. The only thing he had addressed to me in the letter was that his parents would like it if I converted to a Christian, but it was solely my decision and they would respect my decision. I asked him for some time to think about it.

**“Accepting Christianity”**

That night I pondered a lot over the topic of religion. I had only followed Islam till the time I was at Khala’s. After escaping from her home, only my name was Muslim. Rita didi and Atul jijajee had only named me Aruna without attaching their surname to it. The only purpose behind doing so was to not reveal it to their relatives my true religion. They had never given me their family’s surname nor had included me in their Ration card. My whole identity was a flux; neither was I a Muslim nor a Hindu.

I wondered which religion my kids would grow up following in the future. I didn’t want them to lead a confused life. Hence, I decided that I would convert to Christian.

I shared my decision with bhabhi and jijajee and they agreed to stand by my side as long as my decisions worked in my favour. When Kiran called me that day, I affirmed my decision to him, after which he asked his brother and sister-in- law to assist me in the process. This was the same brother I had met in Dubai. He had returned to Mumbai by then and on Kiran’s insistence came to meet Manoj jijajee at our home.

After meeting him, they were satisfied a bit, but still decided to meet the rest of his family that lived in Bangalore.

Manoj jijajee planned a tour of the South with me, bhabhi and

Komal, which sole purpose was to meet Kiran’s parents. We left in a few days and after reaching Bangalore, checked into a hotel. I rang up the number Kiran had provided us with which was his sister, Jasmine’s number. Jasmine made jijajee note the address to her home and asked him to come to her place in the evening because she used to work in an office in the morning.

In the evening we went to her home. She had a lovely home where her husband and her five year old daughter used to stay. I was a little nervous, but jijajee and bhabhi managed everything well. She informed us that her parents lived in Chikmagalur which was six hours away. We had reservations for Mumbai the next day itself, hence visiting her parents was difficult. We had to manage with the meeting with Jasmine and after chatting for a while we returned to the hotel, and boarded the train for Mumbai the next day.

After coming back to Mumbai, I called up Sonia and Gopal and informed them about my marriage to a Christian boy because waiting for him for two years wasn’t possible for me. I didn’t tell them about my acquaintance with my fiancé since Dubai because bhabhi had asked me not to for the fear of my honour being questioned by them. Both Sonia and Gopal were hurt by my decision, but then Sonia told me that they were okay with it as long as it was for my benefit. Gopal was heartbroken and although I understood his situation, I couldn’t help it. I just couldn’t start our relation on the foundation of a lie.

After that day, all connections with Gopal severed forever. Sonia and I were still in touch and she promised to attend my wedding in Bangalore.

A few days after that, I met with Kiran’s sister-in- law and enquired about the rituals to convert to Christianity. She helped me throughout the process along with her elder sister, who became my Godmother when we visited the church in Andheri for the conversion. Manoj jijajee had accompanied us too.

The father sprinkled holy water on my head and made a cross with some oil on my forehead and chanted some prayer. After the ritual he gave me my new name which was Kiran’s choice, Caroline, and I became a Christian from that day onwards.

**“The date for marriage”**

Consulting with his family members, Kiran fixed the date for the marriage. 17th January, 1994 was fixed for the marriage in Bangalore. A day before our wedding, one of Kiran’s brothers was also getting married. Kiran booked his tickets for Bombay for 11th of January and the ticket for Bangalore on the next day. He was going to meet with my family on 11th.

It was decided that he would buy the suit for the marriage from Dubai itself, and I would get my gown tailor-made from Mumbai. From my side of the family, Manoj jiajjee, Sarla bhabhi, Rita didi, my friend Swati who would also be my make-up and hairstyle artist, Meera aunty and Philip John uncle were to attend my wedding. Atul jijajee hated travelling so he decided not to attend the wedding. My other friends couldn’t attend my wedding because it was in Bangalore, and it would have been inconvenient for them to travel so far.

All the arrangements for the wedding from our side were made in whatever time we had and the hotel was booked too in Bangalore, but I don’t know why I had a lump in my throat. I didn’t know Kiran or his family well enough to completely trust with my future to them, and was worried about what turn events would take after the marriage. But everyone made me understand that feeling such things was normal for a would-be bride, and then I shrugged aside my fears and got myself busy with the preparations.

**“Kiran’s arrival”**

As scheduled, Kiran arrived in Mumbai on 11th January. Manoj jijajee and I received him at the airport. It was after nine months that I was meeting him and was clueless on how to start the conversation with him. We used to talk like friends before, but now that we were engaged to be married I felt awkward. Never in my wildest dreams had I thought about this day when I was in Dubai, and yet it was destiny that had made this day happen. I was clear in my head that I would marry Gopal only whose family had become my family over the years. Even in my wildest dreams I couldn’t have thought about dumping Gopal, but this sudden turn of events was highly unexpected. While waiting for Kiran at the airport, I kept wondering what unanticipated turn my life had taken. I had become a Christian, my name was Caroline and I was standing in the airport waiting to receive my fiancé. Everything felt very peculiar. I had no clue how I would face him or if I would even recognize him.

After a few moments, Kiran came out of the airport and on spotting me ran towards me and hugged me. My heart began pacing fast because this gesture was unpredicted and also in front of jijaee. I quickly introduced him to jijajee and then we boarded the car. On our way, Jijajee kept talking to him, and dropped us to his brother’s place.

Sarla bhabhi had invited him for dinner at our place. In the evening, I brought Kiran to the Bandra home with me. Bhabhi had cooked for us. Everyone met him there and liked him for his simple nature. After dinner, Manoj jijajee shared with him the list of guests from our side and the hotel we would stay in Bangalore. After talking for a while, we dropped him at his brother’s place. He had an early flight to Bangalore the next morning and jijajee and I had gone down to the airport to see him off.

**“Gopal and Sonia’s misunderstanding”**

When I returned after seeing off Kiran, Sonia called me up. She sounded very upset and informed me that someone had told Gopal that Kiran and I were in a relationship since Dubai and that is the reason I had dumped Gopal. I tried clarifying things, but Sonia was too angry to listen to anything. I couldn’t even be mad at her because her reaction was justified. Anyone else in her situation would have reacted the same way because of the way the whole thing was fabricated.  I found out that Sristhi had been behind the entire misunderstanding, and I was furious. After venting out her anger on me she disconnected the call. Her words kept echoing in my head throughout the day and I wept a lot.

In the evening, Nishtha came to apply mehendi on my palms. Neither could I completely enjoy the function nor could I be sad. I shared the incident with Manoj jijajee and bhabhi and they were hurt too. They asked me to cut loose all connections with Srishti and her husband forever. All they could advice me was to forget the past and move on.

Nishtha applied mehendi on my hands and legs, and left. The next day we finished our packing and were to board the Udayan express from Mumbai to Bangalore the day after that on 14th of January, 1994. Rita didi stayed the night at the Bandra home and the next day, at six in the morning, we left for the station. We met everyone else on the station and two of Salra bhabhi’s cousins from Pune, who were my friends, were to accompany us too. One among them was my bridesmaid.  They boarded the train from Puna. It took us 24 hours to reach Bangalore and Kiran along with his father had come to receive us at the station. He dropped us to our hotel where he introduced me to his father and other people from his family. They left soon after that. Before leaving, his father invited us to their home at night for a ritual. They had organized some function where the men would be bathed in coconut milk which was identical to the haldi ceremony of our religion.

We got dressed and left for his home at night. A beautiful altar was put up in his home and a lot of guests had been invited. His family members and I had been meeting each other for the first time, and I found them very friendly specially my mother-in-law who was very cute. I had three sisters-in-law; two were elder to Kiran and one younger, an elder brother-in-law and a younger one. Kiran’s cousins, uncles and aunties and a lot of friends had joined us that night. After meeting with all of them and dining with them, we returned to the hotel. The next day on 16th January was Kiran’s brother’s wedding and ours was the day after. Kiran’s family had invited me to attend the wedding too, but bhabhi put down the invitation explaining that according to their customs, the bride wasn’t allowed to step out of the house a day before her wedding. So, only bhabhi, Manoj jijajee and Rita didi attended the wedding.

After returning from the wedding, we celebrated the haldi ceremony, and had a lot of fun. As soon as the sun rose, my heart began pacing faster. I was feeling a weird sensation in my heart and my bones felt weak. I don’t know why I was missing my family terribly that day especially amma. My heart pined to hug them and weep. I wanted them to bless me on my wedding day, but things are never the way we want them to be. Deep in my heart I knew the impossibility of my desire and consoled myself.

I was made to take a heavy breakfast and then asked to rest for a while. A few hours before the wedding, Swati started getting me ready and once I was ready every one complimented me for looking like a doll in the white wedding gown. The thing on the top of my head was the uncertainty of how weddings happened in a church and what my role would be in it. I was hoping things to turn out well.

**“My marriage”**

That day at around 3 or 4 in the afternoon, a car came to pick me up. The car was beautifully decorated and after getting seated in the car my heart began pacing even faster. Manoj jijajee,bhabhi and Piya boarded that car with me while the others boarded another car. Chaya, Sarla bhabhi’s cousin was my bridesmaid. When we reached the venue, Soham’s cousin brother, Robert welcomed us. He was Soham’s best man. Soham and his family were already there in the church. Robert escorted me and made me stand beside Soham after which Chaya and he took places on either side of us. Soham held my hand and I was holding a bouquet on the other. We walked inside the church. Everyone was waiting for us inside the church. With so many people staring at me, my hands and legs began trembling.

We occupied the front seats and father began reading the mass for our wedding. Nothing made any sense to me. I had no clue at that moment what a mass was and what the father had been reading during the mass. I just sat there quietly. After a while, father approached us and made us say our vows, after which he instructed us to exchange the rings. After the ring ceremony, the father declared us as husband and wife and asked us to kiss. After the ritual, father completed the mass and gave me the communion which is considered by Christian’s as Jesus Christ’s body. On my wedding day, I took my first holy communion. After the mass, everyone individually congratulated us. We took photographs outside the church. The reception for our wedding was organized in Hotel Harsha, so all of us left for the venue. They asked Robert, Chaya, Soham and I to take a round of the city in the car and then arrive at the venue.

**“My wedding reception”**

After a while we reached the hotel. Rita didi and bhabhi had already brought my luggage there. All the ladies took me to the room to dress me up in a red sari. Swati began her job to dress me up. Soham’s family wanted me to dress up in Manglorian style, red sari with red bangles, and a lot of white and red colour flowers in my hair. I looked like a newly wedded bride in red. I was escorted to the hall where a stage was put up which was surrounded by beautiful chairs all around. Soham and I sat for a while after which the wedding procession began and then the cake cutting ceremony. The music started and we were the first ones to be called on stage to dance. The first time I had danced was with Soham in Dubai and that day I was dancing once again with the same man. We dance for a while somehow and other people joined us too. Everyone was enjoying themselves except me. I was way too nervous to feel anything. Gradually people began coming up on stage to congratulate us. Soham had many guests from his side of the family while from my side were only 12 to 13 people. After the dinner, a few other rituals were performed and people started leaving one by one and finally the family members. I was feeling awkward alone with Soham at the hotel. We were to spend the night in the hotel and then go to his brother’s home the next day from where we would go to his parents home Chikmagalur. My family members were leaving for Mumbai from the next day’s evening train. On 17/01/1994, I got wedded to Soham and became Caroline Montero.

The next day, Soham’s sister, Jasmine and her husband came to receive us. She helped me wear a saree and we checked out of the hotel. They dropped us to the hotel where my family had been staying. Jijajee had invited us for lunch that day and after spending the whole day with them, we went to see them off to the railway station. Before boarding the train, bhabhi gave me a lot of advice, after which I wept a lot hugging them. Piya was weeping inconsolably thinking the possibility of never being able to meet me again. We bid everyone farewell and the train pulled off the platform in a while.

I was feeling very lonely. I hadn’t been able to open up to Soham completely and his family was a stranger to me. Soham was to leave for Dubai in 15-20 days after which I would have to stay alone with his family members. All of this petrified me.

We stayed in Chikmagalur for a few days, and then visited Goa for 3 days and Velankaly church in Tamil Nadu for 2 days. After returning we went to Mumbai for a few days. We stayed at Rita didi’s for two days and would go for lunch or dinner to Bandra. We took Aayi and Baba’s blessings after which Soham left for Dubai and I went back to his parent’s. I used to feel lonely all the time and the food was new to me too.

After my marriage I applied for a new passport under my new name. It took me a year to get my passport issued from the Bangalore office after numerous rounds to the office. Due to delay in the issuing of passport, Soham was unable to find work for me in Dubai. Soham couldn’t take me along in his visa since his salary was too low. I hated staying without Kiran. After a year to the marriage, he came for the holidays. He stayed for a month and then left. Before leaving he asked his sister Jasmine to keep me with her in Bangalore till my passport gets issued and he is able to take me to Dubai with him. Jasmine said it was no issue and after that I shifted at Jasmine’s. I began working at Windser Mainer Hotel’s beauty parlour.

**“My passport”**

I met Deepak there who used to work there as a hair dresser. Being a five star hotel he used to attend to rich customers.

I had shared the worry over the issue of my passport being stalled for more than a year with him. Deepak used his contacts from among his clients and soon my passport was issued. Elated, I informed about it to Soham who began looking jobs for me there. He was able to arrange for a job for me in a parlour and my work visa was issued. I travelled from Bangalore to Mumbai. I stayed at jijajee’s for a few days, met all my friends and then on 26th March 1996, I left for Dubai once again.

**“The beginning of a new journey”**

A few day before my arrival, Soham had rented a one-room apartment in a flat in Ber-Dubai. When I reached Dubai, he took me to that room straightaway. He had bought a few utensils and the room was furnished. After my wedding, I was building my own home for the first time. I was feeling a different kind of freedom. I had an identity of my own now. The new truth of my life was me being Mrs. Montero and I was proud of living with this truth. This wedding had gifted me familial relations of my own; the sister-in-law relation, mother-in-law, wife, daughter-in-law. All these relations were true ones. I didn’t have to lie anymore about my religion.

Soham was a very open-minded man. We lived a blissful married life. Soham’s salary was 1200 which was the rent for the room and same was my salary which was used for daily expenses. We weren’t financially strong, but were happy and content having only two mouths to feed. As days passed our expenses kept increasing.

**“My first pregnancy”**

Within two months of shifting to Dubai, I got pregnant. When the owner of the parlour I used to work in found out, she was very upset. She was worried about the waste I would be to her for the next two years because of the pregnancy. She taunted me for wasting her visa on me because of the pregnancy. Her words deeply affected me and under stress I began bleeding. The doctor advised me complete bed rest for two weeks, but I continued working. I was the main help in the parlour and if Iwould have gone on leave, the business of the parlour would have greatly suffered. I kept working and taking my medicines. Having come to Dubai on work visa, I couldn’t have taken a leave. My boss would have replaced me and my visa would get terminated which would lead to my deporting to India. Soham couldn’t sponsor my visa due to low pay and I didn’t want to be deported at any cost, so I kept working. To stay with Soham, could have gone to any lengths. Hence I persevered and also being my first pregnancy, it made me feel a different kind of happiness that gave me furthermore strength and determination.

My work demanded me to keep standing for 10 hours at a stretch and I managed the whole stress during my pregnancy. One of the other employees whose name was Samantha, looked after me. Our clients were decent people too. Among them was a lady who liked me a lot and escaping everyone’s eyes would stuff 200 to 300 Dirhams in my pocket and ask me to take care of my nutrition. She always used to offer help in sponsoring the child if Soham’s unable to do so. She didn’t want me to be deported with my kid to India and to stay away from my husband. I was really lucky to have her as my client who was so concerned about me.

On the first week of the ninth month, the doctor had asked me to visit her for a routine check-up. After examining me, the doctor gave me 12th February as the date for delivery and informed me that they would have to perform a C-section because normal delivery wasn’t possible because of the breach. I felt really tired after coming home that day, and took leave from the parlour. Soham dropped me home and left for his afternoon duty. We had already shopped for the unborn child quite a few things. That day I was feeling very uncomfortable. After Soham left, I kept lying on the bed the whole day and just got up to have my dinner after which lied down again. Soham returned from work at night and when he was going to go to bed after freshening up, my water broke. Both of us were clueless about what to do next. He quickly dialled for an ambulance which arrived in the next 5-10 minutes. After examining me, the nurse informed Soham that they needed to take me to the hospital immediately because my water has broke and the child was on its way. Soham quickly changed his clothes and sat inside the ambulance with all my medical papers. I think it was three or four at night when the ambulance took me to Wasal hospital and I was admitted in the emergency. The next memory I have of that day is the sight of Soham sitting next to me when I opened my eyes and him informing me that we have had a baby girl. He lay down our daughter next to me and that was the moment I realised what it felt like to be a mother.

Madam Mouzam came to meet me in the hospital and brought a golden chain for my daughter. She aasked me not to worry since she had asked her husband to employ Soham in his company. She also informed me that on the contract they would write him an increased pay that would able him to sponsor me and the child and we would be able to stay with him in Dubai without any worries. She came as an angel to me and kept her words. Soham had the least idea about water proofing because he had been working in the hotel, but she still arranged a job for him in her husband’s company.

After a week I returned home with our daughter. Soham resigned from the Aviation club and my boss cancelled my visa too. Soham’s new visa was made under Madam’s company’s name. We had to go to India for a while because to get a visa one had to be outside that country. For the first two-three days we stayed at Rita didi’s. Everyone was very happy with my motherhood. After that we went to Bangalore at Jasmine’s where our daughter got baptised in a church. We named her Sara. The next day, he left for Dubai and once he would get his visa stamped, he would apply for our visa. Meanwhile, I stayed at his parent’s house for a few days and then left for Mumbai to stay at Rita didi’s. I stayed with her for 2-3 days after which I returned to Dubai. After returning to Dubai, we stayed at Aafreen’s for a day and the next day shifted in a sharing apartment with a Catholic family in Karama. It was going to be difficult to run the family only on Soham’s salary, so I started working again. Our daughter was eight months old then, and I had to keep her with a baby-sitter for the whole day. When Sara turned one, I became pregnant again. This time my health was more fragile than before. I would vomit all the times and that made it difficult to continue working. The parlour, where I had re-joined, attracted Lebanese client mostly who had a habit of smoking. I requested my boss to request the clients to not smoke inside the parlour because I was pregnant but my boss asked me to leave the job if it troubled me. Out of anger, I quit because my health was deeply affected by all the smoke.

**“My return to Mumbai”**

After quitting, I called Rita didi and informed her about my pregnancy and sick health. She offered me to stay with her in Mumbai which would give me time to rest. They would take care of Sara and the hospitals were good too there. After discussing with Soham, I decided to go to India. I would get rest and Atul jijaee adored my daughter so he wouldn’t be a problem too. Swara was still living with them and so cooking and cleaning wouldn’t be an issue too.

Soham was okay with my decision and thought it would be in my favour. His sister, Carol’s husband had got a job in a big hospital in Dubai and they had shifted to Dubai. I informed Carol of my departure and she assured me that she would take care of Soham. I was in the third month of my pregnancy then. Before leaving I met Madam Mouzam too. She gave me some money to help me while travelling. Taking Sara with me, I returned to India. Manoj jiajee and bhabhi came to the airport to receive me and they dropped me to Rita didi’s home. Everyone adored Sara especially Atul jijaee who loved kids. He wanted me to give one of my children to him after the delivery. Sara had become the apple of his eyes and he wanted to adopt her. I declined his offer. I was in no mood to part with my children under any circumstances.

I got to rest a lot at Rita didi’s home. Sara would spend all day with Atul jijajee. Swara would take care of all the household chores which didn’t leave me with any work to do. Unlike my first pregnancy which I spent struggling, the second one came as bliss. Soham used to call once in a while.

**“My second daughter”**

Soon the date of my delivery came. Leaving Sara with Atul jijajee and Swara, Rita didi took me to the hospital. This time too I gave birth to a daughter. This time, the first face I saw after waking up was my daughter’s. The sight of her made all my pains vanish. Rita didi was by my side throughout. In the evening, Manoj jijajee, Sarla bhabhi, Piya, my sister-in-law with her two sons and a few friends from our building came to visit me in the hospital. Swara and Atul jijajee brought Sara to me and she hugged me. I introduced her to her younger sister and she was very happy, but wanted me to return home soon. I made her understand that it would take me two days to come home after which they took her home. I got discharged in two days.

I got very busy in my daughters. When the younger one would sleep, I would spend time with Sara. Time passed in a jiffy and when my younger daughter turned 40 days old, I went to stay at my sister-in-law’s. She had two sons, a five year old and a three. Soham’s parents also came to stay there for a few days at the same time. My sister-in-law arranged everything for her baptism. She and her husband became her god parents. My younger daughter got baptized in the same church where I was. My sister-in-law arranged a small party for the occasion inviting a few of her friends and my daughter was baptised. After staying there for a few more days I returned to Riya didi’s and Soham’s parents returned to Chikmagalur.

When I returned to Didi’s place, they organised the naming ceremony in Marathi style. Sara’s second birthday was celebrated there with much fun and frolic. I called Soham and asked him to get our visa approved so that I could return to him with our daughters. I had been staying for more than a year now at Rita didi’s home and didn’t want to extend my welcome any further. They had never even once taunted me for it, but it was against my principles. I applied for the younger daughter’s visa and started pestering Soham to apply for the visa.

**“Return to Dubai”**

In my absence, Soham had moved in with his two elder brothers and some friends in Sharjah. They had rented a 3-BHK flat together. Over the phone, he had informed me that the kids, he and I would have to share a room and the others would adjust in the remaining rooms. I agreed to it. After a few days, he sent our visa and tickets. Atul jijajee was heartbroken with the news that I was taking the kids away, but then Rita didi consoled him explaining that a child needed both the parents to nurture, so I would have to go back and bring them up together with Soham. On June 29th, 1999, I went back to Dubai. Soham had come to pick us up and was meeting the younger daughter for the first time. He lifted her in his arms and placed a peck on her cheeks. Holding her in his arms, and holding Sara’s hand, he took us to the cab which dropped us to Sharjah. The house was huge, but reeked of cigarette. In secrecy, I asked Soham how I would manage with the smell with the kids around and he informed me that the boys would puff the smoke outside the window. Nothing as planned happened and I didn’t want my daughters to grow up in such an environment. We rented a different house and shifted. The building we shifted in had a nursery and a play house which worked in favour of me and the kids. After leaving the kids in the nursery, I would work freelancing. I started getting more and more clients and our life was on track now. The rent was considerably low and our neighbours were decent people too. Sara began going to school soon.

It has been 26 years to our stay in Dubai. We had a lot of ups and down in our journey, but we faced all troubles with perseverance and determination. A lot of times we lost all what we had, started building everything from scratch and then lost it again and this series of events have been continuing till date. But I have complete faith in Jesus that one day everything will change all of a sudden. We would be successful in having a house of our own and no loans on our head.

The first time I had left Dubai, I had determined in my heart to never return again, but God had other plans for me. I ended up spending more than half of my life in Dubai only. I started my new journey from here too and even the thought of relocating from this place gives me jitters. I love India the most. It is the land where I was born and made memories of childhood. If for some reason I am unable to visit India once a year, I stay irritated. Whenever I travel to India during vacations, I make it a point to meet everyone. Every time we return only after a few days because of not having a house of our own and staying at someone else’s house is not possible for a long time.

The kids have grown up in Dubai, so they like it there. Soham and I had met each other in Dubai, and now we have spent 24 years of our marriage here, so it has become our home too. While staying in Dubai, we met many different people of different nationalities and it was fun knowing their culture. We never feel foreigners in this country because Indian are scattered all over this country wherever you go. There are Indian cuisines and shops too and the only thing missing is the rainy season. I am grateful to this country where we earn our food and we can stay in full freedom without any scarcity. We made acquaintance with a lot of localities and learnt about their culture too. i am thankful to God to having given me so many experiences that enabled me to write this book. I don’t know why did I go through all those experiences, but I strongly believe in God’s plan behind all our experiences and that everything happens for a reason. All throughout this exceptional journey, God has never left my side no matter how ugly the situation got. I had to deal with the situations but God’s grace has always been with me and always will be.

Through the medium of this book, I send love to my parents, siblings, relatives especially khala, khalu and their children in Mumbai. I have just one request to make that please don’t misunderstand each other and live in harmony. Whatever happened with me was nobody’s fault; it was all part of God’s plan. I was only seven or eight years old without the least knowledge of life. Out of fear, I had escaped home but did not have the faintest of realisation that something bad could happen with me outside the house. But being God’s plan, he protected me every situation. Anyway, I apologise for consciously or sub-consciously hurting my family and my relatives if I ever have. If it’s possible then please forgive me.

I am thankful to everyone I met in Mumbai especially the Maharastrian family. I am thankful to the man who took me to his family, who then put me under police protection from where I received the love and care of the aunties in the asylum, Rita didi, Atul jijajee, Manoj jijajee, Sarla bhabhi, Ayi-Baba, Astha didi, Piya, Soniya, Gopal and all the Maharastran friends and families who loved me a lot and took care of me.

I thank my husband Soham and all his family members, his parents, my three sisters-in-law and their husbands, three brothers and their wives and all the kids. I have got a lot of care from my in-laws home and they love me a lot.

I am thankful to my daughters who became my strength. Both of them are very smart and intelligent. It is by God’s grace that I am mother to such amazing daughters.

Once again I extend my gratitude to the officers and government of U.A.E because of whom we can stay in full freedom and safety. I specially want to thank those police officers who had let me talk to Soham in the airport due to which I returned to Dubai and have been staying here since 24 years now. I extend my love and thanks to everyone I met in Dubai and who became a part of my life. While staying in Dubai, Soniya, Gopal and his family members and I became friends again. We have no misunderstandings between us now. They have shifted to Dubai too. We keep visiting each other’s house every now and then.

This is my story! From Mumbai to Dubai!