

My Mother and I

I, for one, loved the long hot summers of Delhi. All the older people in the house complained about the heat, the power cuts, and the searing blasts of the *Loo* that cut through the skin as though it was paper, leaving it withered, dry and charred. But my mother's skin responded so gracefully to summer's cruelty, acquiring a most pleasant hue and a light musky fragrance in that unrelenting season, that I could not help waiting for the winter to glide into the brightness of April. When I placed my open palms against my mother's upper arm, the flesh always felt cool and moist against my own. In the afternoons when we lay down together for a nap, I would bury my nose in her elbow and breathe in the deep, sweet scent of her body.

At the beginning of every summer, my mother would unpack her cotton saris and send them out to the local *dhobi* to have them starched and ironed. Twice a day, she would wrap herself up in the crispness of a calico print of tiny flowers or leaves scattered generously on a white base. Within a couple of hours the hustle and bustle of her daily routine would leave the sari hanging limp and soft around the contours of her ample frame. Then I would amuse myself with her long *pallu*, hide my face within its whiteness, or spread it like a thin curtain between us and the rest of the world. Sometimes when she stood staring out of her bedroom window, and the pleats of her sari fell in soft, dark shadows to the floor, I would open up the folds one by one and in that hidden world, greet my only friends, miniature beings like elves and little *paris*, who had found shelter in the crevices of the pleats. A rather impressive number of little people lived inside Mummy's cotton saris, and I, being a lonesome child, was always sorry to see them put away into suitcases at the end of the summer in the dismal company of mothballs. Irritated by my games, my mother would pull me into bed after lunch, and I would snuggle up against her belly as she flung the *pallu*

over us like a loose white dreamtent.

Afternoon was my favourite part of the day for my older brother and sister would be at school, my father at work, and this would leave me and my mother to entertain each other. In the deep blue shade of the heavy drapes, when the old house grew dark and cool, my mother would lie down in bed next to me, patting me to sleep, while I begged her for a new story. Then, as her voice rose and fell in the darkness, I would clasp her hand tightly in mine and walk alongside proud and haughty Ranis and Rajas who regularly paraded the long corridors of their marble palaces, or peep into the Rajkumari's private quarters as she sneaked off unescorted on a dangerous mission, forgetting her favourite red *dupatta* at the window. Sometimes flying low over a green forest on a magic rug at the end of a story, or ferrying a boat back from the Island of Paris armed with a jewel bestowed on me by their queen, I would sigh sadly that this most beautiful tale was now over, and tell my mother that this was the best story I had heard in all my life. And then she would smile and stroke my face gently as both she and I drifted off into separate dreamworlds.

On days when my mother received news of a new part in a play, the afternoon hours would be thrumming with a silent excitement. When she rehearsed her lines, I became her enthralled audience and watched her eyes light up as she paced up and down the drawing room, throwing her voice about, gesticulating, smiling, frowning, drawn forth into life by a new and magical force which overwhelmed both of us. At times, when she wanted to reward me for being good, she would let me cue her with a word or a line at the appropriate moment. I felt really lucky on those days when I too had a part in Mummy's plays, but resented, at the same time, the sacrifice of storytime. It also made me feel out of sorts to see my mother so quickly disappear from before my eyes, and become some strange nurse, or schoolteacher, or drunk and sad prostitute, to whose ways, and mannerisms, and speech I must accustom myself. So it was always a relief when rehearsal was done and Mummy was once again just Mummy. At the end of the rehearsal she always looked at me questioningly and my sad, bewildered face must have somehow assured her that the performance had been moving.

I was most confused the day she decided to be not nurse or teacher or secretary, but Mother, for I thought Parts were things other than what one was in real life, and couldn't fathom why she needed to play herself. Not having much of a say in these matters, however, I settled down on the bed to watch her, ready to cry out "Mummy, Mummy" after the lines "Oh just look at these beautiful bangles" as she had instructed me to do. The scene she was rehearsing called for a narrow laned bazaar so we arranged the tables and chairs in the room to simulate small stalls and display stands behind which intangible vendors stood waiting with their wares. I followed her along with my eyes as she sauntered through the crowded market, tugging at the hand of an imaginary son, pulling him along as she chatted with this or that shopkeeper, or stopped to admire a purse or a bedspread. Rahul, her "son," seemed to me to be a model

child for I hadn't heard a peep out of him so far. Had I been in his place I knew I would have become quite restless by now, but he obviously seemed not to mind my mother's idle ramblings, her incessant and absorbed chatter.

Just when I was about to lose patience with the fictitious Rahul and the slow moving plot, my mother stopped at what I construed to be a booth at which trinkets of all kinds were being sold, and began to make inquiries about the colours and sizes of rings and bracelets. As she slipped various bangles on and off her smooth wrists, I perked up in anticipation of my cue, and hearing it uttered, dutifully screamed "Mummy, Mummy" in my most urgent voice. She spun around immediately and called out, "Rahul, Rahul, where are you?" I thought how silly she is being, he is right there, next to her, holding her hand, doesn't she remember? But she kept crying out his name in panic, running up and down the room, looking in every nook and cranny for the mysterious Rahul. So I shouted out my well-rehearsed line once more, to remind her of my presence, but she continued to search behind chairs and tables and in every corner of the imaginary bazaar, as if I was the only unreal thing in the room. And then it dawned on me. He was gone! His hand had slipped out of hers as she tried on the bangles and the crowd had swept him away. She looked everywhere but Rahul had disappeared! She had lost her dearest and youngest child!! She began to run around the room, wailing and crying, a distraught, possessed woman, screaming out his name, Rahul Rahul Rahul Rahul. I couldn't believe my eyes or my ears, couldn't imagine how any mother could be so careless as to let go of her dearest child's hand, and all because of some stupid glass bangles!! But it broke my heart to see her look so guilty and helpless and lost, and I wished she would find Rahul quickly. So once again I tried to get her attention with "Mummy, Mummy, Mummy" but she wouldn't look towards me, just went on and on weeping and sobbing and chasing an invisible Rahul in desperation. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop the tears from flowing down my cheeks, and cried long and hard with her during the entire performance, and couldn't control my sobs even afterwards, even when she took me in her arms saying baby, darling, love, I will never-ever-never-ever let go of your precious little hands, I will never lose you like that foolish mother in the play, no matter what, never, ever.

And so it went, contentment and sorrow walking arm in arm on either side of us through the long summer of that year. At the end of that season I was to begin school and had already started to dread the daily separation from my mother. Meanwhile, other changes had begun to occur around me. My father's work took him away on frequent long trips to distant countries, and Mummy joined a Ladies' Group that met every few days at someone's house to discuss "women's problems." The women in the group were different from the ones who lived on our street, for they did not look down or away when a man spoke to them, wore stylish clothes, and some of them smoked. My mother, at thirty-three, did not smoke in public, but had for some time, taken to blowing rebellious smoke circles into the afternoon air, when she and I were alone in the

house. I, of course, had given her my unconditional promise that I would not “tell” and bore the burden of our shared secret with pride on my young shoulders. She called me her sole and most trusted conspiratress, and although I did not know what conspiratress meant, I felt quite pleased to be the owner of such a complex word.

When she lit up her first cigarette of the day, I would wait for the familiar smell of the smoldering tobacco, mixed in with her body’s summer scent, and the glow of the burning tip at the end of the long ivory holder held at a casual slant between her full and shapely lips. I pretended that the vanishing circles of smoke were ghostly beings from the nether world and would jump around and slice through them with a butter knife as my mother lay back in bed and contemplated. “Life” she would call it, when I asked her, or “Problems” when she was being a little more communicative. “Life” for me was not then a tangible thing that one could lay back and ponder about but “Problems” bothered me since I had begun to sense an imminent danger in the word. I had not much idea about the content of these problems, except that I sometimes saw them reflected in the frown on my father’s brow, or the severity of his voice when he returned from work in the evenings. Still, mostly oblivious to the wrinkles of their lives, I let myself sink daily into the waves of heat the summer spread over us like sheets, and sank back my head next to my mother’s on the pillow, an arm and a leg wrapped around her belly, and followed her gaze as we both looked askew at her expanding circles of desire.

By the end of the summer my mother had acquired a new friend whom she had met at one of the Ladies Group meetings, and she suddenly began to look cheerful again. Gita Auntie was a large, effusive woman, with a lavish sense of style. Unlike my mother who always wore cotton in the afternoons, and used perfume only on special occasions, Gita Auntie’s copious body was always swathed in expensive French chiffon saris and the scent of fresh roses usually preceded her into the house. *Gulabo*, my mother used to tease her, and she would burst into an infectious laughter. She had a vibrant, attractive face, and her dark and smooth complexion was complemented by her large, bright eyes, a wide forehead and sensuous lips usually smothered in dazzling lipsticks, magenta or purple or a deep carmine. Her gleaming jet black and wavy hair was often swept up into an elegant bun at the nape of her neck, sometimes pierced through with silver pins at the ends of which hung bunches of tiny silver balls which made a pretty tinkling noise whenever she threw back her head to laugh.

Also unlike my mother who was given to having “moods,” Gita Auntie was always vivacious, breathless and brimming with things to tell us about. When she entered the house, her animated voice would cut through and dispel our reflective, ponderous reveries with an immediacy that was new to both of us. At first she dropped by occasionally for lunch or tea, or a casual chat in the afternoon, and Mummy and she would light up their cigarettes in the drawing room, their conversation full of energy and verve, and interspersed generously with laughter. I missed storytime but it cheered me up to see my mother become

so lighthearted, so I resigned myself to resting my head in her lap and playing with my fictitious friends inside her *pallu*, or dressing and undressing my dolls while she and her friend talked on and on into the evening hours.

Gita Auntie wove together so many interesting stories about the lives of my dolls, and knew so many different ways to tie a *duppatta* around their waists, that at first I too looked forward to her visits. She showed me how to press between the pages of a notebook, the gold and silver foils that Cadbury's chocolates were covered in, and then scratch the page with my nails until the foil became smooth and stiff and glossy underneath, and as thin and delicate as the silver filigree on fresh *mithai*. Once she even stitched a most glamorous gown in gold lamé for Bella, queen of Europe.

Bella, being Queen of Dolls, was only expected to leave the glass cupboard that my mother and I had named *Shish Mahal*, about once or twice a month, for she did not enjoy too much the company of ordinary people. I sometimes felt she must feel rather lonely cooped up like that in her palace, but her white gown and lacy train had grown dusty in the cupboard, and I had been too lazy to make her a new dress. When Auntie discovered this fact, she immediately went to work on a new party gown for Bella, and soon the doll was completely transformed. She looked so elegant in her strapless gold evening gown, a sparkling tiara on her head made from a piece of wire and part of a broken brooch, and matching gold slippers that Auntie had fashioned out of Cadbury's gold foil, that both my mother and I welcomed this excuse to have a party in her honour, a big ball where she could show off her royal gold garments. Then I brought out my little teacups and saucers, and filled them with sugared water, and Mummy arranged all my other dolls on little tables and chairs around Bella. When we had all drunk up the sweet brew, Bella bowed before Gita Auntie in gratitude.

Soon Gita Auntie became a daily presence in our lives, driving up after lunch in her long navy blue car, sheathed in summery French chiffons, smelling of roses, gushing with energy and gossip and affection. But just as I was beginning to get used to sharing my afternoons with her, my mother decided that it was no longer appropriate for me to spend so much time listening in on adult conversations. She began insisting that I leave them alone after lunch, and would say to me in a pleading voice to go take a nap so that she and Auntie could talk. I couldn't understand why talking had all of a sudden become such an important activity in my mother's life, for she and I had always found the most comfort when we were wrapped up in each other's silence. But I would give in sullenly and leave them alone to carry on their prized conversations undisturbed.

To make up for this sudden change in our daily routine, my mother used to come and lie down next to me for a few minutes after the heavy meal, and let me wrap my legs around her as in the days before Gita Auntie, my cheek lined up against the coolness of her upper arm, as she told me a story or sang to me in her deep husky voice. I tried my best to keep my heavy, drooping eyelids

from closing, so that I would not miss the end of the story, in which the brave Rajkumari finally finds the hidden treasure in the Jungle of Jinns, or the monkey jumps off the crocodile's back and makes it to the river bank just when the crocodile has decided to eat him up alive. But nowadays the stories often went unfinished, for before we got to the end, the doorbell would ring and the familiar scent of roses would waft into the room, to be followed by Gita Auntie's loud, cheerful voice calling out, "hello, hello is anybody home?" Then I would look up grudgingly and see her standing above us, with what looked to me like jealousy in her sparkling eyes, and she would bend down and kiss me on the cheek, and take my mother's hand out of mine and pull her up, saying enough, enough of this mushy-mushy business, and laugh and lead her away into the other room, while I stared at their receding figures in complete and utter helplessness. Soon they moved their afternoon smoke sessions into the guest room, where behind the security of locked doors, they would talk and laugh and cry to their hearts' content. When the door was finally opened, they would come out and greet me with bright, chirpy voices, but every once in a while, my mother's face would be tear-stained and Auntie would leave in a huff.

One day, lying wide-awake in my bed, I felt myself become sharply aware of the sounds of their growing intimacy, and my forced exclusion. Resentment sparked and quickened inside me as I listened to the murmur of their low voices, as I thought of this dark and luminous woman whose presence in our house had turned my life upside down. Unable to control myself any longer, I got up and paced the room and tried to think of the best excuse I could use to drag my mother out of the guestroom. Suddenly my eyes fell upon Queen Bella, resplendent in her new gold lamé gown. Transformed forever from palace recluse to party queen, her cool grey eyes, her imperturbable vanity, her glamorous hairdo, her gold slippers, all seemed to mock me from a distance. I felt enraged at myself for ever having allowed such a big change to occur, for ever having my favourite doll bow in gratitude before this woman who had taken away from me all that was precious. I jumped up, pulled the doll unceremoniously out of her glass palace, and with a rude tug at her gown, ripped it down the front. Gita Auntie, I had decided, could very well spend another afternoon repairing the damage! Meanwhile, my mother would be forced to comfort me at this time of dire catastrophe.

Pleased with myself for having come up with this perfect plan, I quickly walked down the corridor clutching the poor, disheveled doll in one hand, and a portion of her ripped gown in the other. Outside the guestroom, I paused before knocking, putting my ear to the door to gauge the mood within. But all I heard was silence. I knocked once, softly. There was no answer, not even an irritated grunt. So I knocked again, this time with some insistence, and waited. Again nothing. Perhaps they had both fallen asleep I thought in dismay. Just as I was about to try once more, I heard a shuffling of feet and my mother's voice, "Please Gita, I have to see what she wants, let go for a second." Then the door opened and my mother stood before me, her face flushed and excited, her calico

sari in disarray, her eyes veiling dangerous secrets behind a thin maternal resignation. I was about to hold the doll up but some new strangeness in her face made me look beyond her, at the large dark shape of Gita Auntie reclining on the red divan. Gita Auntie's luxurious wavy black hair was spread in disregard on the pillow, her shoulders were bare, and she had carelessly flung one end of her translucent purple chiffon sari over her naked and heavy bosom. A purple sari blouse lay forgotten on the floor. She looked far removed from the seamstress I was expecting her to become. Seeing me standing in the doorway, she turned her drowsy radiant face towards me and blew a perfect circle of smoke in my direction.

In response to my mother's questioning look, I quickly backed away from the door, hiding Bella behind me, and said in a subdued voice, it's nothing really, just had a really scary dream. Mummy bent down, gave me her customary hug, and said, what happened in the dream, sweetie? My mind suddenly went blank, and then I felt tired, very tired. Come on, she said, tell me quickly, so it will go away and no longer bother you. Behind her, Gita Auntie's body seemed to be changing shapes, twisting around, restless, impatient, serpentlike. I searched frantically for a horror story, a nightmare that I could relate to my mother in an instant, a dream so scary that it would put to shame and dispel all other nightmares, that would once and for all prove to her how scared and alone and abandoned I truly, truly was. And the first thing that came into my head was the story about Rahul, the lost boy, so I said, Rahul, it was about Rahul, do you remember him, the one who was lost in the bazaar one day? You were searching for him all over the place, remember, but he was really, really, really lost, and I was begging you to find him quickly, or you would never find him at all, do you remember? At that she laughed and said, yes of course I remember Rahul, and kissed me on the forehead cooing in my ear, but Rahul's only a boy in a play silly, and don't worry, we will find him one day, now go back to bed my pet, and try to get some sleep. Gita Auntie has had a very busy day, she added, so let her get some rest now. I glanced once more at Gita Auntie only to see her smile and wink at me knowingly. I felt my face tighten up as the tears rose into my eyes, but before either one of them could notice it, I turned, and walked quickly away. Behind me, I heard the familiar click of the door, followed by low voices and then Gita Auntie's unbridled laugh. Trying to rid my mind of the image of the dark woman on the divan, I rushed back to my room, placed Bella back in her glass palace, and climbed into bed. Then, turning towards the wall, I wiped the tears streaming down my cheeks and hugged the cool empty spot on the white pillow where my mother's head used to lie next to mine, and threw my leg over the space where her belly used to be.

Glossary

dhobi: washer-man, collects laundry from homes, and returns it washed and ironed

Anu Aneja

dupatta: long veil worn over the bosom, a part of the Punjabi salwaar-kameez or salwaar-kurta outfit; worn in many parts of India, especially the North

Gulabo: from “Gulab” or rose; sometimes used as a name for a colourful or enticing woman

Loo: extremely hot, dry tropical wind that blows over much of India in the summer

mithai: sweetmeats made mostly of milk and sugar, often decorated with a thin filigree of silver foil

pallu: the loose end of the sari that hangs over the shoulder

paris: fairies that live mostly in paradise

Shish Mahal: literally, glass palace