

Of Places and People

A Memoir

by

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Baba and his three brothers and three sisters were born in 28/B, Sindhi Muslim Road, Karachi. It was the first house I lived in, even though we left when I was six. We used to call the house athaayees bee. Later, when my uncle would try to sell the house, Dado would call the house ziddi. We would find a buyer for the house, but they would always back out because it was too big, too old, or too close to the harri pagri ilaqa.

I can't remember much of what the house looked like, because a special portion was built above the single story, for my parents when they got married. The staircase leading to our portion was in the garage, so we didn't have to go inside the house to go upstairs.

Baba would tell me I couldn't go downstairs because it wasn't safe and though his aunts weren't bad people, they were difficult. They were difficult because they couldn't understand why Baba got married and brought a wife into the house when he had them.

I didn't understand what he meant when he said difficult. I didn't understand what he meant when he said it wasn't safe downstairs. I never thought there was anything unsafe about his Kaaki Aunty or Zohra Aunty or his older fat sister, Fozi who stayed in her room all day watching TV and only came out to yell at Sadiq Bhai when he didn't get her the paan paraag she asked for. I couldn't go inside the house, but I could hear things from the blue staircase leading to our portion. I could hear her gales, her throwing things and Dado yelling at her and saying "khuda ka vasta hai Fozi".

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Dado said Fozi wasn't always like this. She wasn't always fat. And she wasn't always bad. She used to be thin and wore jeans and button-down shirts which Dadajee bought for her from London. All the rishtedaar called her Zia ki modern beti because she studied law and wore English kapre and drank black coffee. But she changed after the haadsa.

Sadiq Bhai told me “unke saath ek haadsa hua tha tab se yeh aise hi hain”. I was sitting on the blue staircase while he was watering the plants which were lined against its beige walls. The reddish brown gamlas were cracked and soil poured out of them on the stairs, staining our feet.. He said it when I asked him why Fozi was always so angry and sad and why Baba told him to make sure I didn’t go near her room.

He said it under his breath. He said it and turned around and made sure no one heard.

I had heard the word haadsa before. A girl in my class, with colorless lips and short curly brown hair, didn’t come to school one day because her brother was hit by a motorcycle when he was playing cricket on the streets. He was hospitalized for a week after that. The Urdu teacher called it a “burra haadsa”.

Fozi looked fine to me. Her limbs and arms were all okay. I could tell because sometimes I’d catch a glimpse of her from the entrance to the veranda from the garden. She’d be sitting on her bed, mindlessly eating nuts from a plastic container. Her sparse brown hair springing out from above her ears, her empty eyes fixated on the television screen.

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Once, she got into a fight with Baba. I had just gotten back from school and was getting out of the car when I heard her yelling. I tried to peek through the door of the veranda and saw her shouting at Baba while he sat on the brown wooden chair, his left arm resting on the table, his hand holding his head. He was in his black suit and the creases on his forehead were visible even from a distance.

I can’t remember much of what was said, but I think Baba told her we were moving out. He told her that that was the only way things could get better. For her and for us.

She said something about “mera shauhar”, “tumhaare biwi aur bachey” and “chor ke chale jaana.”

I don’t remember much, but I know she saw me looking through the big heavy brown door and she threw the white plate that was on the table in my direction. I tried closing the door as fast as I could, but my middle finger got stuck in between.

The nail on my finger was purple for a very long time after that.

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I can’t remember much of the inside of the house, but I remember the garden. I remember the garden with its light green sun-kissed grass, the brown patches in between, the light blue slide with the broken steel ladder and the dark pink flowers scattered everywhere.

The pink flowers which grew out of the bushes surrounding the garden. The ones which fell off the canopy of the trees planted right next to the closing walls of the house. They were dark pink, almost purple. They were the kind of flowers which were so thin, they felt like tissue, and if you looked close enough you could see their veins. And if you scrunched them in your fist, they’d make a crunchy sound.

The dark pink flowers were everywhere. They were in the garden where we played pakran pakrai, on the slide where my sister bit me on my back when I refused to slide off, on the steps leading to the veranda where Dado oiled my hair and inspected the strands for lice, and on the dark green bench in the garage, right opposite the guard’s quarters.

Dado would pick up the scattered petals and put them between the pages of her Urdu novels which she would read on the green bench in the evenings. “Yaad ke liye”, she would say. Now when

I think about it, I'm not really sure what Dado meant. Were the petals to serve as a memory of the moment or a reminder of something lost, something forgotten?

The green bench was wooden and was painted green with the type of paint you use on walls. That's why when Baba would sit on it; it would always leave a shade of green on the white jubba he would wear for namaaz. Once, when we were sitting together, I told him how Aleem, a boy in school who always had a runny nose, made fun of my nose. He said it was too big for a girl. He said it in the same way Mamoo said it. And I didn't like the way Mamoo said it. Baba laughed, pressed the tip of my nose and said, "You are a naasa-phaati, like your Baba. And girls who look like their Baba's are khush naseeb." Naasa-phaati means someone with a big nose in Sindhi. But I didn't want to be a naasa-phaati. I wanted to have a thin nose like my sister and Phuppo.

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When athayees bee was finally sold off five years ago, Baba brought all the books from Dadajee's study and put them in our house. Among them were Dado's collection of Urdu novels and short stories. When I was going through the old books, two days ago, pink, crisp, petals fell on my lap.

II

When I was a kid, everyone told my sister she looked like Phuppo. It would make me really sad when people said she looked like her because I wanted to look like her. Phuppo had thin lips, big eyes and brown curly hair which she seldom let loose and held together with a brown butterfly clip. Her skin wasn't fair. It was a pale yellow which shone with sweat each time she cooked green beans and Maggie noodles for us in the kitchen. I always refused to eat the green beans because my cousin had told me they were seeds which would plant trees in my stomach. I would go to bed

thinking I'd wake up with green leaves coming out of my mouth. Every time I'd tell Phuppo this, she'd laugh her kind laugh, wrap the beans in a roti, dip it in ketchup and put it in my mouth.

Her husband wasn't as rich as her father. My grandfather, Dadajee died years before I was born but I know her husband wasn't as rich as him. In athayees bee, Sadiq Bhai used to cook dinner and wash dishes. In Phuppo's house, she would cook dinner, wash dishes and work at her clinic.

She lived in a small single-story house on Kashmir road in Karachi, with her husband and two sons. It was right next to a house with the exact same gate. A brown gate with black pointy spikes. I can't remember the number of the house, but I do remember a plate with 786 written on it hanging on the beige wall right next to the gate. When you entered her house, there was a small living room, with three adjoining bedrooms and a very small kitchen. The walls were orange, with paint chipping off at the ends. My sister and I would peel off the paint and stick it on our cheeks and foreheads and laugh.

There was a big chandelier with yellow light bulbs hanging from the ceiling in the living room. The extravagant gawdy ones you would expect someone to have in their drawing room. Phuppo didn't have a drawing room, so she put all the fancy things in the living room. When she switched it on for guests, the yellow light of the chandelier would reflect against the orange walls and everything would seem orange. Even our faces.

Some nights when the entire family was together, she would spread the dastarkhan across the floor, turn the gawdy light on and serve us Kaybees. The spread was usually a white double sized bed sheet, with oil stains all over it, folded in half. We would sit in a round rectangle, and eat our oily fried chicken and fries and dip them in the packeted watery ketchup that came with them. She would

often tell me that, had we still been in athayees bee, her Kaaki Aunty would have never let us have the watery ketchup. She would have made a special homemade one, thick and yummy.

The living room was small, but that didn't stop my cousins and me from playing cricket in it. Phuppo wouldn't let us so we would play when she was at her clinic. They would always make me a fielder because they thought I was bekaar. The girls weren't allowed to go out and play on the streets because the neighbors' boys would always throw stones at us and call us "jaanoo" and "sweetoo". This one time, this short, thin and dark-skinned boy named Abdullah, who had a thin line of hair on his upper lip, a little thicker than mine, threw a rock at me which hit me on my head. We never played outside after that.

Once, when we were playing inside with a plastic chair as the wicket and a broken bat, I threw the red taped cricket ball across the room. It hit the chandelier and a light bulb in it broke and fell to the ground. It was just about Maghrib time and Phuppo entered the house to broken glass and frightened faces. She picked up a jharoo from the cabinet in the kitchen and swept it off. That night, when I asked her to repeat the story of the Anda man, she shooed me off and told me to go ask my mother to tell me stories instead. That made me angry because Phuppo knew Mama would never tell me stories.

The kitchen had a long table attached to its wall, with four navy blue stools aligned to its side. I would sit on those stools, sip my Ovaltine in a tall plastic light blue glass, my legs dangling above the beige tiled floor, and listen to Phuppo tell me stories about Baba, their childhood, athayees bee and Dadajee. Sometimes she'd tell me how, growing up, Fozi was her best friend and she wished they were still talking.

It was always really hot in that house. They would never open the windows and I would see sweat trickle down Phuppo's thin pointy nose, as she plucked peas out of their skin, carefully placing

them in a bowl, and would wonder how she still managed to look so beautiful with her sweaty bare face and frizzy hair. Sometimes I would pull the end of the long lawn dupatta she had tied across her body and wipe the sweat off her nose.

The last time I was in that house on Kashmir road, the living room was crowded with women; dupatta's covering their heads, tasbeeh's in their hands, sitting on the white double sized bed sheet spread on the floor. The one with the oil stains. The chandelier wasn't switched on. Just the white tube lights. The kitchen counter was clear- there were no green plastic glasses, no jars of Ovaltine, but instead, trays of small squarish transparent glasses and jugs of water. The smell of Maggie was in my nose, but not in the air. The broken bat and the red taped ball were put away behind one of the big brown sofas.

Now I wonder, how could something so real be so lost?

III

Every Friday, Mama would pick me up from our little apartment in Clifton and take me to her house in Gulshan Iqbal, to spend the weekend. Baba would carry me in his arms and force me to sit in the bright green Cultus which had parked itself right outside the little pink gate of the apartment building. Mama would be seated in the back seat; her head covered in a black dupatta, her lips coated with red lipstick.

I would kick my legs into the air, grab the shirt on Baba's back and cry "Mujhe Mama ghar nahi jaana". Baba would let go of me, kiss me on my forehead and bang the door shut. As we drove ahead, I would watch him become smaller and smaller through the rear windshield and would try capturing him between my index finger and thumb.

Mama's house had a white gate with palm trees planted at each side. When you entered the house, there was a little garden with a row of caged maynas, right next to the car park. I would put my finger in between the rods of the cage and stroke the mayna's little necks. Their eyes would widen each time I extended my finger into the cage and I would wonder how their eyes seemed so big when they were so small.

Some days, in the evenings, Nana and Nani would sit on brown straw chairs in the garden, and eat cake rusk dipped in meethi chai. On my eighth birthday, they told Munni, the house help, a small, thin and dark girl, who tied her oily hair in a perfect braid and wore Mama's old oversized clothes, to open the cage and let the mayna's out for a while.

I watched as Munni approached the cage with a towel in one hand and a scissor in the other. She opened the cage, wrapped the resistant mayna in a towel and clipped both its wings off. She then freed the mayna and placed it before me on the cement floor of the car park.

I watched with horror as my mayna struggled to realize what had been lost.

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When Mamoo would come home from work on his motorcycle, in the evenings, he would make my sister and me sit on his lap. He would kiss our cheeks, play with our little ponies which he called "fountains" and tell us how piyaari we both were. I hated it when Mamoo kissed us, his unkempt beard would scratch my face and he would smell of days old cigarette smoke.

Once, when we were sitting on the brown straw chairs in the garden, he touched my face and pressed my nose between his index finger and thumb and told my sister, "Maryam, tum Fatima se zyada pyaari ho kyunki Fatima ki naak barri hai". His touch was rough and I didn't like it. I never liked it when Mamoo touched us. Sometimes he would put his hand, between our thighs, under our frocks. I never liked that.

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One day, Mama took me to the graveyard. It was opposite a big McDonalds and the only reason I went was because she told me she would get me a happy meal if I behaved. Baba would go to the graveyard every Eid but he wouldn't take me because "larkiyan qabrستان nahi jaati kyunki phir ghar mein nahusat hoti hai." I still went, even though I was scared of Baba. I went out of curiosity, I went for a cheese burger.

The graveyard was small and low and there were graves everywhere. There were graves everywhere, and I found it difficult walking between the little spaces between them. They were white marble rectangles with indistinct grey swirly designs all over them. They were extremely low in the ground and I was scared I'd fall on one of them. The headstones had the names of the dead people, their date of birth, date of death, some Quranic verse. I couldn't read Urdu well so I told Mama to read it for me. Sometimes she'd read it out loud, sometimes she'd make a clicking sound with her tongue and walk ahead.

There was one grave which was higher than the rest, but also smaller. When I asked Mama why it was so small and narrow she said, "Agar tum bachpan mein marjaati tumhari bhi itni chhoti hoti."

When I went back home to Baba on Sunday, the way it had been decided, I told him I went to the graveyard. He cried and told me he has nightmares when I'm gone. He has nightmares I'll go and never come back.

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I can't remember the last time I went to Mama's house. It must have been when I was twelve, or thirteen. I can't remember. All I remember is that the court had decided I was old enough to make my own decisions. A little brown stain of blood had made all the difference. I could choose who I wanted to be with. Baba or Mama?

I chose home.