In the Land of Fire by Sterre Sharma

Chapter 1

Subhead: Decision!

"Yes!" the priest thundered down from his ancient pulpit that Sunday. "Those who break their marriage vows will burn forever in hell." He looked mighty in his wooden perch, which had been polished to a high shine by the bad tempered, black-gowned nuns of our medieval Flemish church. As my knees dug into the woven grass surface of my chair, I decided, *"This is pain enough, burning is much worse and that too forever!"*

The nine-year-old child with red stripes imprinted on her knees remained with me during life's journey.

I went to church, in the village of Itterbeek, Belgium, every Sunday. My parents bribed my sister, Mei, and me with the promise of a franc with which we could buy sweets if we sat still for the whole service. The stifling air smelled of wet boots and soggy woollen coats, and sitting quietly took much effort. On numerous occasions, my eyes grew heavy and I felt as if I was about to faint!

A few years later, when I was 14, Father got a job in the US and we left the small village in Flanders, with its green fields, chicken farmers, manure and pigs, behind. We moved into a neat, little white house, with red shutters and a lush, green lawn surrounding it. The whole neighbourhood was built on a slope and small, white boxy houses were scattered higgledy-piggledy, as if they had been thrown down. The front rooms of our pretty house, at the bottom of this slope, were filled with square, bulky antique Dutch furniture that was made of dark, burnished wood. There was also a trunk with the year 1786 carved onto its front, a selection of big, gleaming copper and brass pots, and a large, hand carved wooden cross with Jesus nailed to it dying a never-ending death. Whenever Mother was unhappy with my sister and me, our punishment was to polish the pots and the cross. The only alternative offered to us was to get on our hands and knees and polish the wooden floors. A great, old apple tree leant over the car park in the front garden. In the autumn, loads of green apples fell on the ground and onto our family car. The sweet, pungent smell of them rotting attracted all the bees in the neighbourhood. We had to be careful when we got into the car during those times, as the bees often got under our skirts!

One of Father's favourite spots to relax was his wooden chair in the living room. His light brown, curly hair was always neatly combed, and his small, alert and intelligent green eyes made him look debonair. Mother often sat opposite him, at the other side of a big, round rustic table. Her big, pale blue eyes were often lowered, her long, blonde hair fashioned in an elaborate hairstyle held up by combs. Father sipped Jenever (Dutch gin), ate pickled raw fish and smoked up a storm that formed layers of

clouds throughout the room. As he did this, Mother sat ramrod straight in her chair and crocheted, a basketful of wool on the floor. This moment in time isn't complete without picturing their three blonde daughters lounging in different poses and in different corners of the room, their heads in books. The scene was reflected in, and contorted by, the old, 'fish eye' mirror surrounded by a gold frame. It hung from a brown velvet ribbon on the wall. But in a way, the mirror was actually telling the truth, as this peaceful atmosphere hid the fact that at any moment the calm could be shattered. The family reflected in the mirror walked as though on eggshells.

Father's sunny skies could cloud over any second, producing thunderclaps and lightning. Often the reasons for his explosions were hard to define. His temper was unpredictable and could be triggered by anything.

"Why didn't you all stand in the window to wave me goodbye when I drove past in my car to go to work?" he'd ask. Or, "Why can't you (that was me of course!) remember the capital of Nicaragua when I just told you five minutes ago? Not only that, your friends are just as stupid as you - they also don't have a clue!"

Someone mowing the lawn nearby could drive him to distraction, and he'd take it out on whoever was in closest proximity. A neighbour sanding his fence with an electric grinder prompted him to stand up and scream over at him, "Stop this noise until I finish my newspaper, otherwise, I will throw stones at you!"

When Father planned picnics and it rained, causing the trip to be cancelled, he'd be irritable and scream, throw things and raise his hand to hurt Mei and me, his eldest two daughters. Being the eldest and the example, I bore the brunt of Father's rage. He'd sneak up the stairs and listen behind my bedroom door to see if I was watching the same contemporary news programme as him. If this wasn't the case, and I had on the *I Love Lucy* show, he'd be in the room like a shot. Fortunately, one of the stairs up to my room creaked, so I kept one of my ears peeled for this familiar sound. If I heard it I'd quickly change channels, although carelessness spelt trouble for me when the cat was on the prowl to catch a mouse.

My nineteenth year was my final one living at home, and it was the worst of my short life so far. Several times Father burst into my room, breaking the locks on my door in the process, to rain blows on my sleeping head in punishment for failing to react to his call from the floor below. I'd make no sound as I tried to protect myself with my hands. I didn't want to further frighten Mei, 17, and Engelien, five, who were left cowering in the corners of our cute, white house. Mother pretended that nothing had happened - any sound or facial expression from her might irritate Father further and induce a repeat flare-up. But, once Father was out of earshot, she'd declare, "His behaviour is not normal. He is not right in the head and needs medication!"

When Father came home every day after work, the whole family spent time together until 8pm, often over a tumultuous dinner. Mother sat there fidgeting with her napkin, worrying that any one of us was about to say or do something to upset Father. My stomach became tied up in knots the minute I sat down at the dining table. Father watched me from under his bushy eyebrows, noting how many spoons of food I put into my mouth. If he wasn't satisfied he'd slam his left hand down on the table to shake it hard, rattling the crockery and creating a small quake in our hearts. God forbid if a glass of water overturned; a complete panic ensued, sending mother

running to the kitchen, hands fluttering, to quickly mop up the spillage.

Random topics floated like dark clouds above us. One such subject involved my appearance. I remember Father saying, “We need to do something about Sterre’s nose, it’s too big and she will need plastic surgery!”

“I don’t look bad, what’s your problem, Father?” I thought, but didn’t dare say.

Meanwhile, Mei had to hear time and time again that she was “too fat”. I held my breath as her stubborn self contemplated whether she should answer back.

Father was the eldest of ten children and, while still a child, his overworked mother gave him the task of disciplining his unruly siblings. This no doubt had an impact on his behaviour as an adult. He was also obsessed with the way my sisters and I looked. He deemed the women in the extended Zegers family to be unattractive, including his many sisters.

Our mother was extremely beautiful and moved with the royal deportment of a queen. Seeing her, one felt she had been born in the wrong century and belonged more to the Victorian-era. She was emotionally fragile and when Father created dark, rainy clouds, Mother was like a little brook that overflowed. She’d cry for hours and often retired to her room with awful migraines, remaining in darkness for days and emerging only to continue the sombre mood by wearing sunglasses that wrapped around her face, even covering the sides of her eyes.

Subhead: The Bird Flies Away!

My escape from my stifling home life came in the form of an opportunity to study Chinese painting and Mandarin at the University of Taipei in Taiwan. The trip was in the planning phase for a year and was the source of countless arguments between my parents and me. Mother was staunchly against sending her daughter so far away from home.

My decision to focus on Chinese art and painting no doubt changed my life, and although on the outside it could appear an unusual decision for a young woman, it seemed a natural progression for me as I’d been painting from the tender age of two. When I got older, none of the art courses in Washington interested me, so Mother arranged for me to meet a private Chinese painting tutor.

On the day of the appointment, she drove me to the tutor’s house in a quiet neighbourhood. The white paint of the brick building was flaking in an artistic pattern, which immediately put me at ease. We pressed the bell, a black door opened and two Oriental eyes framed by short, black hair met mine. I recognised the moment.

“This is it,” I thought.

But there was a problem. The Chinese lady, Ming, didn't want to take on any

young students. “Youngsters don't have the discipline that Chinese painting requires,” she stated.

Ming offered tea and sat down with us. But before any small talk ensued, I whipped out my portfolio - I desperately wanted to be her student. She took it and turned page after page. Hundreds of eyes, drawn in black pencil, looked back at her. There were row upon neat row of them in every shape. They conveyed countless moods. I watched attentively as I sat on the edge of Ming’s sofa.

“You are stubborn and persistent enough to become my student,” she eventually announced.

Suddenly, it hit me.

“Sterre, you have known Ming in a past life,” I thought to myself. My mind had shown me the first glimmer of another world. But I could tell the tutor had not recognised me.

Nevertheless, over the next two years we formed an extra special bond and discovered that besides painting, we shared another talent - a deep-rooted intuition that bordered on psychic ability. As I worked with my brushes, the tutor taught me the Eastern philosophy behind Chinese painting. Each artistic expression is considered a prayer, be it painting, dance, music, or poetry, and each has a religious significance. Every movement is action and has its own unpredictable reaction (the qi and chi). The truth of life is just like the energy in the movement of a hand holding a brush loaded with wet paint when it comes down on rice paper. Each blossom has its own personality and each time paint hits paper the result is different. Subconsciously, I had known this spiritual knowledge all along, and it was strange for me to hear these things put into words by someone else.

Ming was right to only take on someone with persistence. She made me paint the same thing over and over again until she was satisfied. I'd return to our class, carrying rolled-up rice paper a meter long with at least 100 bird feet painted on it, only to be told that not a single one was okay.

One day during a class, she looked at me intently and said, “You need to find your spiritual soul mate and I know that you will never be happy and find it in the West. You will find your future happiness only in the East.”

There was no doubt that Ming had recognised *me.*

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For months, Mother sat night after night on the hard wooden chair she had brought in her dowry, the seat creaking in tandem with her deep sighs as she bemoaned the fact I wished to go so far away.

Her sighing irritated me, and I’d raise my voice in argument. Then her wide, blue eyes, fringed with almost invisible, blonde eyelashes, began to overflow with tears. But my ears refused to listen to her and my heart did not flood with guilt caused by those rivers of tears.

Finally, in frustration, winning words flew from my mouth like arrows hitting their target.

"I will pay for half of my ticket myself!" I announced. Mother was stunned. "You do that," she replied, leaving me to wonder if I'd really detected a glimmer of hope in the far corner of those wide, blue eyes.

Father observed all of this as if he was watching one of his favourite TV shows. What entertainment we must have provided! Time and time again he told me: "Daughter, if you think you can become a painter and make money to have a life, you are mistaken. Most artists die poor."

But he was the one who relented first. Waving his stoplight red left palm through the smoky air, he said, "I know you don't excel at anything else, so I give up! I will talk to your mother!"

I was ecstatic and, once mother had succumbed to my wish, I approached Father with one more request.

"I do not want to fly over India, the land of Mahatma Gandhi, without stopping there," I said. "Please can I stay a week in New Delhi before continuing my trip to Taiwan?"

My deep need to travel to the home of the 'Father of the Nation' was reflected in the times I was living in. I'd participated in many of the anti-war protests held in front of the White House, sometimes with Father at my side. The young men I studied with at high school could be called to serve at any moment, and anti-war students such as myself wore black armbands by way of protest. I read books on different pacifist movements throughout the world. Mahatma Gandhi became my hero and I was fiercely against war of any kind, arguing passionately with anyone who was.

On the other hand, Mother was staunchly against my going to India. "It's too dangerous, anything could happen there!" she said.

"Papa, I am paying for half my ticket, let me make the stop in India the way I want," I protested.

Father overrode Mother and let me stop in New Delhi for a week. He got his Indian friend, Ashok, who lived there, to organise my stay.

Once everything had been decided, there was a six-month wait for my adventure to begin. I felt I needed to learn some basic Mandarin to help me find my way around Taiwan, my end destination. Father discovered that a couple of Taiwanese secretaries were working at the World Bank, which was next door to his office at the International Monetary Fund. These two young women were excited by my plans and agreed to teach me spoken Mandarin. Learning the language proved to be easy for me, though our classes were often interrupted by laughing fits at my blunders. I got hold of a vinyl record of Mandarin language exercises and my entire family heard commonly used Chinese phrases wafting from my room, which was a constant reminder of my impending departure. By then I had learned three languages – Dutch, French and English - by simply memorising full sentences and phrases, like

a child. Mandarin got the same treatment.

While all this was going on, I was still in the midst of my final year at high school. Every day, my yellow school bus arrived at 7.30am. Trying to stay as long as possible in bed resulted in me having to run seven blocks from my house to jump straight onto the bus when it stopped. Five days a week, I often didn't return home before 6.30pm. I worked part-time every day after school as a salesperson in the *Woodward & Lothrop* department store. On Saturdays and Thursdays, I spent eight hours there. After all, I had to keep my promise of paying for my future.

In the winter, after a long day's work, when I opened the door of the department store to leave, a strong gust of cold winter wind would push its way in between my clothing and chill me to the core. With my arms tight at my sides and my hands deep in my pockets, I'd walk home via a lonely stretch of road. The large, overhanging trees and scattered, ghostly-looking houses accentuated the darkness. From time to time, when a car whizzed by, I'd cross my fingers and hope someone wouldn't stop and force me inside. Looking at the dark trees and houses, I'd furtively think, *"I hope nobody is hiding there who wants to rape or rob me!"* Sometimes, Mother snuck out of the house to pick me up. Father didn't like this, though. He felt I had made my own choice to work, so therefore I must suffer the consequences. He didn't believe that this area was as unsafe as I felt it was.

Sunday was my only day off, but I was forced to open my eyes early in the morning by Father. He'd stand at the end of my bed, yank back my blanket and shout: "Get out of bed!" Any protest provoked him to pull at my leg, landing me on the floor. His second and favourite method to rouse me involved him looming over my bed with a cold glass of water playfully balanced in the air above me. He'd pour the water down, drop-by-drop, turning the flow into a stream if I was not up fast enough. All this time there was an underlying threat that things might turn ugly, and I could end up with worse than cold water on my body.

During those difficult days, I'd look longingly at the two red suitcases I'd purchased using my pocket money from the department store, Sears. I'd chosen the brightest coloured available. Sometimes the situation at home was so bad my thoughts circled like bees, turning my head into a hive. *"Just give it all up and leave today!"* I'd often tell myself.

This experience in life made me patient, strong and determined. My two sisters and I are experts at the deadpan expression and we are constantly aware of our body language. If we do not wish to show our feelings, no one will ever guess the

truth - no matter how much we're under duress!

Subhead: Fashion Hound

My one other love besides painting was fashion, and I spent hours in department stores trying to find a wardrobe that matched the latest trends I'd read about in magazines and also fitted my limited budget of seven dollars a month pocket money. I often managed to pick up a pair of pants for a dollar and a dress for three.

On one such shopping excursion, I went into a department store in downtown Washington DC with a friend. There was a sale on and hundreds of shoes in wild colours were on display: lime green, red, purple and yellow. The footwear sported chunky, high square heels and square toes. My friend and I couldn't believe our eyes as we stood there staring at the shoe-laden shelves lining the walls. We spent two hours trying on every shoe and, after lengthy discussions, brought down our selection to four pairs each. After paying the bill, the cashier put everything into one big paper bag and we grabbed a handle each as we exited the store feeling gleeful over our purchases. In front of the store was a big intersection where four roads came together. The bag was heavy so, when the traffic lights turned green, we decided to run as quickly as we could diagonally across the busy junction. Oh my goodness! We didn't run at the same pace so the bag split open - right in the middle of the intersection! Cars were honking on all four sides as we frantically tried to gather the shoes in our arms. But, no sooner had we got everything together, the shoes dropped onto the road again, causing us to create a traffic jam.

When I got home, Father was keen to see me model my purchases. He loved ladies fashions and always bought the most beautiful dresses for our mother and trinkets for us. Sometimes I even modelled professionally to earn some more pocket money to buy clothes with.

Subhead: The Two Red Suitcases

Finally, the date approached for my departure. Those two red suitcases were about to hold my entire future life. I often felt in a quandary when I looked towards my walk-in cupboard, which held so many clothes it was difficult to put a hand in between the hangers. I needed to reduce my travelling wardrobe to a handful of garments.

My friends loved my wardrobe and often borrowed something from me, even though my clothes didn't even fit them - everybody weighed more than I did. At school, I'd participated in a fashion show and was the girl with the smallest waist. This meant I could be the showstopper in a century old hand embroidered wedding dress. I was the only one it fit. When my mother saw me in it, tears came to her eyes. She didn't know it was the one and only day she'd see me as a bride.

In order to trim down my wardrobe, I decided to distribute all my clothes to my friends. They were delighted to try everything on and some managed to squeeze into their favourites, the stitches stretching visibly at the seams. They modelled my clothes in front of the great, black-framed mirror that leant against my light green bedroom wall, looking at themselves from every angle. Everything went: the transparent plastic raincoat with a matching umbrella, the black vinyl boots, the

orange miniskirt with the matching orange hat and striped shirt, the double knit miniskirts, the pants with checks and stripes and my jeans and ponchos. The next day I packed my red and navy plastic midi coat, two knitted miniskirts with matching turtlenecks and plenty of fishnet stockings. My favourite green flowered sheets went right in the bottom of the suitcase to cushion my Santana, Simon and Garfunkel and Jesus Christ Superstar records.

It was September when I stood on the front steps of our house. My suitcases were by my side and my back was against the front door as I paused to have one last look at what had been my home. The edges of the leaves on the apple tree had turned yellow, a hint that the canopy of greens surrounding it were just waiting to burst into reds, yellows and oranges in a last hurrah before falling. Within a month the trees would be bare and the leaves would turn the ground a dreary brown. Despite this knowledge, spring was in my stride. I was ready to start my new life and leave the old one behind. Father drove our white Ford to the front of the house and I lifted up my two red cases and walked towards it, my mother and sisters in tow. I was wearing a cream summer dress with tiny printed flowers I'd stitched on myself months before. On my head sat a little hat from a second-hand thrift shop. I was so full of excitement and anticipation I could feel my heart beating behind the thin material of my dress. This bird was about to fly!

After tearful embraces at the airport, I boarded a plane headed for the Netherlands. This was so I could say goodbye to my grandparents. Father was to join me there a week later to say a final goodbye. Our family was an old-fashioned one, with close ties. Little did they know I would be back within a year carrying a baby in my arms.

Chapter 2

Subhead: It Was About To Happen!

My KLM flight from Amsterdam to New Delhi was 13 hours and was due to stop everywhere: Rome, Athens, Tehran and Karachi.

"Show me your ticket," said Father in the taxi. After examining it, he shook his head in shock. "We are too late," he said. "The plane is going to leave in half an hour."

Being dyslexic, I'd read the times on the ticket wrong. This was not a good beginning. I could see what little confidence my father had in me turn to zero. He was a handsome man, with a chiselled face, a large nose and two close set, grey/green eyes. He only needed to look down a little bit to see a young copy of himself in me, the only difference being my face was framed with soft blonde, shoulder length hair.

Luck, or maybe destiny, was on my side. When we reached the airport we discovered the plane was delayed by four hours. As we waited in a lounge, which smelt strongly of plastic and cigarette ash, I sneezed and felt a dry pain in the back of my throat. Father sat on one of the raggedly upholstered black airport chairs with a worried look on his face. He inhaled deeply as he smoked, turning his nose into a factory chimney spewing out more smoke in the already polluted air. He wore a loose jacket and his pants were held up by colourful red suspenders. His feet sported odd socks, one grey and one black. Finally, the wait was over and after one long hug I left without grief in my heart.

Soon I was sitting in my airplane seat. I crossed my slim legs clad in navy blue bellbottoms and buttoned my grey pinstripe blazer against the chill from the air-conditioning. Little gold Chinese pagodas dangled from my ears merrily as I turned my head from left to right and had a good look at all the passengers settling down around me.

A few boring hours into the flight, I decided to do some further spying on my fellow travellers, just to pass the time. My eyes travelled slowly over the young families sitting around me before finally coming to rest at the back of the plane. Here, an interesting scene was taking place. An airhostess was flirting with an animated South East Asian man clutching a glass of whiskey. The woman looked prim in her sky blue uniform and blonde hair and as the man leaned towards her, her eyes twinkled in an inviting manner. As he spoke, the man made broad gestures with his arms, his fingers dancing in the air. Hours passed, but every time I looked, the dance continued.

We landed in Athens and the grumpy man sitting next to me left. As the plane rose again, soaring higher and higher, the crackly voice of the pilot announced, "We are cruising at 32,000 feet and will stop in Tehran and Karachi. The lights will be turned off soon."

Not too long after that, the airhostess came down the aisle, the young man with the dancing fingers in tow.

“You can sit on this seat, or that one, or the one over there," she said.

The one ‘over there’ happened to be next to me. The man moved quickly towards it, but the airhostess held him back. “No, I think that seat is taken," she said.

I decided to have some fun.

“Nobody’s sitting here!" I announced.

Before one could utter 1, 2, 3, the young man jumped like a kangaroo into the seat next to me.

“I am so sorry, I stepped on your toe,” he said.

“I didn’t feel you step on my toe,” I insisted.

He carried on apologising profusely and only stopped when I said, “I am Dutch and have spent the last few days shopping in the sales in Amsterdam. My toes were stepped on so often I probably can’t feel anything anymore.”

The man with the dancing fingers introduced himself as Satish. He had a bronze, square face supported by a strong jaw. He looked at me intently with two large, almond-shaped deep brown eyes framed by thick, long lashes. His jet-black hair had a few strands of white and his well-shaped, wine-coloured lips seemed to move in slow motion beneath a luxurious black moustache as he spoke.

“I am from New Delhi, India,” he said. All the energy he had used on the airhostess, he suddenly focused on me. To impress me, he proudly showed me his Airline Transport Rating identification card.

“This is a very accomplished degree for pilots, which I got in Texas,” he explained. “I’m now on my way back to India. I will get a promotion at Indian Airlines, where I work as a co-pilot.”

Satish told me how he had flown over endless wheat fields as part of his training.

“I was with a beautiful, female fellow student pilot,” he said. “She pointed at the fields and told me all the acres below belonged to her family. Before I left she asked me to marry her and make a future with her in America. I refused and told her I have to return to India because my family depends on me.”

I did not realise at that point how much effort it had taken the self-made man beside me to get his airline rating, or how important it was to him…

The conversation moved on to the two days Satish had spent in Holland, where he got lost and tried to ask directions from someone who looked Indian, but appeared to pretend not to understand Hindi. I explained that the man must have been from a former Dutch colony called Suriname in The Guianas. Indians had migrated there generations earlier and many of them had forgotten the language of their forefathers.

We talked for hours, even during the stop at Kabul. Covering many topics, we chatted like two cosy pigeons on the roof of the world.

Throughout the flight, Satish and I were continuously served food. I couldn't help noticing the history of whatever we had eaten was lodged in my new companion's moustache.

"Get it cut," I told him. "And while you're at it shorten your hair as well!"

Rolling his big eyes, Satish replied, "You act as if you are my wife - maybe you were in my previous life. Why don't you marry me?"

Laughing, I joked, "My front teeth are capped and my father said he will not pay for my dowry when I get married, since he has already spent it on my pearly whites! Besides, nothing is going to stop me from doing what I have worked so hard for over the last two years."

Unperturbed, Satish held my hand and even managed to steal a few kisses.

"It's been fun and nice to meet you for a short while," I thought to myself.

I was surprised by the turn of events and also exhausted. My sore throat was now a raging pain and was accompanied by a red, runny nose and sore eyes. Several times I had to call the now not-so-charming airhostess for extra Kleenex.

"We'll be landing in New Delhi in 20 minutes," the captain announced. "The temperature is 32C and hazy…"

As the announcement was made I was eating my favourite bar of Belgian chocolate and savouring every bite.

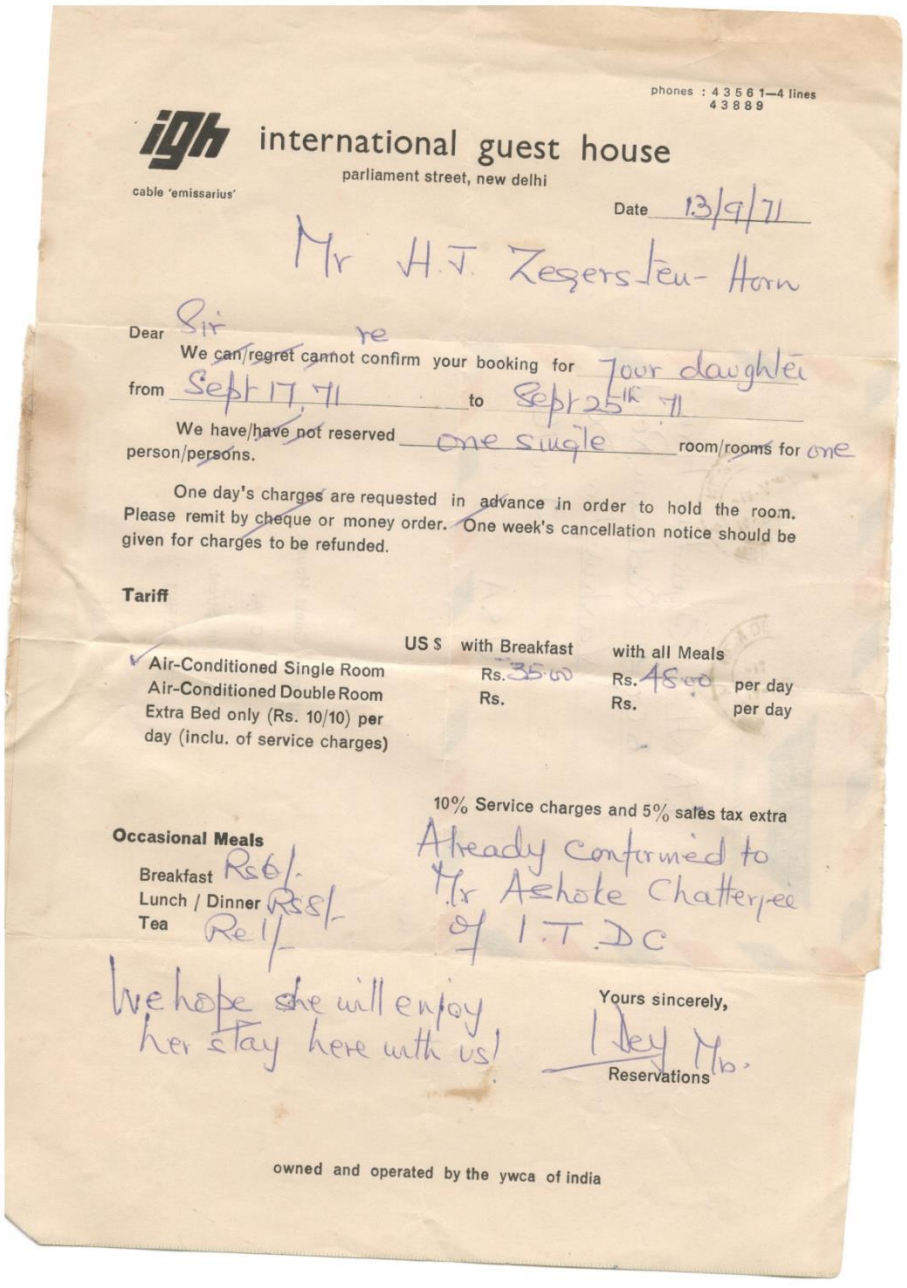
Then Satish interrupted. "Please call me. I will show you New Delhi," he said. "Please take my number.

"No, no! I like you but I won't take your number," I responded.

Our descent began. The pressure in the cabin increased, burning my ears. I could hardly hear as I put my hands over them to relieve the pain. Quickly, Satish snatched the remainder of my chocolate bar from my lap and wrote his number on the wrapper. As the airplane wheels touched the runway, I put what was left of the chocolate into my purse. When the plane had come to a standstill I stood up, grabbed my bag, clattered down the steel steps, walked into the airport and entered a world of smells I had never experienced before. A mixture of spices hung in the warm air and slow moving fans stirred the scent of wood smoke. The grey floor was covered with wide arched, dusty streaks; clearly the result of a poor attempt to mop the floor. I picked up my two red suitcases from the much-scratched carousel, which was covered with stickers that had fallen off previous travellers' bags, and said a quick goodbye to Satish. Then I headed to the exit where a young lady was waiting for me. Father's friend, Ashok, who'd promised to look after me, had sent her. The lady handed me a sheet with a printed programme for the next few days. A 1957 black and yellow taxi drove up to the curb in front of the airport, its curved shape evident from all angles. I climbed into the bouncy back seat, while the driver placed my suitcases inside its big,

old-fashioned trunk. With a jerk, I closed the door, an action that caused a loud bang - the door had no springs! The car shuddered to an uneasy start and I looked with wide-open eyes at the very strange and unfamiliar landscape unfolding before me. It was evening and in the orange-layered haze, people clad in long garments moved along the side of the road like sailing boats on the sea. We passed through villages where dinners were being prepared on open wood fires, the smoke steadily increasing the thickness of the orange air. There weren't many cars on the road, but here and there I saw animals, stray dogs, cows, pigs of all sizes, some chickens and even a camel; it moved slowly and rocked like an old wooden ship.

Subhead: Into The Melee



phones : 43561—4 lines
43889

igh international guest house
parliament street, new delhi
cable 'emissarius'

Date 13/9/71

Mr H.T. Zegersteu-Horn

Dear Sir re

We can/regret cannot confirm your booking for Your daughter
from Sept 17, 71 to Sept 25th 71

We have/have not reserved one single room/rooms for one person/persons.

One day's charges are requested in advance in order to hold the room. Please remit by cheque or money order. One week's cancellation notice should be given for charges to be refunded.

Tariff

	US $	with Breakfast	with all Meals	
Air-Conditioned Single Room		Rs. 35.00	Rs. 45.00	per day
Air-Conditioned Double Room		Rs.	Rs.	per day
Extra Bed only (Rs. 10/10) per day (inclu. of service charges)				

10% Service charges and 5% sales tax extra

Occasional Meals

Breakfast Rs 6/-
Lunch / Dinner Rs 8/-
Tea Re 1/-

Already Confirmed to Mr Ashoke Chatterjee of I.T.D.C

We hope she will enjoy her stay here with us!

Yours sincerely,
Reservations

owned and operated by the ywca of india

Filled with curiosity, I read the programme in my hand and discovered that I was to be at the railway station in New Delhi at 6:30am the next day to go to Agra and see the Taj Mahal. With a deep sigh, I put my hand down on my lap and wondered, *"How will I manage to get up tomorrow after travelling for 17 hours?"* I was totally exhausted by the time I reached my lodgings, the YWCA International Guest House in the city centre, and as soon as I reached my room I threw myself onto the hard bed only to wake up with a heavy head at 5:30am the following morning. I dressed quickly, my stomach rumbling, and rushed to an awaiting taxi. It was black and yellow, similar to the one from the previous evening. Upon arrival at the train station I was faced with the most unbelievable chaos. People milled around doing all sorts of things on overloaded platforms. Women assisted by young daughters cooked for large

families on kerosene stoves, and the spices and petroleum products partnered to produce an overwhelming scent. Meanwhile, fathers slept in sleeveless white undershirts riding high to expose their round, brown bellies. Their sons lay next to them in the same relaxed state – they were small duplicates of their dads. Next to the sleepers, more children ran around utilising bags as launch pads for jumping. It surprised me that anyone could sleep so peacefully amid so much commotion.

As I struggled to fight my way through all of this mayhem to locate the right train, beggars with peculiar voices whined and tugged at my sleeves asking for money or chocolate in various languages, one of which I recognised as Italian. Why they asked for chocolate is still a mystery. Hawkers pushed dripping wet cold drink bottles in front of my face taken from buckets filled with ice placed on the corners of the platform. I managed to somehow find the right train and compartment. My seat was next to a spacious, slightly dirty window. As the train chugged out of the station, I got my first taste of an Indian breakfast. It was a spicy omelette made with plenty of green chillies. I washed it down with regular water, as no bottled was available. I wasn't used to eating such hot food and thought how I needed a fire engine to cool the burning sensation in my mouth.

I watched fascinated as India passed by my window. People of all shapes and sizes were doing their morning ablutions next to the railway track. Children and some adults exposed their bums to the train as they pooped, a bottle or mug of water beside them to wash with.

Young women filled water buckets using hand pumps, while others walked casually on dusty paths towards home, with towers of large, water-filled urns on their heads. Men brushed their teeth with what looked like sticks.

Here and there, long lines of buckets and bowls of various sizes and colours stood in front of a single tap surrounded by rickety shacks covered with black or cobalt blue plastic.

Once outside the city, we passed endless flat green fields and simple villages where cows were milked and food was cooked on small fires by women wearing colourful fluorescent pink, orange and green veils. Small, brightly painted temples, their entrances festooned with brass bells and sculpted cows dotted these villages, their long orange flags gracefully dancing in the breeze

Upon arrival in Agra, eager young men claiming to be tour guides circled me. A tour operator trailed by a group of tourists tapped me on the shoulder, asking: "Are you Miss Zegers?" I joined the group, climbing into a white bus to see Fatehpur Sikri, an abandoned city with an ancient mosque. Upon reaching this famous city built by Emperor Akbar in 1569, we wandered among the many beautiful carved columns and courtyards while the tour guide droned on. When we reached the mosque he told us that we could make a wish by tying a red and yellow thread around the brick-coloured carved stone grill of the tomb inside. I was confused about what to wish for, as my greatest desire for the future had already been granted. However, meeting a good husband in the distant future came to my mind as I tied the thread while looking through the delicate lacy red stone carving at the blue sky. The guide took the whole group for lunch and disappeared briefly before asking us to step back onto the bus. He was vigorously chewing something and when he opened his mouth to speak it was

flaming red inside.

"How did your mouth become so red?" I asked him.

He told me that he was chewing Paan, a plant and nut-based stimulant commonly used in the country. What he didn't tell me was that as well as helping with digestion, it gave people a pleasant high!

I hadn't been feeling well in the morning and the long, tiring day with so many new experiences began to take its toll in the afternoon. When I laid my feverish eyes on the Taj Mahal my head spun so much I wasn't sure if I saw one or two copies of the monument.

Subhead: The Butterfly Gets Caught

To stop myself from passing out on the train back to New Delhi, I spent what felt like endless hours watching my reflection in the now dark window. When I arrived back at the hotel, I tried repeatedly to call the number of my father's friend to tell him I was terribly sick and needed to see a doctor, but nobody picked up. I looked around the drab room with its worn out maroon curtains until my eyes fell on my black leather purse. I hesitated before pulling out of it the yellow and brown chocolate wrapper upon which was the number of the only person I knew in India.

Unbeknown to me, the young captain had positioned his younger brother next to the telephone, where he'd been instructed to wait for my call. He picked up instantly.

"I am very sick," I said wearily. "And if I am not better by tomorrow morning I need Satish to take me to a doctor." I didn't give him my address, just in case I quickly started to feel better and changed my mind about getting medical help.

The next day my fever had increased to 103, so I called the number again and gave Satish the name of the place I was staying. It was two hours before he arrived in his white and green Herald - he had been running from one YWCA in the same area to the next. He took me to the doctor and soon I had a brown paper bag full of medicines to take. I also had a very happy man with a big smile at my side. Satish didn't leave me for a moment. By the third day I was better and ready to go sightseeing again. Instead, Satish took me to some of his favourite haunts - all restaurants! I kept asking him, "When are you going to take me to see some historical places?"

I was curious to see this ancient historic city, which had been built seven times throughout the ages. This was a city so old it was even mentioned in the famous religious Hindu texts of the Mahabharat. But Satish's reply was always the same, "We can always do that later." There was nothing touristic in his mind as he whizzed me in his car past the numerous ancient crumbling domes of monuments scattered about. It was all a blur of colour and romance. My head spun as we held hands and gently looked into each other's eyes, always with love. Everything was happening very quickly and all barriers were broken. I had succumbed…

Soon after, I received a phone call from Father's friend inviting me for dinner. I accepted saying I would come with Satish

On the way there, Satish said, “I’m really serious, I want to marry you. What do you say?”

I was speechless. I didn't know anymore what I wanted. Throughout dinner I watched an Indian scene playing out in front of me… the gracious host generously offering drinks and food accompanied by voices raised in lively conversation. I looked on, thoughts running through my head, namely, *“What do I do?”*

As I watched, I finally decided. We drove around the flickering lights of New Delhi in the warm night until we reached a small, open-air restaurant. The eatery was in the heart of the city and had been built by the British in colonial style. The grass-covered veranda looked over a large circle of white buildings, whose porticos were supported by stylized Greek columns. We sat down on the iron chairs outside as stars sparkled in the moonless sky above us. To our left, a large red neon sign glowed with the name of the restaurant - Rambler

I looked into Satish’s eyes and asked him: “Can I trust you to take care of me?”

His face glowed with the light of a candle that flickered inside a red glass on the table.

“Don’t have a doubt about it, you can trust me,” he said firmly.

I believed him. There was something in his steady, confident, red-hued gaze I trusted. We got back into the car and drove aimlessly around the broad, tree-lined streets as we discussed and thought more deeply about the repercussions of our decision. I noticed a marked hesitation whenever he spoke about his family, and I sensed that a marriage between us would be difficult for them.

“We can just be friends and wait a while, don’t worry about it,” I said softly.

Satish looked at me, his big eyes no longer on the road. "It's now or never,” he said. “You decide this minute.”

I worried that Satish was about to crash the car. I didn’t realise then how true Satish’s words were. If I had waited as I offered to do, our lives would have probably turned out very different.

I made a list of all the pros and cons involved with this enormous decision. Upon reading it back, I felt ready to change my plans and my life. The list was based on my personal emotional needs, rather than on anything concerning the realities of India. On the positive side, I’d listed ‘love’, ‘his generous heart and loving arms’, ‘a calm, dependable character’ and the fact Satish was a ‘professional’. Meanwhile, on the negative side was a long list of unknowns: ‘a new culture’, ‘a new home’, ‘new people’, ‘his family’, ‘no friends’ and, finally, being ‘far away from everything I knew’.

One thing I wasn’t worried about was abandoning my plans to study Chinese

painting in Taiwan. I knew my talent would thrive in India instead. Looking at these challenges, I told myself, *"You are strong and courageous. Have the patience and strength required to embark on this challenging adventure. It is up to you to be as flexible as possible and face unknown difficulties with perseverance. Accept the unexpected, be a piece of driftwood on the water of a river and go with the flow, fast or slow, wherever it takes you."*

I also thought that if I married my love Satish I could be true to my decision made years ago in that Flemish church not to break my marriage vows.

My knowledge of India was limited to the peace movement of Mahatma Gandhi, and what I had seen in that one week spent in Delhi. I had no knowledge about the multi-layered, nuanced and complicated culture. But it wasn't long before the full force of Hindu society hit me over the head like a club, making me spin until I didn't know the head or tail of anything anymore.

The day before I was due to leave India for the onward journey that was never destined to happen, I visited Satish's home and met his family. I sat outside on a metal chair in a grassy garden surrounded by a few bare rosebushes. We had a pleasant, polite conversation over milky tea accompanied by butter biscuits. It was all very nice but I never walked between the white columns supporting the porch of the British colonial style house at the back. As I got into the car to leave, Satish's mother gave me an orange lipstick as a goodbye present.

Meanwhile, my thoughts were concerned with my own parents. *"My God! How am I going to tell them that I'm getting married?"* I wondered. The process of making a telephone call proved a major challenge. I had checked out of my hotel room, so I needed to find somewhere where Satish and I could make a private call to Washington DC. There was only one public telephone booth for international calls in town and this was in the main post office, a cavernous, cream-coloured building with worn out wooden counters and benches that smelt of must. Nothing had changed since the British had been in India. They had left behind the smell of old paper and pencils. To make matters tenser, we couldn't just pay and make a call. After making the payment, the telephone operator was informed of Father's name and the number to be dialled. We were then issued with a serial number and had to wait for a line to become free. The time limit for the conversation was three minutes. After hours of sitting on the hard wooden benches and leaning our backs on the worn-out wall, where thousands of others had left their mark before us, we finally got our turn. By then it was early morning. In another time zone, Father was half asleep and lying on his bed when he picked up the phone and heard me say, "Papa, I am getting married and staying in India. The man I am going to marry is Captain Satish Sharma, a pilot with Indian Airlines. I will not be flying on to Taiwan."

There wasn't a sound from the other end of the line as Satish spoke his first words to Father. "Sir, may I have the honour in asking you for the hand of your daughter in marriage?" There was no sound because our time was up before we heard one word from Father. After a forceful complaint, the operator promised one more minute, but we would have to wait our turn again. When I finally heard Father's voice after two hours, he had only one question.

"Where are you, my child?"

"I am abandoning my plan to study in Taiwan, I will remain New Delhi," I replied.

Father repeated his question about my location several times. I later discovered he'd been very busy that day and was completely exhausted. He'd been the key person to answer questions from the press at the yearly conference of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. By the time I spoke to him he was fortified with stiff drinks. In spite of this he used his excellent memory to remember the name of the young man on the other end of the line, and the fact that he claimed to be an airline pilot in India.

Since I had checked out of the guesthouse and didn't officially have anywhere to stay, I couldn't give Father a proper reply to his question, which turned out to be an advantage in the long run. After a sleepless night, he went back to work, managed more questions at the conference and grabbed every Indian he saw, including the wife of the former Indian economist and politician, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, to convey what had happened and get some advice.

He also turned to the Dutch embassy to find out what was happening. Most likely it was them that in turn called Interpol, which traced my last call to the public telephone booth. This caused great disappointment to my parents, but we had escaped being found by a hair's breadth - although we did not know that yet.

Following that exhausting time in the post office, we headed to the bachelor flat Satish sometimes shared with his friends. The flat had a large, rectangular dining room decorated sparsely with 1960s style wood and rope furniture. The walls were bare except for a small, colourfully painted plaster head of a Tyrolean boy. A white fridge had been given pride of place in the middle of the room and there was a brown dining table behind it, which could seat six people. Satish explained the reason the fridge wasn't in the kitchen was to do with it being a sign of affluence. In India, it was normal to display a fridge as a status symbol.

I found that funny, but was too exhausted to give it much thought. Instead, we threw ourselves on a single twin bed in one of the two bedrooms and fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 3

Subhead: The Race To Marriage

Over the next couple of days, Satish and I debated with everyone who visited the flat the best way for us to get married. The final vote was to get married in court, which would make our union legally solid. We drove there under a canopy of green trees lining wide roads. I wore my favourite cream mini dress printed with tiny flowers. It was the same dress I had worn when I left Washington and it had a deep neckline with a white lace frill and was short enough to show off my knees and legs. The marriage bureau was a single room in a crowded court, where many criminal cases were in the process of being heard. We walked through a gauntlet of shacks comprising four pillars supporting corrugated roofs, beneath which lawyers with typewriters sat with clients in earnest conversation, while waving papers to cool themselves. Heads turned as we passed and people stared shamelessly at us without blinking. We asked numerous times for the location of the marriage office, and were pointed in several wrong directions, maybe on purpose, causing us to walk endlessly, it seemed, through dark hallways where shadowy criminals leant against the walls. Many had noisy shackles on their hands and feet; crying women and children sat on the floor beside them. My nose prickled with the intense, sharp smell of urine, which waxed and waned according to our proximity to the toilets. One man came up to me to try and sell me a Coke and was promptly arrested. He protested his innocence as the police carried him away there and then. I felt out of place with my bare legs and pretty dress and wanted to shrink so I could fit into Satish's pocket.

Finally, we found the correct door. Its brown paint was cracked and peeling and bore a black and white plate with the name of the man in charge of registering marriages. The room behind the door was dusty and on every surface available rested towers of fading files filled with paper with curly, torn edges. The whole office resembled a small, deserted city filled with derelict high-rises ready for demolition. Upon squinting in the darkness we saw the clerk's dark form. He was outlined by the faint light coming from a grimy window behind one of the overloaded desks.

We walked to him with relief in our step.

"Sir, we want to get married, what is the procedure?" Satish asked.

"You will have to post your intention of marriage on a public noticeboard for two weeks, and place an advertisement in the newspaper," the man replied with a twisted smiled. "If there are no objections, the official marriage can take place."

This frightened us and we rushed out of the office as soon as we could. The rumblings of dissatisfaction from both our families were starting to become forceful. The previous day Satish had taken me to his home and told his mother and family, "I have married her, and you cannot do anything about it."

The mood in Satish's home had been sombre. The dark living room, with its looming 22ft high ceiling painted in regulation cream, reflected this. Placed in the middle of each wall were black and white family photographs. Supported by little wooden strips, they leant curiously forward at 30-degree angles. The faces seemed to stare down at us, their disapproving eyes endlessly frozen in time.

Satish's mother was seated in front of us on the dark blue Rexine five-seater sofa of 1930 vintage. She was crying and talking in Punjabi so I couldn't understand anything she said. I was surprised to be the cause of so much misery. I understood that my being from a different race could be upsetting, but I didn't actually realise the ensuing drama was about me not being considered good enough! I only learned after our meeting how it was quite normal for Indian parents to arrange the marriages of their children, and to live with them and be supported by them for the rest of their lives if necessary. It was unimaginable to me that a thing like a caste system could be alive and well. Not only was I not the same caste, I was outside the caste system altogether! My mother-in-law didn't give a jot how I was from a well-educated, cultured family and had been taught impeccable manners. She wasn't interested in how my father worked for the International Monetary Fund and was the permanent representative to the United Nations or how my mother, an artist and tapestry weaver, was excellent at handicrafts and sewing. Both my parents were philanthropists and supported disabled causes, but that wasn't going to improve my chances of being accepted into the family.

I remained in the living room, looking at my neatly placed feet clad in my favourite white strappy sandals, admiring the beautiful floor made of apple green cement speckled with white marble chips. In its centre, a white art deco sun shone hopefully. I was too embarrassed to look up at the arguments taking place. The atmosphere was dark and funeral-like *"You don't know that I am like this sun,"* I thought. *"Give me a chance and I will show you my good intentions and you will realise I only want to bring joy and laughter."*

After these intense discussions, Satish took me out to eat, chat and spend time alone with me. If it had been known we weren't actually married yet I am sure there would have been even more pressure piled on us to separate.

Night after night my father-in-law to be counselled his wife trying to reconcile her to the marriage. He repeatedly recited an Indian saying to her which went: "Cement comes from one place and brick from another, these put together make a home." My 11-year-old future sister-in-law to be, Gunita, and 22-year-old future brother-in-law, Girish, were secretly excited and happy about their brother marrying a foreigner, as it seemed like an adventure to them, but they concealed their smiles behind their hands.

Suhead: The Search

As all this was going on, word spread among Satish's colleagues how the police were looking for a pilot who had kidnapped a Dutch girl. It emerged that the day after my phone call, Father had started searching for the man who had swept his daughter off her feet. He didn't realise the information given by us was not enough to track us down. Millions of Sharmas live in India and there were many Captain S K Sharmas, some of whom were also pilots. During police searches, police in Bombay picked up another pilot called Captain S K Sharma. He had been shown a telegram asking him what his intentions were towards a Miss Sterre Zegers.

"I am happily married with five children," he had replied. Years later, we met him at a party at the New Delhi Flying Club and he told us how he got into plenty of trouble with his wife over this.

This news reached my father, who immediately went into a rage and packed his bags to fly to India to drag his daughter away from this cheating Captain Sharma. Before he could execute this plan, he received a telex from his Indian friend, the one who was supposed to be there for me when I arrived in India. It said: "Do not worry, I have met the man, he works for Indian Airlines and he is okay and well-connected." Even so, my father wanted to do everything in his power to annul the marriage.

Mother stuck up for me. "She is married and it is not our place to do anything about it," she said.

Eventually, the police came to the office of Indian Airlines. Fortunately, the secretary there secretly called to warn us. We knew we had to find a quick solution to the marriage problem. Satish's bachelor friends came up with two ideas, to marry under the Sikh or Arya Samaj religions. The second option was put forward because this was the religion practised by Satish and his father. The movement was considered modern and progressive as it accepted the possibility of conversion to Hinduism, opposing the belief that one could only be born into it. The Hindu religion states that a child is born into the caste system and automatically becomes the caste of his or her parents. There are five main casts: untouchables, farmers, shopkeepers, soldiers and priests. Within each of these, there are many sub-castes.

Subhead: Hindu Ceremony

We decided to try and get married under the Arya Samaj religion and went immediately to the temple situated on a quiet street of houses in the centre of town, close to the Rambler restaurant where Satish had taken me after proposing.

The temple was a very simple white house and was indistinguishable from the others lining the street. A small sign indicated this place was the most important seat of the Arya Samaj religion - there were no pictures displayed, or representations of any kind, of the many great Hindu gods. We rattled the closed, chipped white gate repeatedly and waited in the driveway to meet the priest who resided at the temple. After a while a short, rotund old man in a white kurta and loincloth half ran, half tripped towards us in a jolly fashion. Draped around his neck was a little white scarf with a green and red border. A white Gandhi cap was perched on his head.

"Please marry us as soon as possible!" Satish and I pleaded.

Scratching his ample white moustache, the priest replied, "I will have to convert her and that will take three days. Then I can marry you."

He handed us a marriage certificate and we sat on the cane chairs lined up against the wall in the veranda to fill it out. There was one blank space to be signed by a witness. We walked down the driveway, hoping to find someone on the street. Opening the white gate, we saw a light blue turbaned driver leaning casually against his black and yellow taxi on the opposite side of the road. He crossed his arms on his fleshy chest and curled his churlish upper lip when we called out to him.

"Sardarji, help us," Satish shouted, using the typical name for men of the Sikh religion. He crossed the road for a chat. After some monetary bargaining, the man agreed and we quickly hauled him inside. He signed the certificate and got his cash.

Meanwhile, in order to receive the certificate, I needed to be converted to the Hindu Arya Samaj religion. For this, we were taken to an open veranda outside where, following the dictates of tradition, we sat on the floor. A small fire was lit in front of us and the priest told us we had to strive to become as pure as the flames. Satish was made to wear a white holy thread that hung down from one shoulder and went across his chest, hugging his waist. This symbolised responsibility towards staying on a righteous path. I had to repeat many lines of Sanskrit and feed the fire with wood and purified butter.

Subhead: A Marriage Made In A Mini Dress And Jeans

On the morning of the marriage, I stood in front of my red suitcases and wondered what to wear. The conversion ceremony had taught me the necessity of sitting on the ground in front of a fire. I wished then my suitcase was a magic one and could offer up the necessary wedding outfit, but I had to settle for reality and the only suitable candidate was a high-waisted princess dress with a red and white gingham yoke and an umbrella-shaped flowing mini length skirt, printed with butterflies. I had no idea how to handle the complications of wearing a traditional sari and neither did the bachelors. Satish wore a tight, mustard yellow T-shirt and a pair of bellbottom jeans. We hurried out of the flat that morning assuming the ceremony wouldn't take too long. The bachelors, who were also pilots, crowded into the back of the car with us. Rambir wore a turban and was tall and thin with big, droopy, sad eyes. Captain Vyas was a short man with curly hair. I recall how he never ran out of subjects to complain about.

Arriving at the temple gate, we walked past the cane chairs on the veranda where the conversion ceremony had taken place and entered a large hall with pale green walls. It was lit up by light from the windows and furnished with woven jute carpets. Everything had been prepared for the wedding. In front of a small podium stood an iron, box-like container. This was blackened with soot and filled with wood pieces. Around it were scattered two dented trays loaded with fragrant smelling powdered wood incense, two small copper jars containing small copper spoons, and a child-size matching teapot filled with water. Opposite this stood an Indian 'lota' [a brass pot with a narrow opening] filled with purified butter. A long-handled spoon leaning out of it threatened to topple everything onto the cement floor. Next to it was a hairy brown coconut nestled in a bed of green leaves. We sat down on the small podium covered with a white sheet and two flattened pillows. In front of us, the priest was comfortably supported by a thin, white mattress and two bolsters. The ceremony began with him saying prayers in Sanskrit. He was rocking back and forth slightly and avoided looking at the dog-eared prayer booklet dangling from his hand. I soon signalled for the ceremony to stop.

"I don't understand anything you are saying," I said. "Please translate everything into English for me. I don't want to say yes to things I don't agree with."

The priest replied in perfect English, "Just copy all my actions and words, and

I will explain everything."

After the first invocations, we poured water from the little copper teapot into the small copper jars and were instructed to pick up the copper spoons with our right hand and put some water in our left palm. The priest then indicated we should use the middle and ring fingers of our right hand to touch each eye with water and pray to see 'good'. We followed the same actions for the ears and mouth, in order for us to hear and speak 'good' too. Other body parts, such as the legs and shoulders, were likewise blessed. When the water in the jars depleted, more was poured from the little teapot. While chanting, the priest lit a match and touched it against the three pieces of camphor he'd placed on top of the wood resting in the sooty iron container. Together we added the incense powder and purified butter. The fire rose as a symbol of purity.

Often the priest stopped to translate the sacred words into English, and he'd pepper it with comedic twists.

"You have to sit on the left side of your husband because that's where his heart is!" he announced.

During the ceremony, I had to put my foot on a rock. When I did this, the priest said, "You will have to be as steady as this rock during your married life, but I will not give it to you to take home whenever you think you need it!" The message was clear – the rock would need to remain for other women to use. If I had any problems, I'd need to locate my own one.

There were many more jokes about married life, now long forgotten. But, on a more serious note, he said to me, "I want you to learn a Hindu prayer called the Gayatri Mantra! And you must try to avoid eating meat."

Difficulty arose when the time came for me to be given away by a male member of my family. Quickly, one of the bachelors was turned into my brother. Then the priest requested a pause because he needed to go to the bathroom. The ceremony by this time had already taken two hours or more. While he was away, Satish and I kissed and cuddled in front of the matrimonial fire. It was a truly romantic moment and we felt truly blessed and pure in our hearts.

When the ritual reached its climax, there was a pregnant pause; a new problem had arisen. During this part of the Hindu marriage tradition, the bride and groom are tied together with the end of the bride's sari and the traditional scarf worn by the groom. There was no way that a pair of jeans and a mini dress could be tied together. The priest needed another break to solve this problem. He left for 10 minutes, giving Satish and I a chance to kiss some more. Then he returned with a large napkin and proceeded to spread this on the floor. He placed rose petals and other precious things in the middle of it, rolled it up tightly and tied it into a knot.

I'd made all my wedding vows under my new Hindu name, Nayan Tara, which means Star of the Eye. The priest chose this name for me after enquiring what the true meaning of Sterre is. I explained it means starry in Dutch.

Once the knot was in place we circled the holy fire seven times as I held one end of the napkin and Satish held onto the other. A hot, smoky draft floated

upwards over my body as my short dress swooshed over the fire at every turn. Worried about my dress catching fire, I tried to keep the circle as wide as possible.

Tradition dictated that the groom put red powder [sindoor] in the parting of his wife's hair with a ring, but my groom wasn't wearing one and had to borrow one from one of the bachelors. As if to complete the ritual, at that moment, a white, emaciated hippie walked in and sat down. Rose petals were distributed to the few people present and we were showered with them as a mark of their best wishes. The wedding ceremony was now over.

At this point, the hippie stood up. His unwashed brown curly hair was streaked with blond and his yellow T-shirt and brown harem pants were none too clean. As I looked up at him, the first thought that crossed my mind was, *"Lice must have found a paradise on his head!"* He walked up to the groom and asked if he could kiss the bride. To my surprise, the answer was "yes".

The hippie kissed me on both cheeks and put his hands on my shoulders. His brown eyes were sincere as he looked into mine and said, "This marriage will never work."

I stared back at him, my lips barely moving, and replied, "You don't know what life is or what I am ready to do for my life."

By this point I was really starving. The wedding had taken four hours and the only thing I had eaten was an Indian sweet as part of the ceremony. My stomach was rumbling loudly from hunger. When we asked the priest to give us the marriage certificate he demanded 36 rupees for it, which we didn't have. By this time we were broke, as were the two bachelors, who at the time didn't have piloting jobs. We promised to return in two days' time and pick up our important document. But this meant we had to go to the police station to report our marriage without a certificate. After leaving the temple, we drove straight there. As soon as we entered the doors of the neat, clean and well-lit station, the police marched Satish down the hall and locked him from the outside in a room with an officer. I'd been married less than an hour yet was worried I was about to lose my husband. I was told to sit in a room at the front of the station. The door was open and I continuously peeped down the hallway, my anxiety growing by the second. Five minutes later, Satish strode from the room and down the hall. Trailing behind him was the officer, who was apologising profusely. I was happy to note I had married the right man!

It turned out a complaint had been filed with the Dutch and Indian embassies in Washington, and plans had been put in action to stop us marrying. The Dutch embassy had informed my father that unregistered Hindu marriages were not legal in the eyes of the law, and that it was within their power to remove me from India. Luckily they were completely wrong. The Arya Samaj provided legal marriage certificates recognised by Indian courts. Many inter-caste marriages face opposition from parents who try to annul these unions. But as Arya Samaj priests marry inter-caste couples, a marriage certificate from this religion had been purposely made legal in court to prevent parents contesting them. It had taken exactly three weeks for Satish and me to actually marry officially, but in our minds, we had wed the day that we said yes to each other on September 25th.

Subhead: Flat At A/28, Defence Colony

After spending the day with the bachelors, Captain Vyas and Ranbir, and finally ending it with a nice restaurant dinner, we went back to their flat at A/28 Defence Colony. The long day was over and as we climbed up the narrow, twisting stone staircase to the flat, our feet echoed loudly against the narrow walls. After fumbling with the keys of the white door situated on the first-floor balcony, we entered our abode and went straight to the bedroom. The room was bare of any furniture except for a single bed in the middle of the room. We'd put the mattress on the floor - the bachelors had complained they weren't getting much rest as our bedsprings made too much noise. This way we spared them restless nights. The only other things in the room were a white ceiling fan and the red suitcases. The bathroom was similarly sparse. Only a white sink and toilet gave a nod to contrast, as everything else, including the tub, was in shades of cement splattered with uneven brown speckles. I brushed my teeth with tepid water, lay down with my husband on the floor and fell into a deep sleep, only to be woken a couple of hours later by a strong brown wind blowing in from the open window. The electricity promptly went out and the whir of the fan above our heads ceased. After a lot of gusts of dust and numerous thunderclaps accompanied by flashes of lightning, we heard the light pitter-patter of rain. It was so hot we didn't need to sleep with a sheet or blanket covering us, but we were too tired to make much of our first night as a married couple, although over the previous days we'd had plenty of practice in anticipation of becoming one!

My two red suitcases were still full and on the top of them lay the records I loved to listen to. One was from the musical *Hair* and the other was by the band Santana and included the song *Brown Skin Girl*. We played these every day on a record player in the dining room. The songs reminded me of my previous life as the familiar sound floated along with the babble of Punjabi mixed with English. I had removed my favourite set of green flowered sheets from the bottom of my suitcase and spread them on the mattress – another reminder of home.

The following day I was complimented on the rain as if I was responsible for it.

"It's a portent of good luck if it rains on the wedding night," the bachelors told me. I didn't realise quite how much I was going to need it!

That morning I had woken up to loud wails coming through the window. I stood on the front balcony and peered down, but even though I couldn't see anyone, I could hear people shouting loudly, "Eeeeeepa, kaaaaabaaaaaaaaaaaaari, saaaaaabjeeeeeeeee."

These chants all ended with, "Waaaaaaalaaaaaaaa."

When I asked Satish and the bachelors what the racket was, they refused to look me in the eye and provide an explanation. I was quite surprised about this, but I soon discovered from Girish, Satish's brother, that they came from vendors selling vegetables, the collectors of old newspapers and from women who bought old clothing, giving plastic buckets, bowls or steel plates and water pitchers in exchange for them. This curious collection of people would cycle or walk along the back service lane, close to our flat. There were many other people traversing there as well,

and they participated in many small enterprises by providing services or selling wares. There were shoe repairmen and professional ear cleaners, identifiable by their yellow or red hanky caps. I often saw them as they sat on their heels on the corner poking inside their client's ear with a wire probe. A homemade ice cream man rang his own little tinkling bell attracting children to come and buy his homemade kulfi (Indian ice cream).

All sorts of wandering saints came down the road in front of the flat. They wore colourful yellow, red or blue garments topped by either a nest of dreadlocks or a crumpled turban. Their devotees fed them in exchange for blessings. Some, for example, promised that after a special private session of blessings and rituals, infertile women would find themselves with child. I quickly discovered India was a very noisy, surprising place.

Chapter 4

Subhead: Curiosities

A watchman walked around the neighbourhood with a big stick that he'd bang on the street or wall the whole night through while blowing a loud police whistle. To me, this was a very strange logic because the noise seemed the best way to alert a thief about the watchman's whereabouts!

The neighbourhood had many beautiful townhouses with elaborate balconies and plenty of expensive white unpolished Indian marble on the floors. Next to some of these edifices, and sprouting like mushrooms under trees, stood small shacks. They were no bigger than an eight-seat dining table but they housed whole extended families. Every morning from my balcony I saw the people living in the shacks walking into the surrounding houses to clean or cook. Sometimes rumours were whispered in the dusty breeze. They'd go something like: "A perfume was stolen by that cleaning lady. Temptation became too much." Mostly crime was limited to petty theft and houses were rarely locked. Murder made it to the front page of the newspaper around twice a year. I felt very safe, in spite of observing the big gap between the rich and poor.

Down the street was an ironing man sweating away doing his 'pressing' (as the locals called it). He ironed everyone in the neighbourhood's clothes using a ramshackle wooden table with an iron heated by red-hot coals. He was constantly surrounded by piles of crumpled clothing tied up into different brightly coloured bundles.

I soon noticed the bachelors were extremely jealous of Satish. Not only did he have a job, he had me. They constantly scrutinised me and made comments to Satish about what I wore, how I spoke, where I looked and what I did. They also raised a glass of alcohol to their lips, again and again, night after night.

No one did any cooking and we always went out to eat. It was a miracle if anyone was ready to leave before 11pm. Starving, I'd sit there looking at the plaster head of the Tyrolean boy, waiting until the group finally stopped drinking and stood up to move towards a restaurant. The bachelors took great offence if Satish and I went out somewhere on our own. They were so bored with their lives. If I tried to pry Satish away from them they'd say, "You better watch out, you are going to become her slave. Don't give in or she will make you one."

This meant I was stuck with them again for the whole night.

I made a few feeble attempts at cooking which were scoffed at for not being good or Indian enough.

After waiting so long for dinner each night, in the restaurant, I'd wolf down large amounts of hot, spicy food and as a result often felt a burning sensation in the pit of my stomach, one that wouldn't budge. Back in the US, I had been used to eating at around 6.30 or 7pm. There was no such thing as bottled water to stabilise everything, and the water I did get to drink only increased the population of stomach bugs in my system.

I had to gather my courage just to make a cup of tea. First I had to light a match and hold it over an unpredictable gas stream. The burner eventually lighted with a loud whoosh and scared the daylights out of me. I was so afraid that mostly I waited too long to hold the match over the burner, resulting in a cloud of gas in the kitchen. Boiling water to drink was too overwhelming.

When I explored the small shops in the local market to look at food options, I noted how 60% of the products were unfamiliar. Everything was locally produced and imported Western brands were nigh on impossible to acquire. I had never seen a lentil in my life. Many wonderful spices were displayed in the open air and it was an adventure to put a small amount of each in the palm of my hand and smell and taste them in order to find out what they were. Most I had never tasted before and I had no idea how to use flavours such as sour mango, chilli, curry and turmeric powder. Poppy seeds were also a mystery, as were sticky tamarind and curry leaves. In the open-air markets, piles of fresh, multi-coloured vegetables and fruits were for sale. They had neatly polished exteriors and some were familiar while others I failed to identify. I had never seen guava, mud apple, custard apple or even a mango. Vegetables such as bitter gourd, ladies' fingers (okra) and watercress were alien to me. There was no question of going to the supermarket as there weren't any. In the flat, whatever I brought home and put in the fridge disappeared into the stomachs of the bachelors, who didn't have the respect to first ask if it was okay.

At home, my father was in charge of cooking and never allowed anyone into the kitchen. He was a left-handed and clumsy chef who cooked on a five burner electric stove and banged pots around on its pristine flat surface, cursing loudly. But despite the chaos, he produced seared steaks, quail, prawns, grilled fish or chicken and frogs legs in garlic butter. He despised fruit and veg so mostly we didn't get any and I was unused to eating them. The only nod to vegetables had been the occasional salad.

The only place to eat good Western food in Delhi was the Oberoi Hotel. The food the other restaurants served was either too spicy or completely tasteless - an Indian version of Western food.

Subhead: New News

I needed time to get used to a completely different diet and I often felt nauseated. But, counting on my fingers one day, I thought, *"No, it can't be. Am I pregnant?"*

Satish and I had been reckless and on one night we had forgotten to take precautions. We located a doctor near the flat and told her what we suspected. She looked at me over the rim of her glasses and said, "Do a urine test and come back in three days for the results."

Those three days seemed endless and we did little more than worry and hold hands. Soon the truth was in front of us and the answer was yes, I was three weeks overdue and pregnant. I had been in India a little more than six weeks! My goodness, so much was happening. I was frightened, confused, worried, excited, frustrated and happy all at the same time and my head was spinning.

“What do we do?” I asked Satish.

“Don't worry, I'll take care of you, everything will be fine,” he soothed. “See all the children around here? We have plenty of good doctors here in India and I will take you to one tomorrow!”

After we had been to the doctor, one of the best in Delhi, Satish said, “Now we know everything is fine, let's not tell anyone until at least three months. No more discussion, that’s the end of the matter.”

Having no women friends or family to seek advice from made me feel so alone. Still, I was content in thinking about this little baby growing inside me. What a miracle it was! The baby’s inner voice whispered to me, *“You are not alone, I am so close. I will warm and comfort you.”*

Satish was his usual self and seemed quite nonchalant and proud of his achievement. Sitting in the car one day I glanced at him from the corner of my eye and thought, *“Do I spy a little smug look on his face?”*

Was that look of satisfaction because he knew how much easier it would be to keep me with him?

Subhead: Chaos

At the age of 24, Satish was proud to be a car owner, even though his vehicle, a white, four-seater Herald, was second-hand and seven years old. It had a green roof and two heavy front doors which opened at random as if they had their own mind and thought, *"When we hit a pothole let's just open and throw the passengers out, it’s too much effort to hold it all together!”* The hood didn’t cover the engine at all well and, like a badly fitting jar lid, it rattled musically. Despite these flaws, the car was our magic chariot and it took us out into an exciting world where the traffic was unpredictable and chaotic. Cyclists lined the roads and they pedalled on oblivious to traffic rules, often five deep. They expected cars to stop immediately when they decided to change direction and never indicated where they were going to go. Their bicycles had no lights and were practically invisible at night, especially when there was a power failure and the streetlights weren’t working.

Sometimes our car became stuck in a sea of pedestrians, bicycles, cars and buses. To say these buses were overloaded would be an understatement. Invariably, I’d see people sitting on the top of the roof and hanging from the sides, causing the vehicle to lean dangerously. I’d cross my fingers and pray it wouldn’t topple over and kill the risk-taking travellers. They were mostly thin, wasted young men in tight shirts and bellbottoms. Blind to the danger they were in, they laughed as they showed off their daredevilry. If they noticed me sitting in the car watching, they’d show off further, their actions becoming even more life threatening. This made me feel like some kind of femme fatale.

One morning, I read an article about how only 10% of the New Delhi buses belched black smoke. This could only be correct if this 10% were the only buses driving around town! There was little car traffic and only three models, designed in the 1950s, were on the roads. Everything was made in India and nothing was

imported. Buying a car took a couple of years, as there was a long waiting list. However, the lack of car variety wasn't obvious as there was so much competition from other forms of transport: horses and carts, bullocks and carts, elephants, rickshaws, old trucks with a cow and calf hand painted on the back, yellow and black three-wheeler taxis, camels and Royal Enfield modified motorbike taxis were all legitimate forms of getting from A to B. A relentless orchestra of hooting and tooting accompanied this activity, varying from shrill, high-pitched notes made by air pressure whistles to low sounds produced by hand pressed horns and every possible noise in between. Thrown into this mix were cows, pigs, street dogs and the odd chicken. Most either sat in the middle of traffic or dashed into it at the last minute. Pedestrians seemed to test their belief in the next life by crossing randomly. They looked neither left nor right and appeared to be sleepwalking. There was never a boring moment as every second a deadly accident was on the verge of taking place. It felt as if fate stepped in at the last moment to help the human or animal escape certain death by a hair's breadth. I loved it all.

Beyond the cyclists, the roads were lined with modest, family-run shops. Small enterprises were being run all over India, but western clothing and the phrase ready-to-wear had not yet arrived in the country and there were no malls, which I could certainly see scope for. The service was terrible for foreigners in most shops. They were overcharged and the owners often made fun of them behind their back. When I learned Hindi I realised what kind of fun the shopkeepers had been having with their staff whenever I entered. They'd say things like, "See your lover has arrived," or, "Your wife's cousin has arrived!" (This was supposedly a big insult). By this point, I had already learned never to give a broad, welcoming American smile to anyone. The reaction of some men was, "Ok, do you want to come home with me?" If I mentioned I'd been overcharged the response was often to order me out of the store, probably with the assumption I'd return still desperate to buy. But I was more stubborn than they gave me credit for.

Subhead: Our Families

Weeks had gone by and our families still hadn't reconciled to our changed status. The scenes continued every time we met. My mother-in-law roped in a friend of hers with political connections to have a stern talk with Satish. She resided in one of the colonnaded buildings overlooking the Rambler restaurant and we were duly summoned there. When I arrived I was told to sit on a floral print sofa in the corner and I remained seated while my mother-in-law, supported by the politician, began an animated discussion in Hindi with Satish, who was at the far end of the cavernous white room. No one spared me a glance in their effort to get my husband to leave me. My sister-in-law, Sunita, and brother-in-law, Girish, were also there – only my father-in-law was missing. After a while, Girish came to sit next to me and whispered in my ear to inform me the conversation was about me not being good enough for Satish. Apparently, I couldn't be relied upon and if Satish cared for his family he should give me up. Everyone was so caught up in arguing they didn't realise I was being informed of what was said. After 15 minutes, Satish raised his palm and voice to drown them all out, stood up, politely said goodbye and reached out one of his soft, warm hands to hold mine, his face visibly relaxing. We left the house feeling very much in love, but also a bit insecure.

After two weeks we decided to make another attempt to smooth things over.

This time, Satish's much older cousin, Sarla DiDi, who also happened to be my mother-in-law's best friend, invited us for dinner. Her beautiful, enormous house was situated in one of the newer and most salubrious parts of town. After arriving and ringing the bell, Shivnath, Sarla DiDi's husband, opened the wide, white front door. Shivnath was a renowned Indian architect. He had a portly stature and sported a salt and pepper crew cut. The waistband of his trousers was hanging way below his belly, ensuring he lived up to the stereotype of the absent-minded professor. As we walked through the sparsely lighted, dark brick interior, I felt as if we had entered a cool, spacious cave. The sound of our footsteps echoed off the bare walls. We eventually found Sarla DiDi sitting on a mattress on the floor in one of the large rooms. She was slim, middle-aged and had shoulder length, stringy, well-oiled hair. Her face was aquiline and unconventionally attractive.

Two folding chairs were dug up from one of the many dark corners of the sparsely furnished house and we were invited to sit down. In perfect English, both Sarla DiDi and Shivnath lectured us about our relationship and the problems it had caused.

"You need to give it time," Sarla DiDi said. "Don't be in such a hurry. This is India! Things are different and it will take time for Satish's mother to get used to the idea."

The pressure was building and we were struggling to keep our secret. Satish used his nickname for me as he blurted out, "Capi is pregnant."

Shivnath's and Sarla DiDi's stern expressions were replaced with ones of surprise and their eyebrows looked as if they might reach their hairlines. Once they got over the shock they dug out a bottle of red wine from somewhere deep in one of the wall cupboards. As they raised a glass to us they promised they'd do their best to change my mother-in-law's mind. They explained how I was the only foreign intrusion into a pure Brahmin bloodline, which had lasted 1000 years or more. Satish was of the highest caste and his parents had therefore expected to arrange his marriage. My arrival into the family was considered nothing short of a disaster.

A few days after our visit to Sarla Didi's house, I received a call from her. "I have arranged a formal meeting for you to be officially welcomed, in the traditional Hindu manner, by Satish's parents," she said.

Nervous and slightly nauseated, I went to meet Sarla DiDi prior to the gathering. "When you first lay eyes on your parents-in-law, you must touch their feet," she explained, "but right now I will teach you how to wear a sari and you can then borrow one of mine."

I had never touched anyone's feet like that before and hadn't imagined such a custom existed. I'd soon come to realise how this was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to Indian customs.

"A sari consists of three basic elements," Sarla DiDi informed me. "A six-yard long thin cloth, a cotton petticoat with a drawstring and a tight, bodice-like blouse."

She pointed to the bed where a sari had been laid out for me. It was neatly folded and to me, it resembled a complicated puzzle. I wondered how these three items could be combined into manageable clothing.

Sarla DiDi helped me put on the blouse and petticoat, pulling its string tight, then she tucked the horizontal part of the sari under the drawstring, creating pleats so I'd have enough room to walk. The long end was then wrapped over the pleats and left to hang loosely over my left shoulder. No needles or thread were required to keep the entire ensemble together. I felt excited and scared as I climbed the three cement steps up to the roomy veranda of Satish's family home, and as I reached the top I tripped on the sari and almost fell at my mother-in-law's feet. At the last moment, I managed to gather up the material and straighten myself up without anything coming undone or being torn – I only hoped this was a good omen. I managed to touch my mother-in-law's feet, but in all the commotion I forgot to do the same for my father-in-law.

At 42, Satish's mother had the classy look of an old painted portrait. She was quite slim on top, but had wide hips and two rolls of fat were visible below her waist. Her dark, well-oiled hair was tied up in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. At her side stood Girish, who was tall and lanky and a younger version of his dad. Sunita had beautiful, long, dark glossy hair and she pranced shyly in and out of the room glancing furtively at the people gathered inside.

My mother-in-law's smile trembled as she gave me eight gold bangles representing the marriage status. I had never seen so much gold in my life and, unaware of what trouble they'd get me into, I stared at them on my wrists in wonder. The jewellery jangled as I picked up my cup to drink some aromatic tea. As I moved my silk sari made a rich rustling sound, enabling me to imagine I was a queen. Everyone was laughing and passing around savouries and sweets. The scent of cardamom and cinnamon from the tea filled the air and it felt like my introduction to real Indian life had begun.

Over the sounds of tea being stirred and plates being scraped, I heard Satish say loudly, "Capi, from now on when I'm on a night stop, I want you to stay with my family here in this house!" The tone was one of an order and didn't invite discussion.

Capi was the nickname my little sister had given me when she was two-years-old and couldn't pronounce my name. In my new country, people faced the same problem so everyone called me by my old moniker. Over her tea cup, Sunita snuck quick peeks at me and I realised I had an admirer. She seemed excited and happy to have me in the family and this boosted my confidence. A warm, hopeful feeling flowed through me.

"Maybe it all will work out," I thought to myself.

When Satish went on his first flight after the meeting, I went to the family house as he'd advised. I wore a nice dress and took an overnight bag with me containing all the things I needed for my stay. When the time came for me to use the

toilet, Girish pointed me in the right direction. I hadn't used the toilet in Satish's family home before and wondered why his brother couldn't look me in the eye when I asked him where it was. I soon found out why. It barely reached the minimum requirement for a functional bathroom. There was a tap, a flush, a showerhead flaking with white paint and a cream-coloured crusty toilet without a seat. On the chipped black and white marble floor stood a line of metal buckets in ascending order, from small to large. When I had used the facility, I realised why Girish had avoided eye contact. Upon flushing, I was met with a clunky, echo-like sound and not a drop of water.

"Okay," I thought, *"let me try the tap".*

Again, no water! Then I remembered hearing Girish say quietly, "There is water in the buckets."

So I picked up one of the buckets lined up like soldiers and poured water down the toilet. There was also no toilet paper. Sunita later explained the family considered it dirty. "We only use water for cleaning," she said. "Take it from the small mug next to the toilet."

My first thought on the matter was, *"Okay! I better live in Rome as the Romans do (in this case, India). I don't want to stand out and be criticised for using toilet paper."*

Every time Satish dropped me off at his family home before a flight, I'd sit with my sweaty legs glued to the blue Rexine sofa as my mother-in-law had long, animated discussions in Punjabi. I listened patiently while never understanding what was going on. It was almost as if I didn't exist. Was she discussing me? Was what she was saying going to affect me? I simply had no idea.

The atmosphere at the flat had become tedious due to the jobless, jealous bachelors who constantly complained, their voices rising in a dark crescendo night after night.

Looking into each other's eyes, Satish and I discussed our options. There were only two. The first was to stay in the flat with the bachelors, the second was to move in with his family.

"I can't afford to run two separate families," Satish reasoned.

I had guessed right. All those intense discussions between mother and son were now affecting me - they had been about me moving in with them.

"Why don't we look at the budget and see if we can fit in living separately somehow," I suggested, but Satish stuck to his previous two choices. He didn't show any signs of budging.

I didn't want to be the source of any unhappiness, so I agreed to move.

Chapter 5

Subhead: Preparing For Change

The first thing we had to do was make Satish's bed bigger so the two of us could sleep on it. We called a carpenter; a simple man who turned up wearing a white, soiled kurta and a loincloth. His spiky, well-oiled grey hair was wrapped in an equally soiled white cloth and he was carrying a tattered satchel filled with the implements of his trade. His plan was to make an extension for the existing bed using cheap wood from old fruit crates. He sat on the front veranda taking these apart and then he hammered all the little planks onto a mainframe, which was added to the single bed to double its size. The new bed just about fitted in Satish's small room and we were left with about 2ft either side to manoeuvre in.

Now the only thing left to do was get a new mattress. There were people in the area who specialised in making them. They cycled around neighbourhoods publicising their trade by twanging the large harps they used to fluff up cotton. First, a big, cloth envelope the size of our bed was stitched together and this was to be stuffed with cotton. The filling was bought in rolls wrapped in cream paper with 'Tota Brand' written on it along with a picture of a green parrot. Another man now sat in the place where the carpenter had worked so hard. He filled our ears with the twanging sound of his harp as he put hard balls of cotton on the wire and fluffed them up. As he did this he sprayed the air with fine, white fluff until he turned into a cream snowman. Meanwhile, I sneezed something rotten. Surprisingly, my mother-in-law was so excited in anticipation of my arrival at the house she decided to give me a wedding present: a maroon, cotton-filled velvet quilt and two pillows. In the following winter months, this kept Satish and me as snug as two bugs in a rug.

Subhead: Out Of The Frying Pan And Into The Fire!

The moment we turned into the narrow, bumpy gauntlet of a lane leading to what was going to be our home, the strong smell of sewage and rotting garbage prickled my nose and stomach. The five-minute journey to 100 Gautam Nagar made me feel nauseated and the smell didn't help. This experience was now going to be a permanent feature in my life. On both sides of the lane, vegetable sellers did brisk business with the housewives, who often had their toddlers in tow. Whenever a car came along everyone quickly jumped sideways, snatching numerous children out of the way, but the vegetables on display on the ground often got driven over.

On our very first arrival, Satish drove up to the porch, stopped and honked. The front door flew open and my lanky brother-in-law ran across the veranda, arms flailing. He jumped down the three steps, yanked the two suitcases out from the trunk and put them on the bed in our tiny front bedroom. In the corner stood a small, steel cupboard for Satish's clothes. Later that day, I stood in front of its creaky doors for a long time pondering where to place my most worn clothes. Finally, I folded my things

so many times it was as if I was placing a small pile of magazines into my selected space.

The room had windows protected by horizontal bars. They were always open and from early morning until sunset little birds flew in and out as they pleased. They joined together to play a musical orchestra, recreating the sound of the softest little flute to the extended, low notes of a trombone.

The bed felt really great for the first few months we slept on it, but it proceeded to become harder and harder as time went on, which, in many ways, reflected my life. The nice, matching pillows had the same tendency as the mattress and eventually became as hard as rocks, too. I often woke in the middle of the night with a numb ear. Hooks had been attached to the cream-coloured walls to hang clothes on. Satish's black captain's hat with gold braids was displayed on one of them whenever he was home.

When I moved into the house, my mother-in-law made plans to transform me into her much-desired Indian daughter-in-law and I was willing to do whatever it took to make her happy.

She regularly put on her green and red sari with the now familiar gold border and shuffled to the market, her big hips gently rocking on the road like a rowboat whose oars were being pulled with effort. I went along with her one day, slowing my pace to match hers. We entered a small shop and sat on stools while sari upon sari was unfolded before us on a white sheet. My mother-in-law finally selected a red and white silk batik sari with all the things that go with it, such as a matching petticoat, blouse and fall. After stitching the fall at the bottom of the sari by hand to protect the hem from my careless feet, she dressed me up in all this finery, put a red mark on my forehead and hair, and proudly showed me to my husband. When Satish saw me he was speechless and it took a minute before his face swelled up and turned tomato red with anger. His words fell like cannon balls from his mouth. "I married you for who you are and I don't want you to be turned into a traditional Indian housewife," he said. "Wear your skirts, show your legs and don't try to be someone else."

My mother-in-law was frowning so much by this point her thick brows joined

together in a line. She walked through the wooden door, pushed the curtain hanging in front of it aside and left the room, ensuring she got the last word in.

"At least your wife should wear a red bindi, the sign of marriage," she said.

My head spun, my heart banged against my chest, my legs started to sweat and the petticoat became glued to the lower part of my body. I left the room quiet as a mouse, removed the sari, folded it lovingly, and gently placed it on the bed. That sari had been very hard for me to wear, even for a few hours.

"*Indian women wear this all the time,"* I thought. *"Maybe this is the reason why they have such a beautiful posture and a graceful walk."*

After this my mother-in-law found many reasons to stop me from wearing a skirt. "You offend your father-in-law by showing him your bare legs," she told me. "At least wear clothing which covers you completely."

My father-in-law was a quiet man who never said a word about my choice of attire. He spent so many hours meditating and living in another world, he barely connected with what was going on around him. On Sundays, a long line of around 300 ragamuffin children waited patiently in line as he stood at the back of the house, giving them each a toffee. At 6:30am and at the same time in the evening, he'd turn the radio on for an hour and the sound of crackling voices singing religious songs from Hindi movies echoed around the house.

Subhead: Sudershan Cinema

A popular ramshackle movie hall stood on the road on the way to the house. Above its doors hung huge, hand-painted garish signs depicting the latest offering from the Bollywood film world. Quite often, the faces of the main actors were painted sunset yellow on one side and purple on the other. The actresses were depicted in pink, with a fluorescent blush on their cheeks. Their breasts stuck out like two rockets covered by a super tight sari blouse.

The walls of the movie hall were dotted with holes and beams of light created polka dotted patches on the audience. For no extra cost, we got hot wind from these holes too. Once, just five minutes after the movie had begun, I detected a rustling sound from underneath my seat. Something was moving about. I quickly lifted my feet and a large, almost cat-sized rat scuttled out of the room. I watched the rest of the movie, with its colourful costumed actors, fantastic fairy tale locations and tear-jerking storyline, with my feet on top of the chair in front and my head leaning on my knees.

The climax of any romantic scene in these movies was usually set outdoors and accompanied by songs. The actors danced and pranced around trees and changed costumes several times. I couldn't understand why this was until it was pointed out to me how each costume change signified the romancing couple was singing on different days. No kissing or hugging was allowed and sometimes trees were caressed lovingly as the couple disappeared behind them. Other images often appeared at this point too. For example, two birds joined in the air accompanied by twittering sounds, or flames merging together. This was the beginning of my effort to learn Hindi.

Sunita sat beside me and explained the stories. It didn't bother anyone she was talking throughout the movie. People were very tolerant and maybe it was the novelty of having a foreigner interested in their movies. Soon enough, after having seen a few films, I realised I didn't need someone to tell me what was happening. This wasn't due to the fact I'd become a sudden expert in Hindi, but because all the stories ended up more or less the same. A typical plot went something like this: boy meets girl, boy is separated from girl by mean relatives, people or events, mother gets kidnapped and everyone reconciles. Another favourite story was about two brothers being separated as children. One becomes a criminal, the other a policeman. An alternative version was about two identical twin sisters becoming separated. One grows up to become rich, the other is poor.

Subhead: Flying High

My first direct experience of being a pilot's wife occurred after I moved in with the family. Our house in Gautam Nagar was in the direct landing path of aircraft touching down in Delhi. We had a little black portable wireless, which picked up radio airwaves and, at a time given by Satish, I used to stand on the flat roof of our house with it glued to my ear. From the distance, I'd see the plane approach. It'd get larger and larger as it roared overhead. Upon hearing static I'd quickly turn the knobs and hear a voice I hardly recognised speaking confidently to the control tower – Satish! He sounded like a movie star. Hearing him then felt so good. When we married, Satish had two licenses to fly two separate aircraft. One was a Netherlands-made Fokker Friendship. On the steering column was the emblem of the Dutch crown emblazoned on a background of pure blue sky. Satish was going for Dutch in his professional and private life! It was strange to think how he could make the machine do what he wanted, almost as much as he could make me do what he wished. When he graduated to larger aeroplanes, the machines changed as much as I did.

In India, I knew no one outside Satish's family. There were no girlfriends, no mother to comfort me, no father to ask for advice. I had to be all those people to myself. Every week I wrote home and waited for letters to come from the US, but deliveries could take between three and six weeks. Sometimes the American stamps were stolen from the envelopes. Once or twice a month I spoke with my family through an operator who let me speak for a maximum of six minutes. This was all we could afford and it was hardly enough time for a heart to heart.

However, within my first four months in India, my whole world changed from not knowing a soul to suddenly meeting lots of new people and trying to understand how they saw the world.

Soon after we married, Satish took me to the home of a very close friend of his in the centre of town. Upon arrival, we waited outside for armed men wearing green uniforms to open a large, white gate. After parking, we walked across a well-tended lawn towards an English colonial house painted white. We walked through a smaller gate and into a small-sized apartment. It was beautifully furnished with comfortable, fawn-coloured sofas and a wall lined with dark wooden shelves. These supported the large brass head of a man, his unseeing eyes staring into a room where dramatic events were soon to unfold. A vase with painted flowers and a row of coffee table books covered with beautiful photographs were placed on the other shelves. Two 6ft tall black speakers stood on each side of the bookcase like sentries. Some small knick-

knacks had been arranged on a glass centre table and a cream dhurrie carpet with a geometric design in red, green and blue covered the floor. A small, Botero-style painting of a fat lady posing in a red dress hung near the glass pane door leading to the garden, and there was also a painting by an artist called Anjolie Menon. It depicted a woman staring sadly out of a real wooden window frame.

No one seemed to be at home, so Satish called out, “Rajeev, Sonia.”

“I am in here,” a woman replied.

We followed the voice into another room, where a slim lady in a parrot-green maxi gown was reclining on her bed. She had lustrous, long brown hair and her light brown eyes were lined with eyeliner. The small lashes on her lower lids had obviously been painted one by one. When I was introduced to her she exclaimed, “So, it is true what we heard, you are married!”

It turned out that when Interpol had been looking for me, the news had reached Rajeev and Sonia. I was quite perplexed by my importance.

The three of us had a cosy tea together in the wood-panelled bedroom and discussed my time in India. This was to be the beginning of a very long and eventful relationship. I was visiting Satish’s friends, but this was also the home of Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India! Sonya was on bed rest as she was pregnant with her daughter, whom she would go on to name Priyanka.

I started vising Sonia often. She offered a small respite from the overwhelming atmosphere I was living in. The two of us ate grilled cheese on toast, canapés and cookies, accompanied by tea or coffee. I looked forward to those times so I could seek advice on how to deal with all the different things I was going through, but I was too afraid of Satish to discuss my relationship problems with her.

Satish had been friends with Rajiv since he was 15 and they attended the New Delhi Flying Club together.

While at school, Satish observed a dashing pilot trying to woo his teacher, an attractive young woman with thick black hair and dark eyes lined with kohl. The suitor was creative in finding different ways to impress her and one day, to the astonishment of all the students, he flew low over the school in a small plane. And that wasn’t all. He also offered to give a weekly lesson on aeromodelling to her class. The prize for those who completed the course and did well was a free ride in a glider. This was how Satish caught the flying bug, which led to him meeting Rajiv.

Both of them had to work with other students to push the glider, which had no engine and was being pulled from a Jeep at the front, and help get it airborne. A rough track made up the airstrip and the Jeep created a dust trail, which found its way into the eyes, mouths, hair and ears of the students as they toiled. The treat of flying didn't come easy and hard work was required, even though each ride only cost one rupee.

Every day, Satish escaped his house on the sly and bicycled for 20 minutes to Safdarjung Airport, where the gliding club was based. The airport was situated in the middle of town and was a throwback from the British occupation. Its old, cream-

colored control tower was festooned with a crown of antennas and overlooked a short, black tar runway. Mahatma Gandhi had flown to England from this airport.

The club itself was housed in a squat, square building which sat, like a fat man sunning himself in the garden, at the far end of the runway. It had a corrugated roof and housed an old-fashioned bar and billiard room, both of which were cloaked in dim light. On the green lawn stood wooden tables surrounded by metal chairs with woven plastic seats. They were often loaded with the favourite snacks of students and guests: delicious crispy fish fingers, fried cheese balls, fried spicy potatoes and steaming cups of tea.

One day, when Satish was turning into the long road next to the runway, Rajiv drove past in his grandfather's car and told the driver to stop. He got out and insisted Satish join them. Together they lifted the bicycle into the trunk. During the ensuing short journey, the pair became lifelong friends.

Satish's parents didn't know he was taking gliding classes. He'd slipped the permission slip in between other papers from the school that needed signing, and his father had unknowingly given permission for his underage son to be involved in aero sports. Every day after school, Satish came home and gave his school bag to the servant, another young boy, to hide. Then he cycled as fast as he could to the airport. One day, my mother-in-law heard Satish speaking to the servant. She questioned him for a long time before he finally broke down and pointed upwards as a glider flew overhead, "That is where Satish is," he said.

It's hard to imagine just how horrified my mother-in-law was at this.

Rajiv, who was two years older than Satish, later went off to England to study. This is where he met Sonia, who is Italian.

When he was 17, Satish moved to Hyderabad and lost contact with his friend. The move happened when his father fell on bad times after making a series of ill-advised business decisions, becoming unable to support his family. One by one his wife and children moved away from Delhi, as there wasn't enough food to eat at home. They lived with Mataji (Sunita and Girish's grandmother) and were supported financially by my mother-in-law's brothers. Satish was the last one to leave Delhi. The night he left, father and son fought, with my father-in-law insisting, "It's your duty to stand by your father and keep my porcelain business afloat. We will turn it around together."

"I am not going to stay on this sinking ship," Satish argued. The battle must have been fierce because Satish never spoke to his father again. Without a penny in his pocket, he left the house, borrowed money from a distant relative and took the train to Hyderabad to join his mother. This was more than my mother-in-law's brothers had bargained for and they tried to persuade him to help out, for no pay, with their construction business. Satish stood his ground and continued with his flying lessons, which were heavily subsidised by the government, meaning he could afford them by sneaking just a little money from his grandmother.

Chapter 6

Subhead: A New Life

"Can you explain what's happening," I said to an increasingly angry-looking Satish. "I don't know what to do. Why does your mother not want me to go out with you? Why does she always want us to take your brother along with us? Why do you feel guilty for wanting to do what you feel like doing and why does she always tell your friends what our plans are and invite them to join us? We never get any privacy!"

My mother-in-law made Satish report to her where we were going on the pretence his airline might call with a flight schedule.

Family tradition required me to call Satish's parents Mother and Father. This was very difficult for me, as I felt I was being disloyal to my own parents. So I came up with a solution and decided to call them Mommie and Daddy – names I'd never used to refer to my own parents. In turn, the entire Sharma family was asked to refer to me by my nickname, Capi.

Mommie and Daddy's room was connected to the bathroom, and to use it we needed to go through their bedroom. Instead of doing this, we sometimes went outside at night to do the needful in the open air, which is what so many Indians did. The water in the buckets in the bathroom came from a hand pump all five families living in the house used. This wasn't the first time I'd seen a hand pump. As a small child in Belgium, I sometimes spent the night with our maid in her farmhouse when my parents went away. I vividly recall playing around with their pump and standing in a large, blue-rimmed white bowl next to the biggest, blackest stove you'd ever seen, as lukewarm water was poured over me. The stove had many drawers, even several at the bottom, and coal was shovelled into it throughout the day via a small door in its front. On its smooth, dining table-sized top, large enamelled blue and orange pots bubbled with potatoes, various meats and vegetables. In the evenings, after a long day of toiling in the fields, the head of the family poured himself a glass of cloudy orange Belgian beer and put his cold, wet feet in the stove drawer. He'd keep on his hand-knitted, much-darned socks and put his shoes in another drawer to dry. The air was made cosy and steamy with the smell of boiling potatoes combined with wet socks. Whenever I stayed with the family, I slept in a bedroom right next to the cowshed. The cows rubbed themselves against the wall throughout the night and, as my bed was pushed up against the other side of it, I'd constantly dream they were crashing through and landing on top of me. In fact, there was a strong possibility of this happening in reality, as the walls were made using ancient building methods and materials such as mud, straw and tree branches. They were also hundreds of years old.

One morning, the maid led me to the front of a shed where a docile black and white cow was standing with a metal bucket under her large, pink udders. Gently, she placed my six-year-old fingers around the udder and helped me to pull. Thin, warm streams of white milk flowed straight into the bucket. I tried my hardest but when the maid took her own hands away I couldn't continue with the milking - I simply wasn't strong enough. The maid laughed. Neither of us could have predicted how one day in the future I'd live in a country where I'd be surrounded by cows and forced to use a hand pump for three years of my life. The contrast between my old life and my new

one wasn't as different as it initially may have appeared.

My parents obviously worried about me and sent me recorded tape messages full of advice. These often ended with warnings from our neighbour, a doctor, to be careful when I drank water and to make sure it had been boiled first, otherwise I'd get stomach ache. I mentioned this suggestion to Mommie, who replied, "The water you drink in this house is very clean because it comes from a pump dug 35-feet into the ground."

However, when our drinking water had been in the fridge for more than two days, I'd notice a thin layer of green algae growing on the bottom of the bottle. This was a clear indication the water was not exactly safe to drink. I often suffered with stomach pains, but Mommie blamed them on me eating out at restaurants so much.

Back home in Washington, I'd drunk clean water straight from the tap and shared a nice, blue-tiled bathroom with my two sisters. I spent many hours in the tub soaking myself in warm water and reading novels. This was only marred by the accompanying sound of family members tapping on the door with requests for me to get out of the bath so they could use the facilities. My large and spacious bedroom was situated on the top floor and I'd painted the walls green and the furniture red and black. A sizeable, old black-framed mirror leant on the wall and I'd spend hours in front of it practising my dance moves to the latest music blaring from a transistor radio I'd won in a high school lottery. In one corner stood a white dressing table hand painted by my mother with little flowers. Seated before it I experimented with putting on makeup and even tried and failed to paste on false eyelashes. A line of nail polishes stood on its top in colours ranging from black to yellow. One day when I was out, my five-year-old sister, Engelien, sneaked into my room and used the nail polish as eyeliner!

Every day, in preparation for a life in Taiwan which was never to be, I painted Chinese watercolours on a big wooden table arranged in front of a spacious window. I'd left my white clapperboard house only three months earlier, but now it seemed like another world. I could still picture the wooden picnic table in the front garden, where my father would sit to eat his breakfast. In the evenings, the whole family joined him there for dinner, otherwise there would be hell to pay. It wasn't possible to say it was too cold and you didn't feel like eating outside. If Father said the weather was good enough then the weather was good enough, no arguments!

In Satish's family home we also ate outdoors, on the back veranda overlooking an ancient, three-domed monument called Masjid Moth. Three large bael trees framed this spectacular view, but it was potentially dangerous to stand near them. The fruit was hard and shaped like cannon balls. Woe betide if any of these fell on someone's head. Sunita claimed she'd fainted after being stuck by one!

Being Brahmins, everyone in the family was a strict vegetarian, all except for Satish, who did eat meat. He'd done so since a Muslim friend had offered to share his tiffin with him – he'd loved the meat the boy's mother had prepared. Prior to this, not even an egg had passed Satish's lips. Satish became a strict non-vegetarian and ate meat outside his home regularly, though Mommie didn't know this.

I missed my regular diet. I had been thin my whole life, so my parents had

been obsessed with what I put into my mouth, and how much. Every meal, whether it was breakfast, lunch or dinner, had to start with meat, otherwise I got nothing of what I actually wanted to eat (sweets). I can recall being locked in the basement for failing to finish my plate within a specified time. I wasn't let out until I finished everything.

Now the reason I wasn't eating much was because I was pregnant. My gums started bleeding and I asked Mommie to at least let me eat an egg in her home.

"You can eat egg when you get your own kitchen," she replied. "People who eat anything which isn't vegetarian stink."

"God," I wondered. "*Does she think I smell too?"* She later relented, but only for the sake of my unborn baby, and agreed to let me prepare eggs in my bedroom on a hot plate my parents had sent me. I kept it under my bed and even managed to make banana cake on it. Mommie told me she hadn't even seen what was inside an egg until she was an adult, so there was no question of keeping them inside the fridge.

The arrangements for the fridge were unusual. Due to the lack of room it stood next to the bed Mommie and Daddy shared with Sunita. This made it difficult to access cold water at night without disturbing anyone.

Satish liked to go out - after all he was still only 25. This irritated Mommie a lot and one night when he came back when the sun was already up, she decided to go on 'strike'. This consisted of not speaking or looking at him, slamming his plate down on the table and threatening to go to Hyderabad and not come back. She persisted with this for three days. Satish was very upset and took to sitting mournfully on the roof. I climbed through a small ventilator to get to him, and said, "I won't let you go out anymore on your own and will be next to you at all times."

This managed to clear the storm, as when we went out and alcohol was drunk too fast and heavy, I'd point out I was hungry and we'd go and eat. Once the food was served, it was the custom in India for people to stop drinking. I can't say it worked every time, but there was some overall improvement.

Once when we came back at 1am, Satish went into Mommie's bedroom to get some cold water from the fridge and found her waiting for him like a leopard preparing to pounce on its prey. She popped up her head and with an angry voice scolded, "You'll be the cause of my death from a heart attack with your bad habits. You disturb us by coming in late and I bet you've been drinking, too."

I was standing behind the door and had to cover my mouth to stifle my giggles as Satish replied, "Ma, you'll never die of a heart attack because of *me*!"

How true this turned out to be.

In this family, both the eating of meat and the drinking of alcohol was simply not acceptable. Mommie didn't seem to consider her own behaviour to be a problem. She constantly scolded us and complained. I worried how this was affecting Sunita. The open doors, windows and ventilators all around us obviously didn't help to keep out this cacophony of noise. On top of the grumbling, one of the neighbours coughed all the time because of TB and the family living in a single room right next to us had a

constantly crying baby. Our love was always on the sly, and oh so quiet. We worried people could hear us the way we heard them!

Subhead: Getting To Know Everyone

Mommie didn't invite anyone home and seemed to have few friends, but there was one lady, Mrs K, who played a big role in her life. Mrs K was of short stature and liked to wear low-cut blouses to emphasise her generous chest. Her hair was dyed jet black and was puffed on top of her head, ending in a neat little bun encased in a black hairnet. Her restless eyes flitted hither and tither in her elongated head and she walked around with great importance, her heels making busy little tapping sounds on the floor. She no doubt acted this way due to the fact her husband was a commander with a management position at Indian Airlines. Captain K had helped select pilots for the airline, including Satish. In fact, he'd helped him get the job because Mrs K had an ulterior motive; she had an unmarried niece whom she'd wanted my husband to marry. That was until I came along, of course!

Every time Mommie went to meet Mrs K she came back in a bad mood which lasted for days and manifested itself in a long face and her muttering in my direction. Sometimes this turned into open criticism.

"You are careless," she'd say, or, "You are like this, you are like that!" It was true I was forgetful, but she didn't care it was due to the fact I had a lot to cope with.

One time, Satish and I went to pick up Mommie from Mrs K's house. Satish sent me inside to inform her we had arrived. The two friends didn't even glance in my direction as I stood hesitating with my hand on the knob of the sitting room door. Observing the heavy silence which had suddenly descended, I didn't know if I should enter. When downcast eyes didn't rise to meet mine, it suddenly dawned on me they had been talking about me again.

"Please, tell me what the problem is," I pleaded. "What am I doing wrong?"

This was taken as a big insult and Satish was hauled inside.

"I will not take you home until you apologise to both ladies," Satish told me. The two women were left to their own devices as I was driven around the block many times until I gave in. I felt as if I was tied up in a straitjacket with no way out. Frustrated and cringing, I said a humble "sorry" while my stomach painfully clenched up inside me.

I continued to face Mommie's bad moods for days on end, but there was nothing I could do to change the fact I was a foreigner and was married to Satish. I wasn't about to leave my beloved to make his mother happy. For her, everything about me was uncultured and below her standard of a proper Indian daughter-in-law. The sentence, "Just give me a chance, I will be good to you and prove it, just wait and see," spun around in my head as Mommie remonstrated on a daily basis how in India things were done differently.

She didn't even like the way I made my bed with a bottom sheet, a top sheet and a quilt and a bed cover over the top.

"You must roll up the quilt at the end of your bed and nothing more," she'd say.

I tried to do it her way, but since the air was often dust-laden, a brown layer collected on the bed during the day and made my skin feel prickly when I laid down to sleep at night. To me, the bed looked as if I was about to go camping.

The next complaint wasn't long in coming. "Look at the floor of your room, all your husband's clothes are thrown everywhere."

"Mommie, it's *your son* who doesn't tidy up after himself," I argued.

"Well, it is your duty as a wife to pick up after him. All Indian wives do it".

"So this is how you brought up your son," I thought to myself.

I told Satish about our discussion and he immediately starting folding his clothes and putting them away.

Every time there was another complaint, I'd think, *"I must try harder to fit in with Indian customs."* But it wasn't possible for me to comply each and every time.

Satish observed my struggle with his mother passively, without moving a muscle on his face. His feelings on the matter were inscrutable. Did he hear it or not? Did he agree, and with whom? With solid ground moving under my feet, what could I hold onto to get my balance? It certainly wasn't him.

Sometimes, when my patience threatened to exhaust itself, I'd seal my lips to not let a sound escape. But after days of continuous nagging, steam built up in my head. It was as if Mommie had put me in her pressure cooker; my fingers tingled, my cheeks burned and my lips lost their power. Out of them, an occasional "Stop it!" burst out. This sounded just like the whistle of the cooker, causing Mommie's head to turn to see who had witnessed the outburst. She'd shake her head innocently and mutter, "Look at this, tut, tut, tut."

At times, she even did this without any provocation.

"Did I do something wrong? What could it be?" I'd wonder. But if I voiced these questions out loud, Mommie couldn't answer them. It certainly wasn't peaceful to live like this, but I tried to keep my mood positive, light and cheerful.

"Shall I dust the living room or set the table?" I'd ask to try and placate her. "Shall I cut the vegetables? Do you want me to buy some clothes for Sunita?"

There were brief times when a smile appeared and her face relaxed, and I'd think I was getting there, but it didn't last long. Reality eventually set back in and the corners of her lips settled back into a martyred downward tilt. Though Mommie was excited about my pregnancy and often showed genuine concern, she couldn't resist being irritable with me.

My belly had begun to swell and I often couldn't wait for Satish to finish his bathroom ablutions so I could relieve myself. These began with him opening the door

to the outside toilet and waving his newspaper vigorously while a swarm of flies flew out. After closing the door he remained there for two hours reading for privacy. I found this funny and stood there more than once just to check if the flies were obedient every day, and they were! I'd knock on the door when I couldn't wait and Mommie would say, "Poor boy, you are disturbing him!"

"Satish hears her constantly nagging me," I thought. *"Why isn't he bothered enough to ask her to stop? Does he think, 'My little bird is caught, where can she fly to?'"*

Talking about Mommie to Satish wasn't really possible, as he'd react as if I was trying to set him on fire. I couldn't understand why it wasn't possible to talk things over. What he did do instead was communicate without words by taking me out to a nice restaurant, cuddling me, or sometimes something extra! I didn't want to spoil the good times, so I'd tell myself to let it pass.

When Satish was on a flight and I was left alone I'd think, *"Maybe it's the cultural difference, so give up trying to understand."*

I'd also take refuge in positive thoughts and think about the warm embraces of my lover and how the excitement of our life together made my world spin.

The moment Satish got back from work we went out and left our troubles behind. When we were alone, Satish was attentive and different. He took me everywhere, fixing his big eyes on the road as I chattered away about little nothings, the air from the open car window ruffling my blond hair as people stared at me from the side of the road. Then I'd get a love attack, grab him and kiss him on the cheek. He wouldn't move his eyes away from the road and threatened, "You can get arrested for doing that in this country."

"What a weird place I have landed in," I'd think, grabbing him again. I expressed my affection whenever the impulse hit me, which was often.

Subhead: Taking Responsibility

Yes, I was playful, but my heart also had a serious side, and soon this part of me needed putting into action.

Sunita was attending one of the best convent schools in the city and every day she left home wearing a light blue uniform made up of a blue skirt, a beige sweater and a white blouse. She was a very pretty girl, with dark, long, lustrous hair tied into two braids with white ribbons. Within her diamond-shaped face, her almond eyes glowed. I regularly teased her by grabbing her thick braids and holding them so they stood up like two poles.

"Look at these, the magic ropes of India!" I'd declare.

She had psoriasis and although her dry, flaking skin wasn't apparent to other people, she was embarrassed by it and constantly fussed about the fact everyone could see it. No amount of protesting about how this wasn't the case worked. Not only that, she thought she was extremely ugly and any conversation to the contrary was dismissed with a negative nod of her head. According to her, on top of all her other

unattractive qualities she was also fat and had big hips.

At the end of her school year we got a notice saying she was being expelled from the school, as she had failed twice in the same class. The school had been sending notices, which said, "You are requested to meet Sunita Sharma's teacher to discuss her problems."

None had been responded to. Daddy had cut himself off from all family-related responsibilities and Mommie wasn't bothered, declaring, "Satish is responsible for anything to do with his sister." So Satish and I went to meet one of the nuns who ran the school.

I had never seen a Christian nun in a sari before; the ones in my village had their faces framed in a kind of white, starched sculpture. This one sat down in front of us dressed in beige, which was the same colour as her skin, and made her resemble a sand sculpture.

"The rule is, students need to go to another school when they have failed twice in the same class," she informed us. "Sunita doesn't understand English very well and is therefore unable to follow the lessons."

I pleaded with her, promising I would take responsibility for Sunita's schooling, but the frown on the nun's face didn't soften and I was unable to change her mind. We were suddenly faced with finding a new school, and fast.

Mrs K introduced us to a teacher from an Anglo Indian school who interviewed Sunita and got her admitted. Later on we discovered the teacher was extremely disappointed when she realised Sunita was not our child and therefore didn't have mixed blood. I decided to help Sunita with her education. Mommie spoke quite decent English but didn't bother to speak in the language to her daughter. Meanwhile, I loved to learn new tongues and could often be found with a heavy book in Dutch, English or French in front of my nose. I had learnt English myself at 14 and still carried the dictionary I'd used to help me.

Sunita became my sidekick, and when Satish was on a flight, the only language she heard was English. Her understanding and communication skills improved so much she soon became better than her classmates.

Every day when she came home I asked her to tell me what she had been learning and what else was on her mind. She worried constantly about the way the other students looked at her, and felt they were talking about her negatively. Sometimes she came home after school and cried for hours, lying on the bed and working herself up into a state. At those times she became hysterical, gasping, clutching her chest and complaining she could not breathe. I took her to a doctor who gave her some homeopathic medicine. After this I made an extra effort to bring change in her life, and introduced her to new things with the hope she would feel happier. I tried to take her with me wherever I went and we'd go out to eat pastries in restaurants and watch English movies. I did homework with her every day on the large veranda table outside, and I also arranged a tutor to help sharpen her skills.

I could identify with Sunita's plight, as I had a lot of trouble at school myself.

I'd struggled with dyslexia, a reading disorder. This caused me to process information differently and made me very slow at writing. This was a double-edged sword, as it made me more visually-oriented. I see with my eyes things others don't and get distracted by things like the rocking of individual leaves on trees, clouds being pushed by the wind across the sky, and the movement of birds in flight, which I witness in a kind of freeze frame and store to be drawn later. I notice expressions on faces and just the turn of a head tells me what is going on in the mind of man or beast. It's as if I have an extra pair of eyes on top of my head. Every colour infuses me with life, and I take India completely into myself with each breath. Everything in its air is suspended in a light, silvery haze and I absorb the breath of millions, present and past, sweet and pungent, all at the same time. A light sprinkling of dust is everywhere, including on the leaves of the trees, and the sun shines light orange in the hazy sky. In this air I feel as creative as a child discovering everything again and again.

Early in life, my family recognised my talent, as well as the things I struggled with. From the age of seven, my mother took me to learn art from a French teacher in Brussels. She was incredibly gifted and after seven years with her, I never needed to go to another art school to learn anything about painting or sculpture. She gave me a good foundation, which I used to build upon with years of practice.

In India, the artist in me imagined the stories of the scattered, lonely and forgotten monuments crowded by modern buildings. I fantasised about how old some of the ancient blocks next to the road were. And I imagined the lives of the old men sitting next to them. Their weathered, brown faces and long, white flowing beards weaved historical tales and transported me into the past, causing me to forget the present.

The city of New Delhi (Indraprastha) is mentioned in Hindu scriptures, which are believed to have been created thousands of years before Christ. It's no wonder I felt stuck in a time warp, shifting randomly from the present to the past. I went with the flow, experiencing, with my eyes open wide, the sight of airplanes and kites, bellbottoms and pyjamas, purple movie heroes and dhoti wearing farmers, hand pumps and water works. Before long, my life in India would change and I'd witness history being made first-hand.

Chapter 7

Subhead: The Months Pass

At home, it was as if a big, Indian wave had swept over me at high tide. Mommie took care of all the household matters and cooked all the food.

"You are pregnant and I don't think you should strain yourself right now," she said. "Maybe later you can learn to cook Indian food".

I was very grateful and thought, *"How considerate of her."*

The cream-coloured kitchen was situated at the end of the back veranda. Although it was well ventilated, it was very hot in the summer. Mommie sweated so much the wet patches under her arms often spread until they met at the front hooks of her blouse. Two barred windows provided a favourite spot for little birds to rest and play. However, they flew away fast when their tiny nostrils filled with sharp, spicy cooking smells. One of the walls was lined with shelves housing traditional steel plates, glasses and utensils. These were cleaned with the ash from the 'angithi', a coal -fuelled little stove used as backup for the main gas one. Comprising an aluminium bucket lined with clay, it spewed smoke in swirls, which created a haze around the kitchen-dining area. It also fumigated the bathroom, momentarily chasing away the flies. As there was no running water in the house, our bath water was warmed on the angithi during the winter months.

Every day, the vegetable seller passed our house carrying his wares on a wooden contraption strapped to his bicycle and pushed by hand. It amazed me how this whole 'shop on wheels' was propelled by manpower. I often sat on the red steps outside the house to help cut these vegetables. I'd also remove stones, dead insects and fibre from our stocks of rice and lentils. I wasn't expected to do anything else - my knowledge of cooking vegetables was limited to boiling them in salt water.

The main stove in the kitchen had two rather unreliable burners. It leant on a cement counter underneath which was a red gas cylinder. In front of the barred window, on a rickety table, stood a handmade, pot-bellied, brick-coloured earthenware container called a ghara. It was very large and could hold at least 10 bottles of water. This was a traditional way for keeping water cold. A wet cloth was often draped over it and the breeze did the cooling. The water in the pot tasted wonderful. Whenever I took some, though, Mommie flinched. I'd see her out of the corner of my eye, and if she noticed me clocking her she'd say, "You are taking the water wrong. Don't put your hand near the mouth of the pot!" Later, when I'd had my baby, she banned me from touching the pot when I was on my period. This continued off and on until we stopped using this age-old water cooler years later.

Mommie's instructions were subject to arbitrary change, and mostly started with, "In India we do it like this…" It was as if she wanted to use my head the same way as one of her pans, stirring my brain vigorously with plenty of spices and red pepper in order to set it on fire. The heat of her disappointment made me want to run away. On many occasions I temporarily fled the house to think things over. I'd march until I became short of breath and my mind calmed down. As my pace slowed, I became more conscious of my feet and noted how putting one foot in front of the

other stirred dust on the uneven road.

"I'm not married to Mommie, why should I let her ruin my marriage and family life?" I'd think. Then I'd make a determined U-turn towards home. When I got this feeling for the first time, I wrote a long note to Satish regarding my frustration with the way Mommie behaved towards me. That night, when finally we got some privacy in our little room, and were snuggling together under the cover of darkness, he loudly told me, "I don't want to hear any complaints about my mother. She comes first with me, you come second."

He may as well have hit me with a club. My heart pounded so much I felt its beat right through my body, down to my toes and fingertips.

"He does not love me enough," I thought and instinctively put my hand on my belly to feel the restless movement of my baby. My heart sank even more when I thought how Mommie had probably heard Satish's words and was no doubt extremely satisfied with them.

Satish had never learned to whisper and always used his trumpet voice for every conversation, no matter what the topic. Disappointment flooded our room like a dark cloud and a little bit of it remained hanging over my head. It was invisible to everyone but me for many years to come. Here I was on my own in a new country and culture with no emotional support from the only person I could count on. He was also the only reason I was experiencing this misery in the first place. But I told myself it had been my choice to marry. I'd decided to break off from the family tree and, just like a branch drifting along a river, I had to just go with it. I spent many hours pondering what I could do to make Mommie happy with me. The only thing I could think of was to be patient, spread some love around and be positive in my reaction to what was coming my way. And so the cycle was repeated until my head was put on fire again.

The one area I couldn't fault Mommie in was the kitchen. She was a fantastic vegetarian cook and could make food really last. Each dish had its own unique, wonderful flavours: red beans with cinnamon, green lentils with mustard oil, beans with freshly scraped coconut, sweet candied carrot in a buffalo milk reduction…the list was as endless as it was mouth-watering. She had learned five of India's main languages from travelling through the country, and this is how she had also learned to cook in five different styles.

The kitchen was about 30-steps away from a big outdoor dining table where all the wonderful dishes were laid out. Mommie made flat Indian bread (chapatis) and each piece was filled with hot air and covered in a small lump of melting butter.

The first time I sat at this particular table, Girish told me a joke. "I have a girlfriend and her name is Ram Pyari (beloved of the god, Ram)," he said. "You have seen her, guess what she looks like?"

I tried and tried but all my guesses were wrong. "My girlfriend has two round circles and her name is written on her chest."

Now I was totally mystified, but I wasn't left in suspense for long.

"She is my little motorbike. I can ride her whenever and wherever I want and she is very obedient."

Girish's punchline brought on my full-throated, loud laugh, the one that comes from deep inside my chest and heart. In fright at this, Sunita, whose chore it was to bring the freshly baked chapatis to the table, promptly dropped the steel plate she was carrying them on. It clattered down three steps while crows eyed its contents, calculating how quickly they could swoop down to snatch the food. Within minutes, the next steaming roti arrived. In all, each person ate at least three servings of the delicious bread. Mommie made a separate portion of all the food she made especially for me, which contained less hot chili pepper. However, as I was so thin, she also snuck purified butter into my food. The moment I smelt it, I felt like running to the bathroom to be sick, but it was difficult to stop her. Though well intentioned, it had the opposite effect to what she wanted.

Satish regularly invited friends home without any notice and asked Mommie to cook a meal. Within half an hour she could expand a meal for six people into one for 10. Beautiful Indian steel plates (thali) containing small, cup-like containers (katori) filled with colourful vegetables, lentils, homemade yogurt and butter appeared like magic, with a heap of steaming rice in the middle. And Mommie never once complained about the lack of notice. Satish's bachelor pilot friends regularly invited themselves for lunch when they were in need of home-cooked food and attention. After these meals they walked up to Satish's cupboard and helped themselves to his clothes without asking. When I mentioned there were only two shirts left and no more stealing should be tolerated, Satish simply shrugged his shoulders.

Captain Vyas was particularly perturbed about us leaving the flat and called us every day to keep him company. Every afternoon I'd think, *"I hope he isn't going to invite himself over, or worse, ask us to go to his flat."*

It was almost as if he was a second wife! Satish didn't think this behaviour was strange and was happy to indulge him.

My husband was a different person around me. He was cocky and, as already mentioned, spoke in a loud, pompous voice. Sometimes, I wouldn't even get past my first word without him cutting in and stating, "End of discussion. I don't want to hear anything more!" He talked as if he was commanding an army, instead of just me!

His stride was wide and I needed to break into a jog in order to keep a pace several steps behind him.

"Slow down, Satish, I can't keep up with you," I'd moan, but my complaints fell on deaf ears.

"I'm like a Japanese wife!" I thought mournfully.

Eventually, I solved the problem by putting my hand on his shoulder to slow him down.

Subhead: Flying!

Satish became the head of the family at 20 and developed a lot of confidence as a result. I found this frustrating and endearing in equal measures. I loved how his temperament was always the same. As he was constantly cocky, there were generally no surprises. Being an airline pilot involved being extremely strong and stable, and Satish possessed these qualities in abundance. He'd had many extraordinary experiences for a man his age, including flying a Tiger Moth, a 1930s biplane, at the tender age of 18. In order to be certified as a pilot he needed to fly the plane for long stretches in the dark. No easy feat considering the cockpit wasn't covered so half his body was exposed to the elements!

He told me about one time when he was in a Dakota and unexpectedly flew into towering dark clouds loaded with lightning. In those days there were no navigational aids to see what was inside the clouds, so the two pilots had to make a calculated guess about where to go. Monsoon thunderclouds are notoriously dangerous and rise thousands of feet in the air. Well, on this occasion, Satish guessed wrong and a huge lightning bolt hit the aircraft and shook it hard. They lost height and the entire skin and windscreen of the aircraft was engulfed with dancing blue flames. While the two pilots took corrective action they heard a loud thump in the back of the cockpit. When they turned around to see what was up, they saw their understudy pilot on the jump seat passed out cold.

In some places, the airports were also quite primitive and had only a simple, paved landing strip, sometimes complete with grazing buffalos. As there was no fencing either, at times Satish flew low so the engine noise scared off the animals, giving him room to land. Some airports had no electric lights on the landing strip and were lighted at night by kerosene torches instead.

Once when I was sitting in the jump seat, I heard Satish say, "Can you see the airstrip, it should be on the left?" Gulp!

The same Dakota plane was used for the calibration of the radar at the airport. When the pilots crisscrossed Delhi for hours, the cockpit became stifling and the noise of the engine was ear-splitting. One day, Satish flew with a captain who was troubled by flatulence. As the atmosphere filled with nauseating gas, Satish quietly opened the cockpit window to get some fresh air, all the while hoping the captain wouldn't ask him to close it.

This plane also played a role in Satish's childhood, as it was the aircraft in which he took his first flight. His grandfather paid for two tickets for him and his brother to go on a flight. While sitting above the airplane wing, Satish memorised the number written on it and decided there and then to one day fly this very aircraft, a dream which eventually came true when he became a pilot. His first flight, however, was from the local airport to the international one - a journey of only 15 minutes. Years later, in the 1980s, Satish was elected president of the club at Safdarjung Airport, where he taken his first flight, learned to fly and met Rajiv.

A Dakota led us to a meeting with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the early 1970s. Someone had gifted him this aircraft - just as a little present - and he was looking for pilots to fly it to Europe. At that point, there were only two qualified commercial pilots with valid licenses to do this, and one of these was Satish.

The Maharishi was staying in a large mansion on the main road in Defense Colony. We duly parked our car in front of it, walked down a concrete driveway and climbed up black marble steps to the first floor, the soft smell of roses drifting down from above. His disciple, a small, thin young man with premature balding swung open a honey-coloured door that led into a large room. The Maharishi sat cross-legged at the opposite side of it. He had shoulder length grey hair and his small eyes were very alert as he looked us up and down without seeming to blink. His body was covered with nondescript drapery and when we were guided to sit down on the sparse wooden chairs before him, we felt like two school children with guilty consciences Soon the customary tea, milk and square glucose biscuits were put down in front of us on a small wooden table. After a brief introduction, we were asked the usual question concerning how we met. This wouldn't be the last time we told our story; over the years we've repeated it thousands of times. Then a futile conversation regarding flying the Maharishi's aircraft to Europe ensued. Before we left, he offered to send us someone to teach us meditation, an offer we gratefully accepted. Although Satish never did get to fly the Maharishi's plane**,** the meditation lessons had a deep impact on me, which remained with me for life.

My first winter in New Delhi brought with it a momentous event that shocked and destabilised our newly married life more than anything else. It started while we were spending a nice, quiet evening at Sonia's house and all the lights went out. Ordinarily, this wouldn't be very unusual in India, only this was the prime minister's house! An hour later, the lights still hadn't been turned on and nobody seemed to know what was happening. Not even those in the Prime Minister's office were able to explain. Then the news came through how the entire city was blacked out; no streetlights or lights were working anywhere. After several hours, an announcement was made on the radio stating the liberation of Bangladesh had begun. It was 1971 and we were at war. I'd listened to my mother talking endlessly about all her experiences of the Second World War and my mind conjured up images of bombings, airplanes flying overhead, dead soldiers and civilians, gutted houses and starving families.

We drove back home through the darkened streets of Delhi, which now resembled a ghost town. News was very scarce as there was only one television and radio channel at the time, but via the TV news we were told to paper our windows and to paint the top half of all car lights black.

Within a couple of days, Satish was ordered to report for duty at the airport, where he was to use his flying skills to assist the army. He was then sent on to an undisclosed destination.

He was gone and I didn't know where he was or what he was doing. He managed to sneak two little phone calls to me, but all he said was, "How are you? I am fine but I can't tell you any more."

I missed him and worried about him constantly. I was also so, so lonely. My only company was 11-year-old Sunita, Girish and Mommie. But they were sick with worry and needed comforting too.

By this time my tummy had expanded into a gentle bulge and all my clothes were too tight for me. I looked at the pinstripe slacks I'd been wearing when I first

met Satish on the plane and tried to think of a way I could keep them up without putting a strain on my waist. Finally, I came up with a solution and threaded one of Satish's nice ties through the belt loops. It wasn't perfect - the zip remained open so a triangle of white tummy peeped out underneath the blue and red striped tie.

"This wilI have to do for the time being," I thought to myself as I examined my new look before the mirror.

The nights were cold, sometimes dropping to near zero, and I would lay in the half-empty bed listening to the cries of the baby next door and the coughing of the old man with TB. Intermittently, hordes of dogs created a ruckus by fighting, howling and yowling. The walls of the house were 2ft thick and freezing, and wind blew into the rooms through gaps under the rickety doors. I shivered under layers of clothing and only felt warm under the maroon quilt while wearing two pairs of Satish's black uniform socks. I was tired all the time and slept constantly, waking only to eat. When I felt a little more energetic, I hogged the shoebox-sized heater, putting it under a chair and draping my long, red and blue vinyl midi coat over it. Heat travelled up it as if it were a chimney. Mommie suffered a lot too. At 42, she already had arthritis and the cold made her bones hurt, causing her to groan a little whenever she moved. Daddy insisted on keeping their bedroom windows open all night, which added to her overall discomfort.

It was torture to take a bath in the freezing bathroom. My whole body became a mesh of goose bumps and my only comfort came from knowing my baby was cosy inside me. As Mommie advised, I rubbed pure mustard oil over my tummy to prevent stretch marks. The days were long and difficult to fill. News was vague and controlled by the government. I felt as if I was floating in a vacuum of ignorance.

I imagined the scenes playing out at my own family home, far away from India and war. Communication was bad and the phone lines were down for days on end. The mail took anywhere between a week and a month to arrive, and sometimes it failed to arrive at all. Envelopes reached me without their American stamps.

My poor parents constantly worried about my safety. Both of them were very highly strung and worried even when there was no good reason for it. I imagined Father freaking out at home and turning into a shouty, red-faced, foot-stamping monster at the slightest incident. I visualised Mother's tears flowing sporadically in response to his tantrums and to her own worries. When I was a young girl and used to stand in the basement listening to Mother's prolonged wailing on the top floor, I'd think, "*God, I can't take this, I am getting out of the house. Mother could make money as a professional crier at funerals in the Middle East!"*

Father was different outside the home. He was a very capable economist and writer and a brilliant conversationalist. He started his life as a journalist for Dutch media. On many occasions I heard his voice crackling over the radio waves as he read out the news. Or I'd hear his fingers clattering on the typewriter deep into the night. He wrote articles in English for *Time* and *Life* magazines and travelled the world, from the North Pole to Africa. He reported on general news before eventually specialising in economics. He wrote a book in Dutch based on his experience in the North Pole when he was stranded with the Eskimos and lived in deep snow for three weeks. In 1957, when I was five, he travelled to the region in a tiny private aircraft to report on the lifestyle of the people who lived there. After landing, a terrible blizzard began, making it impossible for him to leave. The plane had frozen solid within the ice. When the blizzard finally ended after three weeks, it had to be defrosted. They set up several bonfires around the plane using the only wood available, which came from a small hut built by a priest on a mission to convert the Eskimos to Christianity. He kindly agreed to donate his temporary home so Father could escape. The plane eventually defrosted and took off. Mother hadn't heard from him for weeks and had naturally feared the worst.

Jan Maarten Zegers

voor ons blad op reis

naar Canada

WIM HORNMAN is, zoals u hebt kunnen lezen, weer in ons vaderland teruggekeerd. Niet dat hij daarmee is uitverteld over het fenomeen Afrika; nu eerst kan hij zijn stof goed overzien en wij beloven u nog een serie zeer belangrijke artikelen over het Zwarte Werelddeel, dat zo volop in ontwikkeling is...

Maar wij hebben inmiddels al weer uitgezien naar een volgend onderwerp, waaraan een van onze reportage-redacteuren een uitgebreide reis kon besteden. Onze keuze is daarbij gevallen op

Canada

het goudzoekersland, waarvan wij in onze jeugd reeds zongen en waarnaar het heimwee uitgaat van elke displaced person, waar hij ook ergens in West-Europa in een kamp zit.

J. M. ZEGERS

Dat goudzoeken is er overigens niet meer bij. Het is een machtige staat, die zwaar geïndustrialiseerd is, maar waar nog even grote gebieden liggen te schreeuwen om arbeidskrachten; een staat die tot in het poolgebied reikt waar de Eskimo's wonen; een staat die een machtige partner is in de verdediging van de westelijke wereld; een staat, die altijd nog flinke kerels kan gebruiken om de rijkdommen van het land te helpen ontginnen; een staat die onder de Nederlandse emigranten zeer geliefd is.

Emigranten

Onze Brusselse redacteur JAN-MAARTEN ZEGERS, bij onze lezers wel bekend, is met het emigrantenschip „Zuiderkruis" naar Canada vertrokken om twee maanden lang in dit land rond te zwerven.

- **Op de eerste plaats zal hij schrijven over het wel en wee van de Nederlandse emigranten, die hij persoonlijk gaat opzoeken. U vindt vandaag reeds zijn eerste verhaal dat hij schreef aan boord van de „Zuiderkruis".**
- **Verder schrijft hij over het gigantische Canada en zijn stoere bevolking.**
- **Speciaal zal hij ook belichten de bijdrage die Canada levert in Nato-verband.**
- **En tenslotte — en wij stellen ons daar veel van voor — zal hij naar de Eskimo's trekken om te kijken hoe de paters Oblaten daar hun missie-werk verrichten. De moderne missie is een van de boeiendste aspecten van het moderne leven en ons blad acht zich verplicht — wij herinneren aan onze grote serie reportages over Nieuw-Guinea, Afrika en nu weer Canada — daar deskundige en ruime aandacht aan te moeten besteden.**

Voor de komende maanden kunt u in het LIMBURGSCH DAGBLAD dus verzekerd zijn van boeiende lectuur over Canada. Leest deze artikelen dus in

de krant, die zelf gaat kijken

Father brought back with him some beautifully sculpted figures depicting Eskimo life, and I imagined many different scenarios surrounding them.

In Africa, Father reported on fights for independence from colonial powers and met many famous leaders, including Patrice Lumumba, who became the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Father told me they became close friends and shared many personal secrets. On his return, Father brought with him two fresh pineapples and a big, traditional African mask made of dry grass and shells. Blue and white beads coloured the sides and he put it on his head and danced madly around the room, his feet clattering on the cold stone floor. For me, the pineapples, mask and the accompanying

stories were a wonder. They sparked my curiosity about the world beyond the village we lived in.

In India, and now part of the big wide world I'd so longed to see, I'd sit alone in my little room thinking of Mother and how she must be keeping herself busy with her art and tapestry. I knew she'd be weaving to keep her mind off thinking of me. I remembered how she liked her peace and quiet and yearned to hear her laugh out loud. In my mind's eye I saw her designing toys out of recycled materials, and observed her busy making them for blind and mentally challenged children. There she was, seated behind her sewing machine at her huge Art Deco desk. I saw her training elderly women to assist her with making surgical dolls and toys to be given to children facing surgery.

Mother came from a wealthy family who lived in a large house in the middle of the forest in Nijmegen, in the Netherlands. During the Second World War, my grandfather took advantage of his remote location to hide Jewish friends and others wanted by the Germans. Sadly, a Jewish couple he'd been sheltering couldn't bear being shut away and fled to the city, where they were caught and sent to a concentration camp to die.

Grandfather participated in all sorts of activities for the Dutch underground, including stealing IDs from a police station when he was taken in for questioning. At the end of the war, my mother saw blazing tanker batteries lighting up the sky in front of her house as Canadian parachutes descended. Despite this eventual victory, the events Mum witnessed caused her to suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder for the rest of her life.

In her childhood, Mother was surrounded by maids and cooks prepared all the family meals. When she had a family of her own she tried hard in the kitchen, but made terrible meals for us. And for years she wondered why I was so skinny! Mother's idea of a good, wholesome meal was to put one chicken complete with the skin into a big pot of salted water, which she'd boil with leftover vegetables, adding rice at the end. This was fed to us for three days on the trot, at the end of which the rice was invisible and everything had turned into a watery mush. If I didn't finish everything on my plate, Mother said, "I have seen people starving and even as I speak, somewhere in this world children are not getting enough to eat. Now finish your food."

I'd cheat and hide it in every corner of my mouth so I could spit it out at the first opportunity. Sometimes Mother got wise to this, making me open my mouth and threatening to send me to the basement. I'd be forced to eat the hidden stash at these times, following each bite with a big gulp of water as if it was medicine.

Fortunately, Father took over the cooking after we moved to America. His food was so good he could have become a chef in a five-star restaurant. The problem was he always catered for a minimum of 15 people. The four of us sat around a dining table loaded with huge serving plates piled high with chicken, fish and large chunks of meat. Mother was dismayed every time she opened the fridge door to find it overloaded with leftovers, and she made sure they all got eaten up.

Perhaps Father's overindulgence at mealtimes was down to the fact he was the eldest of 10 children, and they all had to share just one chicken for dinner. Due to his status as the firstborn, however, he was allowed to take the biggest piece, which was the neck.

The war brought so many memories flooding to the forefront of my mind, but it took a pretty female newsreader with a flower tucked behind her ear to bring me fully back into the present.

"Bangladesh is free," she said. "The war is over."

I was over the moon. The horrifying images my parents had witnessed during the Second World War weren't going to be seen by my eyes and my husband was safe. What a relief!

Satish returned home after three weeks away. The moment the white, Indian Airlines ambassador car stopped in front of the house, I jumped down the front steps, skipped over the flowerless, dry rosebushes and flew into his arms, oblivious to everyone around me. I simply can't describe in words how good it felt when I kissed him and how wonderful his cuddly body felt in my arms.

"Pregnant women should not jump like that, it's dangerous," Mommie complained in the background. "Indian women do not grab their husbands in front of everyone."

I was so happy and relieved, right then I didn't care what Mommie thought.

Subhead: Teaching Me

Life returned to a routine. Mommie appointed herself as my teacher and her eyes scrutinised my every move.

She kept a close watch on the bangles she'd given me when I entered the house for the first time as her daughter-in-law. It was traditional for married women to wear bangles at all times, and Mommie told me only the husband's death made it acceptable to take them off. These golden bangles mattered to Mommie for another reason. During his financial troubles, Daddy had pawned all the jewellery he had given to her.

The trouble was, the bangles were too big for my wrist and when I gesticulated excitedly, which was often, they slipped over my hand and flew through the air. When I slept they fell off in bed, without my noticing. There was no side table by the bed to keep things on. Even a bottle of water had to go on the floor. I sleepily tripped over it on the way to the toilet countless times.

Mommie was on 'high alert' over the bangles at all times. She searched our bed and peeked under every surface and in every corner of our bedroom looking for them. If she wasn't able to find them, the rest of the house got a thorough shake down. As she did this, she made panicky noises for the benefit of anyone within earshot. Her problem got worse with time and she started to obsess about my purse as well. She believed it was her responsibility to make sure she knew where I kept it and she'd scan the three rooms of our home searching as patiently as a fisherman awaiting

a tug on his line. Then things escalated further and anything of mine she considered valuable was locked in her cupboard without informing me. I'd worry myself sick looking all over for things like my wedding certificate, airplane tickets, invitations, letters, and so on. Whenever I was going somewhere with Satish a big search had to be mounted at the last minute for my purse. Mommie looked on, eyebrows raised, and exclaimed, "Capi is so careless!"

She told me at her own leisure where my things actually were, announcing to the family, "If I can take Capi's stuff then so can anyone else. I am helping her and she should be thankful."

The general consensus in the family was that I was completely empty-headed and irresponsible.

I resisted locking the only cupboard I shared with Satish, which I'm sure was Mommie's objective. I didn't want the hassle of having to constantly unlock something to get to my everyday items. Plus, I was pretty sure Mommie was angling for me to give her the key at some point, so I'd need to ask her permission to open my own cupboard. The sheer force of repetition meant everyone in the family was convinced I was a failure and they discussed my carelessness in front of me. It was pointless to complain so I remained silent, resolving to be in 'prevention mode'. But I was not alert enough to keep a constant eye on Mommie and she outwitted me every time. I'd end up thinking, *"How did I get caught again? I must be as stupid and as careless as Mommie thinks I am."*

Every day, there were so many new things to learn. One fine morning, Mommie announced, "I am going to sell my old silk saris - there are holes in them."

Then she waited for the ladies who regularly passed our house, gracefully carrying baskets filled with steel utensils on their heads. These ladies were duly invited to sit on the red steps of the back porch. The saris Mommie displayed for them were very valuable, and many had borders made with real gold or silver thread. Mommie tucked the end of her sari into her waistband and sat down opposite the buyers to begin negotiations. These were accompanied by wide hand movements, pointing fingers, close up inspections of the borders and the weighing of utensils on old-fashioned, handheld brass scales. I observed the scene from the kitchen for two long hours before a deal was finally struck. The saris changed hands and we were left with several gleaming steel plates and bowls, which reflected countless tiny suns as they glittered on the red steps.

Chapter 8

Subhead: Extremes

As winter gave way to spring, I experienced my first dust storm. Without warning one evening, a strong wind shook the sky, turning it orange with dust. Sand as light as baby powder got in between my teeth and in my eyes, ears and nose. It hung like a fog for several days and got into everything, providing yet another reminder of just how much my life had changed. As a young girl, I'd dreamt of faraway places while secretly reading books under the bed covers when I was supposed to be asleep. I'd experienced dust storms before, but these had only taken place in my imagination.

A few months later, when the hot summer was just around the corner, the sky turned brown and filled with loud thunderclaps. As lightening punctured holes in the darkness with no break in between, Satish slept on, never stirring. I pulled our sheet up to my chin and looked on as silver flashes fell on the bars at the windows. I waited, full of expectation, for the pitter-patter of raindrops to cool the air, but not a single splatter fell on the parched ground; this was an electrical storm.

During that time, Sanjay Gandhi, Rajiv's younger brother, was gifted an inflatable motorboat big enough to seat 12 people. On select Sundays we went with him, Rajiv, Sonia and other friends to Badkhal Lake, which was located a little way outside Delhi's border, the boat dragging behind one of the cars. Once there we'd race around the lake with Sanjay at the helm. He took sharp turns just for fun, spraying water on frightened families sitting in rowboats, his laughter echoing over the water.

"Sanjay, slow down," we'd plead from the back. "The boat will turn over! Come on, Capi is pregnant!"

But our cries fell on deaf ears. He'd eventually drop us off on the shore before continuing to race until he'd turned over the boat.

On one occasion, when we'd reached the middle of the lake, two of the friends with us decided to take an impromptu swim. (Incidentally, one of these friends went on to become a judge and India's election commissioner.) They took off their clothes and jumped into the lake wearing only their underwear. As quick as a flash Sanjay followed them fully clothed and proceeded to pull the underwear off one of the swimmers, a move that was met with loud protests from his chosen victim. Then he got back into the boat to drop Sonia and me at the steps by the lakeside. After five minutes the naked friend was standing in front of us, waist deep in water, begging for Sanjay to return his clothes. Sitting shoulder to shoulder with Sonia, watching the orange sun throw its final rays over the water, I felt none of our friend's distress. Eventually, though, we showed mercy and helped him out of his embarrassment.

Subhead: Wishes And Predictions

Living in India, it wasn't long before numerous superstitions crossed my path, the evil eye being one of them. Mommie used to point people out and declare, "They are very jealous people, I am sure they are casting the evil eye on us. We will have lots of bad luck."

Black thread played a big role in preventing the evil eye from having an effect, and we had to tie it around various parts of our bodies. Alternatively, green chillies could be waved over the head of the evil eye's chosen victim. As we walked down the road, Sunita pointed out bundles of grass tied together with green chillies and lemon slices.

"These have been put there by someone who is unlucky," she explained. "The first person who comes close to it will catch the bad luck. Whenever you see one of these bundles, walk away from it as fast as you can or you will bring the bad luck home."

One hot afternoon, Sunita stretched herself out on the floor and promptly fell asleep, blocking the passage from the living room. To leave the room I had to step over her legs. As I did this there was a muffled cry. I knew I hadn't stepped on Sunita as she was still fast asleep, and when I looked up I saw Mommie, who had buried her face in her hands. Nonplussed, I waited for an explanation, which was long in coming as Mommie was groaning and mumbling so much.

"People only step over dead bodies," she said. "If the person is alive it means they will die. Just look at what you have done."

"But Mommie, she's in the way and I had to get out of the room to go to the toilet!"

"Well, you need to step over her legs again, just the way you did before, but in the opposite direction. Then all we can do is hope for the best."

That wasn't the only time I committed an 'evil act' in Mommie's eyes, and she often used to declare "my blood boils" when I did something against her wishes. I horrified her again when a proud young mother came to show her newborn to me.

"Your baby looks really nice, fat, and healthy!" I remarked.

"Oh my God, you must never say that again," Mommie said. "You are just asking the evil eye to do something terrible to the baby and you will be blamed for it!"

What a mysterious land! In my long career of baby praising in India since then, I have never once accused a baby of being healthy, only nice and cute.

My own mother believed superstition was evil and only brought fear into the lives of believers. She made this clear to Mei and I when she taught us the Catechism (Christian teachings).

Back in Itterbeek, some of the older people believed in magic and were scared of all sorts of things, including lightening, black cats and ladders. Once, the villagers came running to my mother after spotting a single line of towering white clouds in the otherwise pure blue sky - they believed it meant the Day of Judgment was imminent. This amused Mother. Just as she found many things deeply saddening, she also noticed the comedy life offered and welcomed it with a hearty laugh. Meanwhile, I told myself, "*I have to adjust and stop judging what I can't understand. Everyone has their own reality."*

A battalion of horoscope readers recommended antidotes for bad luck, just as doctors prescribe medicines for illnesses. These took the form of giving rice or telling people to fast, pray or even look at one's reflection in a bowl of mustard oil and drop a coin in it. People were also told to go on pilgrimages, feed the poor, give grain to birds or free them from cages, and give food to cows.

Mommie didn't hesitate to tell me a prediction an astrologer had made the previous year. He'd told her, "Satish will marry a foreigner, but don't worry, the marriage is not going to last, and your son will go on to marry an Indian girl."

As she told me this story, I looked deep into her unblinking eyes to try and find answers to all the questions crowding my head, but I soon realised this wasn't the place to get them. One of the main ones was whether she really wished for me to leave now I was carrying her grandchild. It took a few years before I discovered the answer to that one.

Later, when Sunita was older and Mommie was keen to find out when she would marry, she visited a blind astrologer who told her what she wanted to hear and predicted a wedding. When this didn't come to pass he made excuses.

"Maybe you didn't keep up with your fast, or maybe the white rice wasn't eaten at the right moment."

Whenever she needed a dose of positive energy, Mommie picked up her fake leather brown purse, looked at us with firm resolve in her eye, and announced, "I am going to blind!"

This meant she was off to visit the blind astrologer who would give her remedies to help ease her worries.

Generally, Satish didn't show any interest in rituals or superstitions. The first time I saw him pay any attention to a prediction was when he was walking between the back and front verandas one day sipping his tea with a white towel tied around his waist. A travelling sant (religious aesthetic) was passing the house and suddenly stopped and stared at Satish open-mouthed. He wore baggy red robes and a yellow, loosely wrapped turban from which strands of his long, dark hair escaped. Brown beads cascaded down his chest and he was carrying all his worldly possessions in a small orange pouch. From his waist hung a highly polished brass pot.

"You are going to be a leader and do big things," he announced, keeping his gaze fixed on my husband.

Satish rushed inside to find his wallet so he could give the man a tip. I followed him outside just in time to see the man bestowing a blessing on Satish. Then he went on his way never to be seen again. However, this prediction turned out to be correct.

After that, Mommie doubled the time she spent praying. One of the walls in her small dressing room was covered with pictures of various Hindu Gods. Every morning she placed a fresh flower on top of each picture and lighted a dhoop (a smoky incense stick made out of dung and sold in a red oblong box printed with

roses). The scented smoke they gave off slowly filled each room, making me sneeze. She then rung a little silver bell to signify prayer time had begun. When there was a full moon she prayed extra hard for Satish's success, telling him, "You were born while I was looking at the full moon through the hospital window."

Mommie also fasted for nine days every year. Each day represented a positive, powerful goddess and the fasting was designed to keep the negative, fearful ones at bay. Mommie could eat during this time but her diet was limited to puffed lotus seeds, potatoes, fruit, various seed-based dishes and milk products. Salt was strictly off limits. Understandably, Mommie became a little crankier with each passing day and I tried to stay out of her way, even though I stole some of her tasty fasting food when she wasn't looking. The final day was a relief for everyone. Her ritual involved washing the feet of pre-adolescent girls and giving them gifts. Then she cooked a fantastic meal for everyone to share made up of deep fried bread puffs, chickpeas, potato curry and a semolina wheat pudding (halva), with raisins and purified butter.

Mommie and Daddy's goals were on opposite poles and didn't meet. Daddy observed everything with a detached eye and preferred to make no comment regarding the religious activities taking place around him. At 5am and 5pm every day without fail, he sat on his bed in the lotus position and meditated for a couple of hours. Then he took a cold bath, no matter what time of year it was. His goal was detachment and moksha (an end to rebirth and entry into heaven/nirvana) and he would have preferred to be left alone completely.

When the family moved to Hyderabad for five years following Daddy's financial troubles, he tested himself by not eating any salt. This was part of his plan to end his attachment to food, but it turned him into a shrunken shadow of himself and caused all his teeth to fall out.

"My self-denial means I am not even tasty enough for mosquitoes," he told me with a twinkle in his eye. At 6pm on the dot he turned on the radio and religious songs from Hindi films echoed in and around the house. This was music I'd never heard back in Washington.

Daddy was a good palmist and one day asked me to show my palm to him. He gently held my hand and pointed to a single line on my left palm where there should have been two.

"Your lifeline and your love line are intertwined," he told me. He found another line and dug his finger into it, sending a sharp pain up into my wrist. Although he didn't make it clear what he saw there, all the other predictions he dared to tell me came true in time. I will not write here what he said, as what he foretold is within the pages of this book.

In 1971, way before we married, Satish, was encouraged to try palm reading by his friends in the Gandhi home. He insisted he knew nothing about palmistry, but his friends reckoned predicting the future ran in his family. The first man to show his hand was the actor Amitabh Bachchan, who was in the process of making his first movie.

"You will be the biggest actor India has ever seen!" he told him.

Then it was Sanjay Gandhi's turn. Satish predicted, "You will never become the prime minister of India."

Next up was Rajiv Gandhi, who Satish forecasted *would* become India's prime minister.

Maybe predicting the future did run in the family after all…

Subhead: Our Families Meet

After months of planning, my parents and my sister Engelien, now six, arrived in New Delhi for a visit. Mother and Father couldn't hide their shock when they came through the exit doors with their arms open wide to encircle me. I was a pale, sickly version of the daughter they'd bid farewell to less than a year earlier. By then I was seven months pregnant and dressed in a tent-like nylon orange sari covered with gold glitter. My once flat tummy had become so big no stopgap arrangement had been possible. My pants could no longer be held up by Satish's tie. Luckily, my mother and father couldn't see how the tight belt of the petticoat I was wearing underneath had produced a red, blistery rash around my waist. Satish was by my side and my parents very formally shook hands with him, their backs ramrod straight.

"Welcome to India," he said and arranged for their bags to be put into the waiting taxi.

Once outside, I saw Mother blink. *"Was this to do with the sunlight or was she holding back tears?"* I wondered. I couldn't be sure.

The next morning, and fully rested from their long trip, Mother and Father conspired over breakfast to spruce up their wilted plant (me), as a gardener might trim and water the flowers in his care. They took me to the shop in their hotel's lobby and bought me a blue lungi (a wrap-around skirt and short top typical of Punjab), which Satish liked very much.

It wasn't long before the two men in my life discovered they had lots in common. They were both self-made and were bossy, loud, independent and liked to smoke and drink. They talked to each other as if there was no one else in the room. "*Hey!"* I thought. *"This visit is about me!"*

But I was so happy as Mother had brought me maternity underwear, pants, tops, nighties and even a swimsuit. These were all unheard of in the shops of New Delhi. We went swimming in the hotel pool, luxuriating in the cool water as a warm wind blew over its surface. With my mother near I finally felt I had someone to confide in, but in many respects what was going to happen to my body during my impending labour was still a mystery to me, and Mother was too overwhelmed to bring it up. I didn't want to make her more nervous by sharing my fears with her. I worried no matter which family member I was with and constantly found myself thinking before speaking. I felt as if each person was an egg rolling about on a vegetable vendor's handheld scale, and it was my job to prevent any breakages.

Mommie did her best to communicate in English and her black and gold

necklace swayed gently with each word. She played the Indian hostess to the hilt, dressing impeccably in beautiful South Indian silk saris. Meanwhile, Sunita found meeting her new foreign family members somewhat overwhelming. To her, it must have sounded like they were speaking Double Dutch.

Everything seemed to happen at once following my parents' arrival. Satish's grandmother Mataji wanted to meet us and called to inform us she was packing her bags to fly to New Delhi. The night before she arrived, I cried as I thought to myself, *"Here comes one more difficult person. How will I cope if she is like Mommie?"*

I felt the boat in which each family member sat could sink with a ripple.

However, my worries were completely unfounded. Mataji was so excited to see us she came to my parents' hotel straight from the airport. Against the bright sunlight streaming through the lobby's large entrance, we spotted her short, rotund figure dressed in a white sari waggle duck-like towards us. As she came closer we could see a benevolent expression in her large, luminous dark eyes fringed with black lashes. Her white hair was tied in an onion-sized knot and birthmarks dotted her moonlike face.

As Satish and I touched her feet, she put her right hand on our heads to bless us.

"May you have a long and happy life together," she said.

Mataji was very excited to meet me and her cheeks flushed pink as she opened a little cardboard box covered in silver paper. Nestled in hot pink tissue paper was a necklace made of real gold and black beads, traditionally worn by married women in the south of India. This was accompanied by a matching black and white enamel ring. Mataji indicated to Satish to put the necklace around my neck in front of everyone, then she took my hand and spontaneously kissed it. My parents watched this scene play out with wide eyes, hope rising in their hearts.

For the rest of her life, Mataji (meaning honourable mother) loved me without reservation. She told everyone I was her favourite daughter-in-law and was exceptionally close to Satish. The women in his family married and had babies while very young, and Mataji and Mommie had become pregnant at the same time. Unfortunately, Mataji's baby didn't survive so she helped to breastfeed Satish.

My father and Engelien loved India, although the little girl missed a good hamburger. After two days of whining, the hotel chef made one especially for her from mutton meat. Seeing the familiar shape on her plate made her blue eyes light up and she grabbed it with both hands, biting into it with full force. Seconds later she let out a loud scream. Her mouth was on fire and a whole fire department spraying water into her mouth couldn't have prevented the burning. The poor waiter swore there were no chillies in the burger, but I was discovering "no chillies" was often interpreted by the cooks as "a little chilli". After, Engelien made no more further burger requests and ate only French fries while singing *American Pie* by Don McLean...*"Drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry..."*

Every day I ate at fancy restaurants with my parents and we visited many of

the historical sites scattered across the city. We formed a small group around Father in front of each monument while he regaled us with his exceptional historical knowledge. The sun's rays were getting stronger by the day and he sweated profusely, swatting away the flies forming a moving crown above his head (he was their king!). For a short while I felt a little bit of my past life returning to me.

My parents had brought me some much wished for goodies, such as chocolate and cheese, all the way from Washington. For months I had been eating such food only with my eyes as I leafed through old international fashion magazine advertisements showing wonderful continental style salads, breads, pasta, cheeses, meats and fancy chocolate cakes.

As was their custom, my parents wanted to go to church on Sunday and selected the British-style cathedral in the centre of town. As we walked towards the entrance, Mother asked, "When you got married was it in this church?"

"Mama, I did not get married in any church," I replied.

"But you told me you would," Mother protested. "If you didn't that means your child is going to be born out of wedlock!"

I was horrified this was her belief, as she'd initially told Father it was still a legal marriage even if I had taken my vows in the customary Hindu way.

Outside the church, Mother became upset and had a crying fit which lasted two whole nights. The familiar dark glasses covering the sides of her eyes reappeared and the tops of her cheeks became pink and puffy. One egg had fallen from my balancing scale.

When my parents came to have some tea with us at home they struggled to hide their shock over my living conditions. Their eyes moved politely and quickly from here to there as they avoided staring at anything for too long. They took it all in, but didn't comment.

"Thank God they didn't ask to go to the bathroom!" I thought to myself.

Some friends of theirs had already visited the house and prepared them in advance for what it was like. It was something I'd avoided sharing with them, but I could tell they were concerned.

"Don't worry, I will look after Capi as if she is my own daughter," Mommie said to reassure them. I swallowed hard and hoped one day I'd see some truth in her words.

The day before my family was due to leave, we visited Qutub Minar, the tallest brick minaret in the world. As Father and I waited for the others to find a toilet, he asked, "How can I help you?"

"Papa," I replied. "Girish doesn't have a job and his only wish is to immigrate to the United States. He talks about it constantly, so please try and help him."

I hoped Father could do something for my brother-in-law. He hadn't managed to get a job after finishing college and refused to look for one because all he could think about was moving to the US. Satish had told him tall stories about the land of milk and honey.

I loved my brother-in-law's company and he was happy to drive me around, but I also felt it was high time he earned his keep and stopped asking for money. He often slept in until 11am. One day, I pulled on his blanket in a bid to get him up, just as my Father used to do to me. He woke up in a panic, clutching his bedcover for dear life.

"Capi, I'm naked," he said. "Please stop pulling on the blanket!"

Girish's dream eventually did come true when Satish managed to get him a free plane ticket to the US, but it turned out to be a double-edged sword.

Before my parents left India, I promised to visit them in five months' time with my baby.

Chapter 9

Subhead: Living From Day-To-Day

Despite missing my family tremendously, I felt very special having a baby made out of love growing inside me - it was a miracle! We went out often to meet friends or eat in restaurants and, if that wasn't possible, in order to get some privacy we snuggled after sundown in the car outside our window. Cuddling up wasn't exactly easy as there were only bucket seats in the front, but we sat there like two cosy pigeons murmuring sweet nothings to each other, which Satish punctuated here and there with the comment, "I wish we had a better car!"

"Come on, Satish," I'd reply. "I'm glad we have a car to go out in. To me this is our golden chariot."

When he wasn't on a flight and money was short we went for long drives, sometimes only to get cigarettes or paan (betel leaf for chewing). I didn't like the taste of the latter and looked the other way when Satish stopped to spit the red juice on the road.

Sadly, uncertainty was a big part of my life. In previous years, Indian Airlines had several air crashes, one killing one of Satish's good friends. If he didn't come back on time, I'd hang around the phone with Mommie waiting for it to ring. When it did, my heart stood still and my head spun, my thoughts racing in circles like a dog chasing its tail.

"Let's hope the flight has had some normal delay," I'd say. Or, "God, I hope it's not bad news of a crash!"

One day, Mommie announced, "I'm going to Hyderabad for a family function."

I was overwhelmed by cluelessness. *"For how long is she going?"* I thought. *"What am I expected to do in her absence and what about Daddy, Sunita and Girish?"*

"When will you be back?" I asked innocently.

"Who are you to ask me when I'll be back? I will return when I feel like it. I'm not obliged to report to you!"

What struck me about Mommie was her lack of any plan and the nonchalant way she moved around the house without a care for anything. Within no time Satish organised a ticket for her and she was gone.

In an effort to help out, I filled a small pan with water from the ghara to make tea for Girish, who was sitting at the table. There were no teabags in sight, so I pulled a box of Brooke Bond tea powder from the shelf, as I had seen Mommie do, and put a spoon of it into the water with milk and sugar. When the mixture was hot I sifted it into cups to serve. To me it looked all right, but Girish stared at it as if it was poison. He took a little sip and exclaimed, "God, this is bad tea, Capi! From now on I will make the tea, but you can cook."

"Ok, Girish, it's a deal, but you have to be responsible for the chapatis (flatbread)."

I decided to make a vegetable pilav in the pressure cooker, which I'd never used before. I selected the veg, cleaned the rice and put it all into the cooker with a

generous amount of water. I'd heard it whistle countless times before and decided three whistles would mean it was ready.

At this point I was scared to open the cooker, as I didn't know how much time it took for the steam to dissipate, but eventually curiosity got the better of me and I peeped over the rim. There were no rice or vegetables anywhere - it all had turned into soup!

This was no wonder really, as the only rice I'd cooked before was Uncle Ben's instant rice - no boiling required!

There was no alternative but to serve the soup to the hungry family with bread and pickle.

I pondered over where I'd gone wrong and the next day decided to make the same dish again, only without leaving it in the cooker for so long.

This time when I had a peek inside I was really happy with the results. The vegetables and rice were intact. Delighted, I grabbed a ladle to start spooning the food out, but it didn't move. The contents of the pan were stuck. I turned the cooker over and hit it with a rolling pin. Finally, after lots of banging and shaking, a beautiful white rice and vegetable cake fell out. That day everybody got a slice of it, again accompanied by bread and pickles!

The news of my failed attempts in the kitchen soon reached the ears of our neighbour, Mrs V. Nothing escaped her scrutiny, as the door to her side of the veranda was always open. Her short round body, as tall as it was wide and perched on tiny little feet, rolled out from her door every five minutes to see what was going on in our house, especially when Satish and I raised our voices in argument. She also felt it was her right to take whatever she liked from our fridge.

But this time, Mrs V came to the rescue and gave me some basic cooking tips. The funny thing was, she didn't like cooking herself at all, and I often heard her teenage daughter crying after school due to the fact there was no food to eat - most probably her mother had finished it. She had learned to cook for herself out of necessity and also taught me whenever her mum was too lazy to help.

Later, I learned to make all sorts of homemade flatbreads, including chapatis and stuffed parathas.

Mommie returned three weeks later in a worse mood than usual and looked around the house in disgust. She was especially upset to see her super clean kitchen, which Sunita and I had spring-cleaned, taking out two inches of dirt from under her stove. A sparkling kitchen obviously wasn't something she aspired to cook in.

Subhead: The Little One

The season slowly changed to summer. I was used to the heat of Washington, but this was different. I could feel hot waves radiating from walls when I passed my clammy hand 15 inches above them. Metal objects, such as scissors and other utensils, were much warmer than their surroundings and I perspired from every pore. A heat rash turned my body red and I felt as if an army of ants was marching over the landscape of my body. My neck, breasts and thighs burned and bled where seams of clothing and elastic rubbed as I moved. Mosquitoes died from the heat - the one saving grace - though the flies enjoyed parties on our outside dining table, and other such delicious areas.

It was the end of May, and the hottest summer the city had witnessed in a hundred years. We threw water on our bedroom floor, mattress and pillows and then

turned on the fan to try and keep the room cool. When there was a power failure, our bedroom became an oven and our house turned into a dark hell at night. Dogs barked louder, the few mosquitoes left dive-bombed us and mice scuffled around fearlessly close by. But life went on; time doesn't wait. Girish teased me by calling me 'Motee bhens' (fat buffalo). For a change, I was really happy to be called fat.

Satish befriended the manager of one of the government-run hotels and got me membership at its pool. Every day, I'd call a black and yellow taxi in the white sizzling heat of the morning and head straight there with Sunita. She wore a swimsuit for the first time in her life, but made sure she was covered in a towel as she stepped gingerly out of the blue-tiled dressing room, only discarding it when she reached the edge of the round pool. Then she threw the towel quickly to the side and jumped into the turquoise water faster than I had ever seen anyone do it. Even though I was eight months pregnant, I was able to teach Sunita and Sonia, who also used the hotel's facilities, to swim. I dished out instructions from the side of the pool as by this point my doctor had advised me to stop swimming in case I got an infection from the water.

One day, as Sonia gained more confidence and proficiency, we decided it was time for her to swim in the deep. She headed towards the middle of the pool, but when she glanced down and saw how far away the bottom of the pool was, she started hyperventilating and gasping for air. I quickly took off my shoes ready to jump in and rescue her, but when I noticed she was still moving her arms and legs correctly, I encouraged her to keep swimming from the sidelines and she was fine. Afterwards, we bought some pastries and went to our homes to have lunch. As I ate, I felt my stomach becoming intermittently hard.

"So these are the false contractions they talk about," I thought to myself.

All I had as a guide was an old book on natural childbirth someone had given to me at a party. I had diligently read it several times from cover to cover and practised the breathing exercises the book advised while lying on my bed. However, it soon become apparent these weren't false contractions when my waters broke.

Satish was on a flight to Calcutta, so Girish drove me to the hospital as fast as he could, with Mommie by my side.

When we walked into the reception area, a nurse came over with some admission forms to fill in.

"Which one of you is pregnant?" she enquired.

Shocked, I pointed at my belly and replied, "I'm the one who's going to be a mother."

I didn't yet know the competition to be the mother of this child was about to begin. Installed in a nice, air-conditioned room, I continued to experience mild contractions.

After an hour or two, Mommie's good friend, the busybody Mrs K, materialised seemingly out of thin air. She informed me she just happened to be in the hospital visiting someone else. She and Mommie sat on opposite sides of my bed, their knees touching the frame. When a nurse came to check on me, Mrs K asked, "Is this baby full term or not?"

"Why is she asking that?" I thought to myself. *"How very strange."*

Here I was in a hospital in a foreign country, worrying about delivering a baby prematurely, and this friend of Mommie's was asking questions that were none of her business! Some months earlier, she had shown disbelief when she found out Satish and I had decided to get married within seven days of meeting each other. Had she convinced Mommie we'd married for another reason than love? For the moment I decided to forget the pettiness I was witnessing around me and concentrate on delivering my baby. Although I mulled over it afterwards and still felt suspicious, I also vowed to give Mrs K the benefit of the doubt.

However, when I became older and wiser, I became convinced the two friends wanted to see if there was a chance I was pregnant by someone else when I met Satish. I suspected they thought I'd ensnared him and hoped they could get Satish to leave me. Maybe they even dreamt that once I was out of the picture Satish could go on to marry the prophesied Indian girl, who was, of course, Mrs K's niece.

My doctor came to see me, had one look and announced, "We induce labour tomorrow," before going home. Less than two hours later I was wheeled into the labour room and instructed to get on a narrow raised bed complete with two stirrups covered in peeling white paint. A gas mask was pushed on my face with no warning, blocking my view, and a searing pain shot through my body. I then heard a never-ending scream as a callused hand grabbed mine. The baby was delivered in minutes by forceps. By the time my child entered the world and took his first breath, the gas had knocked me out. When I regained consciousness and saw my baby boy, he reminded me of a little black-haired angel. But I was also worried. He had bruises and scratches on his face, shoulders and neck and his head was seriously dented at the back. I voiced my concerns about brain damage to the doctor, but she reassured me everything was normal, and this often happened. But doubts have niggled away at me ever since.

Meanwhile, outside the hospital, temperatures climbed above 47 degrees. The hottest summer in a hundred years continued!

Sonia came to visit me with a large thermos of chicken soup in the crook of her arm. Four months earlier she had delivered her child Priyanka in the same room. My little boy was tiny, weighing in at only four pounds and eight ounces. His little hands were miniscule and with sparkling dark eyes he looked around unsteadily and full of curiosity.

Days later, a proud Satish drove his new family home from the air-conditioned hospital. When I stepped out into the heat it felt as if I'd walked into a burning wall. Unfortunately, the baby got heatstroke and I was sweating so much my health deteriorated and prevented me from breastfeeding. Needless to say, I was very upset about my inability to feed my boy. Mommie didn't help by constantly reminding me she breastfed Satish until he was one and a half. Meanwhile, Satish behaved as helpless and aloof as possible, only to get anxious in spurts and start screaming louder than the baby, who cried all the time. I'd tell myself to calm down for fear of going out of my mind.

Mommie and I took turns to care for the baby in six-and-a-half hour

shifts. Whenever the fans stopped we sat with a newspaper and fanned him by hand. Due to her superstitions, Mommie didn't want me to buy anything for the baby or even think of possible names before the birth. According to her, new things brought bad luck. Once the baby was born, one was supposed to magically produce everything, mostly in the form of borrowed clothes. However, there was one problem. There were no mothers of babies with old clothes to give away, and readymade clothing was non-existent. I stitched some clothes for my boy by hand and named him Junior Satish for the time being.

When Sonia visited me at home she was horrified to see we didn't have anything for the baby – he was even sleeping in a box. She immediately sent me the most beautiful traditional Rajasthani rocking cradle I have seen to date. As was customary, I tied a string to it, which I pulled in order to make it rock. But Junior Satish remained restless as he grew and didn't sleep for more than 40-minutes at a time. The smallest noise woke him up. At night, the watchman made it a point to blow his whistle and beat his stick against the wall of our bedroom. He was trying to impress me, the foreigner, by demonstrating he was working hard. In the end we had to pay him not to blow his whistle and wake up the baby. At other times, Mr V next door revved his car's engine right under the porch, filling our room with poisonous fumes – all before sunrise. This wasn't the perfect environment in which to care for a newborn.

We eventually decided to name our newborn Samir, meaning gentle breeze in Sanskrit. This pleased my parents, who considered it a Christian name, as Samuel was also known as Samir.

Mommie loved Samir and wanted to play and look after him all the time. I knew about caring for a newborn, as I looked after Engelien when she was a baby, but Mommie didn't agree with me on any of the things I was sure about. Nothing was good enough for this little boy. She sat on the floor and balanced him face down on her legs to administer traditional mustard oil massages that made him cry so bitterly I thought my heart would break. I was scared to say what I felt about this and eventually managed to stop his trauma by bathing him when Mommie was busy in the kitchen. Mommie had another cure for the evil eye, which she feared might fall upon Samir due to jealous enemies lurking near and far. She made a wick, placed it in a bowl filled with mustard oil and set it alight. A long flame rose up and from its pointed tip a stream of black smoke swirled towards the ceiling. She held a little silver plate above this, which slowly became covered with black powder. Then she mixed some of this with purified butter and rubbed it into Samir's eyes. As an extra precaution, a dot was put on his forehead as well. When I saw this, I naturally worried about germs, but I was unable to convince Mommie to stop. When my own mother saw a photograph I'd sent her of Samir at five months she wrote, "When you send us pictures of Samir please do not have this black stuff put into his eyes as we can hardly see what he looks like!"

It took me some time, but I finally managed to get Mommie to compromise. The black dot stayed, but she stopped rubbing the powder into his eyes.

Satish made it clear he felt his mother knew everything about babies, much more than I did.

"Don't complain," he'd tell me. "She brought up three kids and just look at me

now!"

Her presence was a double-edged sword. I needed help because Samir was so difficult and never slept, and there was no one else to provide me with this other than Mommie. A thought niggled me from time to time that something wasn't quite right with Samir. This was so immense I didn't dare put it into words. When he cried, Mommie immediately turned up at my side to help. She could hear everything from her bedroom and there was no question of her knocking. I also knew I couldn't ask her to leave – after all, she knew best. She'd sit cross-legged on her bed with him in her lap and bounce his head up and down in a quick, regular rhythm until he fell asleep, however long it took. This sleeping habit took years to break.

Slowly, one after another, my fingers weakened and lost their grip. In this confusing, strong current, I felt I had lost hold of my child.

"*I can't stop her, what can I do?"* I thought. "*Maybe I need more time with Satish in order to work on our relationship. I'm wasting my time fighting a battle I cannot win with Mommie to even hold my child."*

We moved into the larger living room in order to make it easier to look after the little one. A black telephone stood in pride of place on a small table in the corner of our new room, and every time it rang Mommie was there like a shot. She appeared next to our bed like a magic genie. At times, waking from a deep sleep, I imagined a ghost-shaped Mommie standing watching us with an irritated expression on her face. Locking the doors was out of the question, as access to the front of the house could only be gained through the living room, which was now our sleeping quarters. The room had four doors, each with curtained-covered glass panes. The curtains were moved every time someone passed by and were often left hanging open, meaning everyone could see into our room. No one ever thought doors needed to be closed, and so the hot or cold wind, depending on the season, blew right through our room, bringing dirt, noise and bugs along with it. As no one paid heed to my requests to close them when I told them in English, I learned my first Hindi sentence: "Darwaza band karo". (Close the door.)

I had to repeat this many times before anyone complied and it tested my patience to the extreme.

Mr and Mrs V had frequent screaming matches involving yelling and throwing things, as well as each other, around. Preparing to go to bed one night after returning home late, Satish accidentally nudged the dividing curtain between our room and the neighbour's.

"Capi, Capi, come and see this," he said. "He is so small and she is so big!"

"Satish, I'm not in the least bit interested, so just go to sleep!" I replied, eyes drooping with tiredness.

In spite of it all, there was romance in our lives, from tender, stolen and silent moments at night, to sly grabs, hugs and kisses in the day. Sometimes we got carried away, leaving family members watching open-mouthed.

“Shameless! This is not done in India,” Mommie grumbled in the background. And that was true.

Sometimes I’d say, “Come on Mommie, I want to give you a hug and kiss, too.”

“No, no,” she’d shout and quickly get out of my way. I don't think anyone had ever tried to hug or kiss her before! But that didn’t stop me trying.

Chapter 10

Subhead: In Washington

My first trip back to Washington didn't turn out to be the experience I'd been looking forward to for so long. By this time Samir was three months old and, as promised, we planned a trip to see Father and Mother. Satish was entitled to free tickets to Washington for the three of us.

The red suitcases were pulled out from underneath the bed and this time one was filled with baby clothes. My hands and feet tingled with excitement as I climbed the plane's steps. I couldn't wait to arrive in Washington and show off my baby to my family and friends. After a seemingly endless flight, we finally landed on US soil. Mother was waiting at the exit gate, an anxious furrow marking her forehead and a jumping Engelien at her side. On the drive home, I looked out of the car window and noted how everything looked just the same, as if nothing had happened in my life. For some reason, I'd imagined it all would look different, but the broad roads, the lush trees drooping with thick vines, the neat little neighbourhoods and the lonely streets with not a soul walking along them hadn't changed a dot. We arrived at the quaint, white house I'd left 18-months earlier and it felt like it was from another lifetime. I was a wife and mother now, sure of my responsibilities. The girl flying off into the unknown was gone. I stood on those familiar steps with my baby on my hip. Dressed in a little jumpsuit, he was fat and plump without a hair on his head. The thick, black hair he'd been born with had fallen out, leaving him completely bald. It was as if he'd decided black was not his thing after all.

"*Maybe he'll end up with flaming red hair like my great grandfather,"* I'd think to myself. Anything seemed possible.

The day after our arrival, Mother decided to have a serious talk with me.

"You have not been to church for a long time," she said. "I want to have a private mass here in the house and I also want Samir to be baptised."

I agreed to speak with Satish, who said yes on the basis it would keep Mother happy.

My parents came from strict Catholic families and as children spent many nights on their knees praying, finishing whole rosaries under the strict supervision of their parents. Father was forced to be an altar boy, and had to be in church for 5:30am every morning. He had no talent for this, sometimes spilling wine on the white tablecloth while handing it over to the priest, or tripping over the carpet. On occasion he was known to put his white lace gown on inside out, or he'd turn up to church wearing mismatching socks.

That evening, as we sat at the round table chatting happily, Father and Satish with a drink in their hand and Mother nursing a glass of port, Father turned to Satish and said, "If Sterre told you I beat her, I can tell you it's not true!"

"So, you remember now what you did to me!" I thought.

Everything suddenly became clear to me. Father had always known what he

was doing. There was no madness involved in how he lost his temper - he simply liked being a tyrant. I found it interesting how he felt the need to justify himself in front of Satish.

Mother invited her Catholic friends to attend our mass, which was held in the dining room. Twenty minutes in, the priest said quietly, “All those present wishing to repeat their marriage vows can do so now.”

One by one all the couples in the room did this, and Satish and I followed suit when it was our turn. I kept my thoughts to myself about the way things had been arranged. Mother and Father hadn’t exactly made it clear how they’d organised a sort of second wedding.

We held Samir’s baptism the following Sunday. I was expecting the usual discrete family gathering these occasions usually took the form of, but when we got to the church we found it full to the brim. Samir’s godfather couldn’t make it so Satish held his son and said the baptismal vows in his place. Despite being unprepared for such a big event, my dear husband stood up in front of everyone with ease, his pride evident to all. As we left the church, the priest came to shake hands with us.

“I know you are a Brahman and I respect you for what you did today,” he said.

At this point I wasn't very clear about what had really happened. *“Had Satish also been baptised somehow?”* I wondered. I had no time to consider this further. I’d left Delhi with a mild fever, but now I felt a lot worse. My head and stomach ached and my legs were weak. I’d looked forward to eating my favourite home-cooked dishes so much, but soon I couldn’t swallow a thing. The doctor couldn’t establish what was wrong so I was admitted to hospital. Blood tests confirmed I was suffering from hepatitis.

In my white hospital room I worried about what was happening at home. I was concerned caring for Samir would be too much for Mother to cope with, and fretted over how Satish was getting along with my parents. By this time I was yellow from my eyeballs to the soles of my feet. When I was discharged two days later, Mother was on the verge of collapse. The deep furrows between her brows had deepened and her eyes were too moist.

It had not gone well for Satish, either. Father mistook his quietness for rudeness, which upset him and created tension. That night, at 1am, Father banged the door of our bedroom.

“Satish, get out of my house right this minute,” he shouted.

I turned on the light and saw the fragile doorframe shaking dangerously. Clinging to Satish, I prayed, *“God, please, don't let him break open the door.”*

The door held and a few minutes later the commotion stopped and Father retreated.

As usual, the logic behind his outburst wasn’t something anyone else was able to decipher; it was as if any small adjustment to his expectations turned a screw too tight in his mind.

We returned to India as soon as possible, using our free tickets to get standby seats. Back home in India, I continued to suffer with my health and didn't contact my parents for six months. I was too physically and emotionally exhausted to search for a way to reconcile with them.

Eventually, I decided to put pen to paper and wrote a long letter home asking Father to see a psychiatrist and take action to improve the family dynamic. He very reluctantly agreed to this, and Mother was soon called in to see his doctor.

"Your father has convinced the psychiatrist there is nothing wrong with him," she told me tearfully. "Men always gang up together!"

I knew things couldn't be considered normal at home, but at the same time I couldn't force my father to get help. Eventually the day did come when Mother left him, never to return.

Subhead: Life Goes On

People regularly passed comment on how thin I was. My sharp nose, which seemed longer somehow, divided hollow cheeks and I weighed only 48 kilos. Mommie took remarks over my recent weight loss as a personal criticism of her feeding and cooking skills, and the sounds of her clanging pots and pans in the kitchen rang out as she tried to cook lighter versions of her regular dishes to suit my palate. Here and there she snuck purified butter into the meals. My response was to wrinkle my nose and say, "Don't put any ghee in my food, just the smell makes me feel sick and then I can't eat anything!"

"Capi, in India we believe it's good for you," Mommie replied. "It has special health giving qualities."

She reduced the amount she put into my food, but did not give up; its telling scent still rose up from my lentils. Not wanting to hurt her, I pushed the food down, just like when I was a child and was locked up in our mouldy smelling basement until I had finished everything on my plate.

To take my mind off things, Satish regularly took me on one of his flights to Bombay (as it was called then), which involved a stopover. We'd leave Samir with Mommie and our worries melted away as soon as we entered the airport. Those were innocent times, when hijackings and bombings were still in the future, and there were no security checks. I'd climb the steps to the plane behind my dashing, uniformed husband, his black cap firmly on his head, and sit on the jump seat in the cockpit. It was such a thrill to experience the runway disappearing ever so lightly beneath us, the engines roaring in our ears as we rose into the sunny blue sky. I was so proud I felt like getting up in front of the passengers to declare, "My husband is flying this plane and he is the youngest pilot to ever join this airline!"

The first time I went to Bombay, I was surprised at how different it was to Delhi. Smells fought for space in the humid air, including fish, garbage, sewage, spices and incense. It was twilight as I stared wide-eyed through the clear glass of the white airline transport car. I peeped through the windows of crumbling multi-storey buildings into rooms painted in a myriad of bright greens, pinks and yellows. The

garish tube lights revealing just how much the paint was peeling.

I'd left a house with no running water and was transported to a five-star Taj hotel! The room looked out over the grey sea, above which the purple sky was dotted with faded stars. A big side door opened into the biggest old-fashioned British-style bathroom I'd ever laid eyes on. Clinging to one wall was a huge, vintage tub surrounded by light blue tiles. Quick as can be, I turned the big, cross-shaped tap and watched a flow of steaming hot water immediately pour out. I added a generous helping of bubble bath, grabbed my book and lowered myself into the crackling, rose scented bubbles, staying there for hours until my hands and feet were as wrinkled as prunes. After waking from his regular nap, Satish came into the bathroom to look at me, a big smile on his face and a glint in his eye. I felt like a queen!

And, on top of all this luxury, there was room service, with a large menu to choose from. Downstairs was a discotheque, where all the young people gathered at night, including us, to drink and dance to the latest music. Its smoke-filled air was stirred by red, green and blue lights that made my head spin.

Subhead: A Glimpse Into The Future

One Sunday, when Samir was 12-months-old, the Gandhi family invited us for a Sunday picnic at a farm just out of town. This experience was to have a profound effect on the future choices we made. This place was no ordinary smallholding - it was a 200-acre stud farm owned by a Dutch lady called Mrs Wadalia, who had married an Indian army general.

As we drove towards the farm, I saw flat green fields on both sides of the road, which brought my childhood in Belgium to the forefront of my mind. We entered a simple but beautiful home filled with sofas and chairs covered with rose print. I was reminded of my mother when Mrs Wadalia walked towards us tall and straight, her long, blonde hair teased into a French roll, beehive style.

The day passed as if it was a dream. Bone china plates filled with finger sandwiches were offered to me with the polite manner of another era. On a tray covered with a doily sat a potbellied silver teapot and bone china cups with lacy edges. I sipped the warm liquid with my pinky in the air. On the wooden table in front of us was a plate of creamy white pineapple pastries. The balmy air was filled with polite chatter and I closed my eyes and dreamt about how one day Satish and I would live like this.

As luck had it, a few months later, Satish was awarded a windfall of 40,000 rupees from his airline in compensation for some salary arrears. It was enough money to support the entire family for 18 months.

The first thing that came to my mind was, *"We are going to buy some land near the stud farm. I don't care how small it is!"*

We duly bought a one-acre plot through a broker called Noor Mahomet, a typical farmer from a nearby village. He was a simple man who wore a white kurta and loincloth and went about on a bicycle. We posed for photos by our new land and Satish stood there with his arm swung wide over it. He looked so proud. How happy

we were to be taking our first step towards becoming homeowners. When he heard our news, Sanjay referred to his friend as 'Landlord Sharma' and 'karorimal' (multimillionaire).

When times were hard, I'd think about the little house we'd build together, picturing its white exterior walls and red roof.

Subhead: Friends

Sometimes, when it was time to say goodbye to the Gandhis following a visit, Satish's car wouldn't start and we'd have to hunt down a mechanic to get it going again. As the car was old we didn't suspect anything at first, but after some time we realised Sanjay was short-circuiting our car on purpose. This was his warped sense of humour at work. Satish told me how long before we met and married, Sanjay decided to test his new gun on Satish – complete with live bullets. He duly aimed the weapon at the ground near his feet and pulled the trigger, making Satish jump and Sanjay laugh out loud. God forbid something had gone wrong as Satish was likely to have lost his job and we'd never have met.

Sanjay had a thing for danger. He'd take his open air Jeep and drive it around a stone quarry at full speed. He had other eccentricities too. An Australian lady once left him all her possessions when she died, as she felt he was going to make history by doing great things. Sanjay wasn't quite displaying his potential when he swung her walking stick around in jest.

Sometimes he got annoyed with the staff at his family home for not following his instruction to the letter. To teach them a lesson he made one servant write out, "I will not bring a full glass of milk when half a glass was asked for," a thousand times. This poor servant had thought he was doing a very good job by bringing more than what was required, and didn't realise it meant supplies were being wasted. He was completely illiterate, so the entire kitchen staff conspired to help him write his lines.

Around this time we also met Sanjay's beautiful girlfriend, Maneka. Her sharp tongue ensured he was kept in his place. By this time his political power was growing and his mother was grooming him to become India's future leader. I'd watch him on TV addressing large crowds and saw posters of him everywhere. I found it very strange to see such a familiar face on roadside walls and in markets.

I remember an argument I had with him once about the dust storms. I felt they were caused by the deforestation happening all around New Delhi.

"You don't know what you are talking about," Sanjay said. "Just look at all the trees outside this window."

As I was the smart alec who'd read about the subject somewhere, the argument continued for quite some time.

"Go to the outskirts of New Delhi and see the barren hills all around," I said. "And beyond those, the desert is creeping in."

Not long afterwards, articles appeared in the newspapers announcing massive tree plantation projects all around the city. Years on, big dust storms seldom visit us.

Sanjay promoted the concept of a car for the people and took steps to make it a reality. He invited us to visit his new automobile factory on the outskirts of town to see the progress he was making. He asked us to follow him there by car, but soon whizzed off at breakneck speed and we lost sight of him, struggling to find our way. From what he had told us, I expected the factory to be like one of the bustling car manufacturers I'd seen on TV. We eventually reached the gates of the facility and walked into a huge hall, one kilometre long and half a kilometre wide. In the centre of this vast space was one little tiny car with five people actively buzzing around it. It didn't look very promising, but destiny had other plans.

The idea of the people's car started with that small little seed, which was to grow into the giant car manufacturers, Maruti Suzuki.

During this period, we went on two vacations with Sanjay and his brother Rajiv, travelling to Jaipur and Dehradun. The roads were very bad, but Sanjay still managed to reach Jaipur in two hours flat – killing several stray dogs in the process. Luckily we were in our own rickety car and although we took six hours to complete the journey, at least we didn't bear witness to the road deaths.

In Dehradun, we stayed in a stilted cottage in the middle of the lush green woods of Latchi Wallah. Satish had a tendency to thicken around the waist so he jogged every day - he needed to be fit in order to pass his pilot's medical, which he underwent once a year. Whenever he jogged around the covered terrace, the whole house bounced up and down with him.

"You're as heavy as an elephant," one of the group teased.

Poor Satish was so embarrassed he didn't jog for another six months.

Being together in the small house felt very cosy. Sonia organised all the meals and one day decided to send us to the market in Dehradun city to buy some organic eggs. Sanjay drove in his Jeep and we spent two hours searching every nook and cranny of the city for the eggs, eventually managing to buy four dozen. I sat with them on my lap, with Satish next to me, as Sanjay drove us home. As usual, he drove like a maniac and while whizzing around the yellow clock tower he encountered a cart loaded with bananas. He had to slam on the breaks and Satish lost his balance and fell into my lap. Only six or seven of the eggs survived.

The beautiful green forest surrounding the cottage was home to wild animals, which is the reason why we'd chosen the spot. Unfortunately, we were having a hard time finding any, so the group decided to travel deeper into the forest. As usual, Sanjay drove us in his Jeep and one of the forest guards joined us as our guide. Despite this, we soon got lost. The guard pointed this way and that every 10 minutes.

"Yes, yes, I know where we are," he claimed each time we turned a corner. We were lost for hours and at dusk reached a sheer drop to the forest floor. It must have been 15-feet.

At this moment, Sanjay turned to the guard and said, "If you do not tell me the correct direction I will drive over the edge."

The poor man was speechless with fear. Sanjay kept his promise and the next thing I knew we were on the forest floor. As we were flying through the air I vowed to never again get in a car driven by Sanjay. The poor guard was so terrified he actually jumped out of the Jeep mid-air and injured his hand, which later required stitches. At twilight we managed to find the right road back to the cottage.

Chapter 11

Subhead: Further Goings On At Home

My life continued to swing between extremes. Sometimes I'd be having lunch with Indira Gandhi or eating in five-star hotels, other times I'd be working the hand pump or mastering the art of killing flies with the morning newspaper. Samir was getting bigger and his once bald head was covered with downy golden hair, just like mine. Wherever we took him he was by far the most handsome child.

"Satish also had golden hairs on his head when he was small," Mommie often exclaimed.

I took this with a pinch of salt, having seen my husband's baby pictures.

Sometimes, a young girl from the neighbourhood, Momabati, meaning candle, came to babysit Samir. Mommie noticed how Samir often finished his plate when I was out and Momabati fed him.

"You don't even know how to feed your child properly!" she scorned. "Look, even this young girl can do a better job than you."

"Mommie, I don't understand," I replied. "I'm doing my best, but he just doesn't feel like eating more."

The following day, I decided to solve the mystery by observing what this girl was doing during Samir's mealtimes. I crept up to the window and looked through the bars towards the veranda where she was feeding him. He was eating really well, but whenever he paused, Momabati finished whatever he'd been munching on. Mommie didn't even back down when I informed her what was going on. "I'm sure he will eat more if you try harder," she persisted.

More surprises were in store - I fell pregnant again. This definitely hadn't been part of the plan. Samir was 18 months and needless to say I felt quite depressed at the thought of bringing another child into a house with no running water. Mommie and Satish consoled me by promising things would get better. Indians believe children bring good luck, and I could only hope this was the case.

The baby was due in August and I dreaded the frying heat as mosquitoes dive-bombed me in search of blood.

"I am going to die if I remain in my marital home," I thought with more than a little melodrama.

By then I was using Indian terms of expression – 'marital home' being one of them.

I turned to Mother and Father, writing to them to suggest I'd be better off giving birth to the child in Washington.

It was customary in India for daughter in laws to give birth in their parental home (another typical expression). This hadn't happened with Samir, but I hoped it

could with my second. There was just one problem. Father disliked children, especially small ones, and I worried Samir might get battered. I'd need to stay in Washington for a total of three months and knew there'd be many opportunities for provocation by Samir, who was by all accounts a restless, sleepless and noisy hellion. I couldn't travel by air after seven and a half months, and then I'd need six weeks to recover and organise the new baby's passport. I also worried how Mother would cope with Samir for the five days I was in the hospital. I remembered all too well what had taken place during my previous trip to Washington.

Mommie spent a long time trying to convince me to let her take Samir to her mother's house in Hyderabad, where the entire extended family volunteered to help care for him. She even went to the extreme of telling me he was so attached to her he wouldn't even miss me.

"He even calls me Ma," she said practically every day for six months. The thought of Samir thinking of her as his mother rather than me made me feel very sad.

Finally, we made the decision to all go to Hyderabad together. After a while Satish and I returned to New Delhi and I said I'd leave for Washington on the condition all was well back at Mataji's house. The problem was they were going very badly, but nobody told me this during our many phone calls. Samir wouldn't even let Mommie go to the bathroom without him and then he contracted measles. Mommie had got it completely wrong - my baby knew exactly who his mother was!

I was 22 years old and travelling to Washington with very little money in my pocket. There were lots of stopovers on the journey and with each one there was a risk I'd lose my seat. If this happened, I didn't have a clue when I'd be able to resume my journey. During the transatlantic lap, I sat in economy next to an extremely large man and every expedition to the toilet took major effort on both sides. His stomach was bigger than mine and when he got up from his seat I heard a pop just like when a cork leaves a champagne bottle. In Paris I said a silent prayer as I managed to get the last empty seat on the aircraft.

The trip took at total of 22 hours, during which time I also fretted about US immigration banning me from entering the country. The Americans were reluctant to allow foreigners to give birth on US soil, as it meant they'd automatically get American citizenship. In the end, I had no trouble getting through, as the immigration officer's desk was so high he couldn't see my bulging belly. I was soon in my parents' open arms, nestled warmly like a little bird in its nest.

Back in the Western world I enjoyed eating hamburgers, pizzas, sausages, pasta and cupcakes. The weight piled on and my health improved. I also had a chance to catch up with my old school friends and share with them how my life had changed. We munched on cookies in my green bedroom as I talked about how much I was longing for a daughter, and how there were going to be no more children. I was determined to make that a certainty.

I could tell listening to me talk was quite strange for them. They were either in college or had jobs, so having children was far from their thoughts. In soft murmurs, I discussed the cultural differences I was coping with. I also shared with them how choosing a girl's name was difficult, as there were no lists of Indian names and the

only way to seek out potential ones was to ask family and friends. However, I'd been at lunch with the Gandhis when the subject came up. Several names were put forward and Indira Gandhi came up with one I loved - Sharika! She explained how this was the name of a Kashmiri goddess. What she didn't share with us at this point was how she had wanted her own granddaughter to be called this.

While in Washington, I had a surprise visitor in the form of Sarla DiDi. She was living in America, as Shivnath was a visiting professor at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. She travelled to us by Greyhound bus and Father went to pick her up at 6am. I was waiting in the doorway for her when she arrived and watched her get out of the car clutching a tattered handbag.

"Capi, I don't have any bags with me," she explained. "I left my clothes as I didn't think I'd need them."

"But Sarla DiDi," I said. "What are you going to wear?" She was staying with us for four days!

" I thought I'd wear your clothes."

"But Sarla, I'm seven months pregnant - nothing will fit you."

It's possible Sarla DiDi hadn't planned to change her clothes during her stay, as this was usual for her, but perhaps she didn't want to come right out and admit it. All she'd brought with her was one handbag filled with wool for knitting. Mother immediately gave her a dressing gown to wear and proceeded to wash her underwear, grey trousers and grey t-shirt, which, once clean, turned out to be blue and white. A shopping expedition was organised to get DiDi the basics. She was happy to oblige and was content when she left us.

Satish arrived in Washington in the nick of time - just 12 hours before my contractions started. I remember standing in the parking lot of the hospital asking him, "What if we have a boy? What will we call him?" We were clueless.

As I entered the labour room, Satish was downstairs finding $1,500 in cash resting on a tank in one of the toilets. He handed it over to one of the hospital guards and considered discovering the money an extremely good omen. His little baby was going to bring him luck. While Satish was in the bathroom, Mother was running all over the hospital looking for him. When she finally spotted him in reception she excitedly told him he needed to be by my side.

"It's a Dutch custom for the father to be present at the birth of his child," she explained.

Satish panicked at the thought and remained glued to the spot.

With her big eyes widening, Mother told him, "If you don't go in, you will be considered a coward in our family!"

Upon hearing this, Satish moved quickly to join me in the labour room!

As Satish came through the swing doors, I was having a kind of out of body

experience as I watched my legs being strapped into shiny steel, from my hips right to my toes. I found myself missing the chipped Indian stirrups.

Strong lights reflected a hundred times over in the gleaming surfaces around the room - surgical instruments, steel trolleys, basins and, of course, my legs. The doctor introduced himself and started a polite conversation with Satish. They chatted as if they were at a cocktail party and I felt like just another object in the room. Fear overcame me with every contraction and I prayed my strength wouldn't leave me as it had done when Samir was born. As I soldiered on, both men continued to talk about their work and how much money they earned.

"I'll make $500 for this delivery," I heard the doctor say.

Meanwhile, the pressure built inside me and my stomach curled itself into knots as if it was trapped in the grip of a boa constrictor.

"One last push," I heard the doctor say and there she was - my daughter! He held her up and I saw my little girl already sucking on her thumb. Tears of joy ran down my cheeks.

I felt a lot more secure than I had done when I'd given birth to Samir. This was partly due to my conversation with Father two weeks earlier.

"You never had to pay for my education," I told him. "You owe me one!"

He could hardly argue and promised to help us out for a few years so we could rent a comfortable home to live in. I hadn't told Satish about any of this as I worried it might hurt his pride.

Within a week of Sharika's birth, we applied for her US passport. The photograph showed a plump, baby face already displaying potential buckteeth! Mother was over the moon at being part of the whole adventure.

We were conveniently able to housesit for neighbours. I wanted to do everything I could to avoid drama and played the role of the American housewife by cooking, cleaning and caring for our baby, my husband and our guests. This arrangement was better for keeping the peace, although by this time Father had bonded with his son-in-law and they spent loud, boozy evenings together, chatting deep into the night and gesticulating wildly to illustrate their adventures. The thick, yellow velvet curtains hanging from the windows failed to muffle the noise they made, which could even be heard outside the house.

One night, Father suggested to Satish he could pay the rent for us. I acted surprised and that was that – deal done! Six weeks later the three of us travelled back to India, making a detour to the Netherlands so Sharika could meet her great grandparents.

Subhead: The New House

The day we returned to India happened to be the day of Sanjay

and Maneka's wedding, which was an unexpected surprise for us as we had been out of touch. Sonia and Rajiv invited us to attend the evening celebrations. The groom was smart in plain white and the beautiful bride wore a sari woven by Mahatma Gandhi.

The following morning, we sat down with the newspapers, and, as Satish's cigarette smoke spiralled around the room and teacups steamed at our sides, we looked through row upon row of ads for a nice house to rent. The first one we saw was a dream come true. It had two kitchens, one at ground level and one on the first floor. Mommie had made it abundantly clear she wasn't going to leave us. She considered her and Satish as the heads of her joint family and wasn't about to let us break away, employing emotional blackmail to keep her son under her thumb. She frequently brought up how she was going to suffer if she was abandoned for a second time, and didn't hesitate to remind us of all the sacrifices she'd made for her children.

At least with her own kitchen she'd have no more excuses to stop me cooking, as my meaty cooking smells would no longer waft by her nose and 'pollute' her system. We made the appropriate arrangements to secure the house and moved in immediately. I didn't want to stay another day with my newborn in Gautam Nagar.

The new, red brick house stood in front of a park. Green fields stretched as far as the eye could see at the back and all sorts of vegetables grew in them. In the middle of this expanse were the ancient, crumbling monuments of Siri Fort, which gave you the sense of living in the middle of history.

I was so happy with my room and the privacy upstairs. We didn't even buy curtains. At night we could look through the big picture window over moonlit fields. It was pure romance.

With an eager heart I looked forward to Samir's arrival and I will never forget his face when we first saw each other again. His beautiful, dark glittering eyes stared at me from a moonlike face topped with gold blond hair. Joy sparkled when I held Samir in my arms, and this warmed my heart like sunrays on wheat fields after a big storm. Samir was speechless and looked at me with unblinking eyes, a puzzled look on his face. It quickly became clear he couldn't understand what on earth I was saying to him. During the entire time he was in Hyderabad, Mommie hadn't spoken one word of English to him and now he only spoke Hindi. It hadn't occurred to me this might happen as Mommie used to speak to him in both languages. My poor boy had gone through so much strain already and learning English was too much for him. He naturally clung to Mommie.

I realised if I wanted to communicate with my son I'd have to learn Hindi and fast. I pushed Mommie to tell me what to say to him, and this was a role she enjoyed!

Meanwhile, Samir's behaviour was atrocious. He ran amok and constantly threw big tantrums, which involved banging his head very hard against the walls and floors. Big, swollen bruises appeared on his head as if he had been beaten black and blue. I worried he'd give himself brain damage. The little guy needed his mother to stop him hurting himself, but I knew this wasn't going to be easy.

There was no time to take things slowly. Refusing to give in or pay attention

to the tantrums was the only thing I could think of to try and curb them. When this failed and he continued banging himself about, I'd pick him up for 'time out'. There was no way he was going to sit on a chair quietly like a good boy. While I dealt with this, Mommie stood a few feet away with pursed lips. She was making it clear to Samir his mother wasn't up to the mark. Soon enough, the tantrums reduced, but they never went away completely.

As a result of his stay in Hyderabad, Samir's eating habits were also a disaster. He never sat down to eat and Mommie ran around after him stuffing food into his mouth with her fingers. When I saw her running down the street behind him with his plate in her hand, I felt it had to be stopped. I confronted her as she had Samir planted firmly on her lap. My stomach was in knots as I said, "Look, you cannot run down the street and feed Samir in public. My mother used to say it's not polite to eat on the street, as other people might look on with hungry eyes." This did the trick, as Mommie interpreted this to mean people might cast the evil eye on Samir's food.

Whenever I tried to talk to him, Satish seemed as oblivious as a cock in a chicken coop. Sometimes, I heard him have animated, but incomprehensible conversations with Mommie. Whenever I asked what it was all about, no answer was forthcoming. Everything was always a secret between the two of them. My head felt as if it was crushed in a vice.

Mommie didn't have it all her own way, though. She didn't like the new abode. Her dream had been to buy the miserable three-rooms of the old Gautam Nagar house. She thought we'd miss out on a great opportunity by leaving the place and giving up the opportunity to purchase it one day. It was beyond my comprehension how she didn't wish to move on to better accommodation. After many stubborn arguments we came up with a plan. Daddy would continue to live in the old house, as he was more than happy to be left alone. Every day he came to us for a meal and took a tiffin back with him for dinner.

Mommie's revenge for not being consulted about the move was to punish me. She answered my questions only if she felt like it, and then only after leaving it for five minutes. She made sure I was watching before allowing the corners of her mouth to slide downwards in a grumpy expression. Sly remarks shot out of her mouth like little daggers, which slowed down my understanding of Hindi. I refused Mommie's help with the baby, as I was scared to lose the mothering relationship with my second child too. I slept upstairs with Satish and Sharika, while Mommie, Sunita and Samir slept downstairs. By this point, Girish was living in America and doing further studies.

In the old house, a lady called Rishma had helped with the housekeeping, washing our clothes with water from the hand pump. She did this in her own special way by laying the soapy clothes against a stone platform and hitting them with a stick, sending soapsuds flying around. She then swung them in the air over her head before slamming them down, which stretched my small t-shirts so much they could have fitted Girish.

In the new house a young mother helped us with the housework but she refused to wash nappies. Washing machines were the stuff of fantasy back then so I ended up washing cloth diapers by hand for more than two years.

The mother's little girl was the same age as Sharika and from time to time I asked her how things were going with the baby. One day she casually told me she had passed away. I was puzzled as the child had been fine the previous day. The housekeeper told me she had given the baby opium to keep her quiet, but when she was out the mother-in-law unwittingly did the same. So the poor baby had died of an opium overdose. Mommie speculated that maybe they didn't care, as the baby was a girl so they knew they'd need to provide an expensive dowry one day. Sadness filled my heart. What a strange world I lived in. As the eldest of three daughters, I realised I might not have survived in India.

Chapter 12

Subhead: Cooking

Satish was very happy about having a kitchen where meat could be prepared. As soon as we settled in he invited his cranky Captain V friend over for dinner. I was really worried and complained I didn't have enough experience with cooking meat in Indian dishes. I'd wanted Satish to let me practice before inviting his friends over. The opposite happened and he ended up asking 10 people over. I set about making an entire Indian meal using the spices Mommie had told me about.

I was so happy in my own big kitchen and felt like a scientist cooking up a storm with pans filled to the brim with mysterious concoctions. I was finally doing it on my own and set about putting a spoon of red powder in this pot and a spoon of yellow powder in the other. As the evening progressed and dinner was served, I nervously loaded the plates with steaming food, the spicy scent of cinnamon, cumin and cardamom floating in the balmy evening air. My guests' mouths were watering over the goat curry with fluffy white rice and crispy raw onions. But when they took their first bite and started to chew, I knew something was up when question mark-shaped creases appeared on their foreheads and they refused to swallow. It turned out the meat was like chewing gum!

"My god, Capi, what have you done?" Satish enquired.

"I told you not to invite so many people," I replied. "You needed to give me more time to learn."

"Ok, then make omelettes for everyone," Satish instructed. The guests were quite satisfied with this arrangement, but this episode was to be repeated over the next few months, with both of us playing out the same roles, as if we were preparing for a play. Each time I suffered the same defeat in front of my hungry audience. I knew learning to become a better cook was something I needed to achieve fast, just like learning Hindi. I approached the neighbours for help, as I had done at the previous house.

Living in a nice house meant we didn't feel the need to go out quite so much, but we still visited friends sometimes at night. Mommie was possessive about the house key and wouldn't give it to us. Satish didn't dare confront her about this, but it was difficult as she also didn't like to be woken by us coming home. Whenever we returned, she stood behind the window and took time fumbling with the simple latch, an angry scowl on her face.

She had a face like fury one night when we were finally able to enter the house.

"You are too late and you had a drink," she said to Satish. "Stop this drinking, you are a Brahmin!"

I ducked as she raised her hand to slap my husband. I escaped into the house as I heard Satish protest, "Ma, I am a father of two children now!"

On our next night out, despite returning home at 11pm because Satish had a

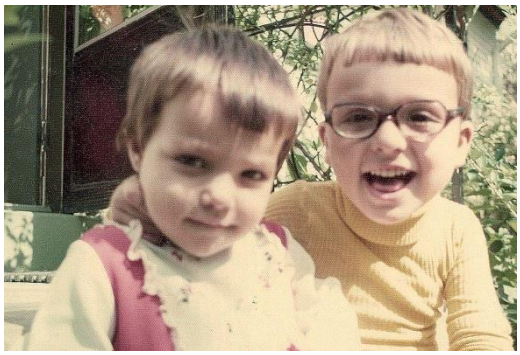
flight the next morning, Mommie refused to open the door altogether and we were stranded outside. After ringing the bell several times, we went to the back of the house and pelted pebbles at Mommie's bedroom window. She finally opened the door after about 40 minutes, but was furious, as the window could have broken. She did have a point, but had also given us little choice. I couldn't figure out the logic behind her feeling it was OK to make us spend the night outside. I also couldn't work out how the man I was so proud of allowed his mother to rule his life. I kept my shock over this buried deep inside.

Subhead: What Was Seen!

On a beautiful, balmy morning when the late spring painted yellow, red and purple flowers in the trees, an elephant came to visit our neighbourhood. She was standing right across the road in the shade. I grabbed Samir and ran outside to show him, but although I pointed at the animal several times he just couldn't see it. Previously, when planes had flown overhead and we'd pointed them out to him, his eyes had wandered aimlessly around the sky. He was two years old and we'd assumed he didn't fully understand the concept of pointing. But after the elephant incident we decided to get his eyes checked. I took him to a government hospital called the Rajendra Prasad Eye Institute and, following a long wait in the reception area, was given a registration card to fill in. After asking people for the doctor's room number and being pointed in the wrong direction several times, we were finally directed to the end of a dingy hallway where we handed in our card and sat down to wait once again. I was the only white person in an endless line of traditional sari or kurta-clad Indians. Curious looks were shot in my direction.

Samir whined, jumped from the bench and ran around crying, stepping on waiting feet as he did so. I counted numbers in my head, as Mother had taught me to do whenever I was feeling impatient. Finally, after two hours, we sat in front of the doctor. He looked into my child's eye, carefully put some drops under his lids and asked us to go to the end of the line again. Several more hours passed by before I received some shocking news. Samir had a serious eye problem.

"Your son must start wearing glasses as of tomorrow," the young doctor told me bluntly. "If not he will become blind in one eye. His problem must be treated with glasses before he is two and a half, and he must continue wearing them until he is 18."



It was evening by the time we returned home. The check-up had taken the whole day! For the next 24 hours, Samir stumbled around the house as the after effects of the drops meant he could barely see a thing.

A week later, we went to pick up Samir's glasses and he put them on for the drive home. Standing on the back seat of the car, he stared out of the rear window and screamed, "Look at how many cars there are on the road!"

What happiness!

Samir embraced being a spectacle wearer, but he also broke them all the time. At one stage he smashed them into 32 tiny pieces, which I duly collected and took to a shop selling glasses.

"I'm going to be a very good customer!" I told the lady behind the counter. "But for me to become a permanent one I need you to use these pieces to make up some new pairs of spectacles, as my son gets through them very quickly."

For a year, Samir walked around with multi-coloured, unique glasses. Every month he had a new combination of colours.

Subhead: New Friends In The Neighbourhood

After about 18 months in our beautiful, red brick house, the landlord asked us to leave. It took us two months to find somewhere new to live, and this house was much smaller. It was located in a narrow, dead-end lane and had only one tiny kitchen. I was relegated to a tiny corner of the garage to do my cooking. My stove rested on a waist-high, crusty cupboard given to Mommie as part of her dowry. The doors were covered with mesh but had been painted so many times the holes were almost invisible.

My fridge stood near a square aluminium sink with a single, dull-looking tap. A chipped manhole decorated the floor, from which rats peeped out curiously, regularly scooting from one wall to another. Sometimes I cooked when the old Herald was parked in the garage, its green and white colours adding some brightness to the cement floor. The scent of spices and gasoline wafted through the room, stirred by a big old fan.

Being in the garage wasn't all bad. Rajiv gifted me what was probably the first microwave in India. Sonia had been suspicious of the new invention and refused to use it. In my eyes, this small electrical item was nothing short of a miracle. I felt even more like a scientist as I used it to bake cakes, prepare steaming fish and warm food late at night.

I used it so much I cried when it broke down. "Satish, this is terrible," I complained. "Is there anyone who could fix it?"

"Capi, don't you dare give it to anyone for repairs," Satish replied. "If they mess it up you might get hurt."

After several days, I missed my microwave so much I decided to take matters into my own hands. I carefully removed the screws of the metal cover and looked at the gleaming machinery inside. On closer inspection, I spied two black, mouse-shaped lumps. I carefully removed the bodies and low and behold the microwave remained in action for another seven years.

All kinds of different families lived around us. In the house next door resided a man who had two wives. One lived in the house and cared for their children, the other lived in a different city. One day the father arrived home with the child he'd had with his second wife and demanded the first wife bring it up.

An Egyptian couple and their two children resided at the corner of the lane.

Across the road from us lived a Muslim family. A bachelor occupied the house next door with his servants. Their children also stayed in the house and they operated as one big family. There was a couple with three rustic boys and a Sikh family, whose household also comprised a trio of lads. This all added to the hullabaloo. Each person had their own unique set of problems and we became close, going out for picnics and partying at our house. I was finally starting to make my own friends.

Rajiv had given us some enormous, 6ft tall tower speakers with the capacity to blast out music from all four sides. The poor bachelor never once complained when we partied, even though he must have heard our music blaring out when he was in bed. The friendly rustic boys across the road actually asked us to crank the music up further so they could party in their house. Once the sound was so loud the window near the speaker cracked. Amazingly, Samir, Sharika and Mommie slept right through the noise.

Meanwhile, I'd been trying to get a live-in maid to help Mommie. But whenever I raised the subject she responded with a long face and a loud sniff. When one of the neighbours' servants returned to her village for a visit – a two-day train ride away - I asked her to find a girl interested in coming and working with us. I decided I'd convince Mommie once the maid had been employed. Sure enough, a month later, five lost and forlorn-looking girls shuffled up the dry, dusty road towards our gate. They'd all made the journey in the hope of securing work with us.

"Come and choose one," I said to Mommie. "If you don't like her she doesn't have to stay."

Mommie wasn't interested in coming out, so I decided to make the selection, picking the most humble looking girl in the group. She looked about 15 or 16 years old and her name was Mangri. She had luminous dark skin stretched over a skeletal frame and her dark pupils rested in yellow eyes. Dusty dreadlocks dangled around her shoulders. Her job was to prepare vegetables, wash clothes, dust and run errands.

After sunset on her first night with us, we turned on the lights as usual and Mangri screamed and dived underneath a chair, curling her entire body underneath it. She had never seen electricity or a light bulb before.

The following day, as I sat resting my sore back in the tiny front garden, I noticed three round slices of Indian bread slip onto the ground from under Mangri's shirt, as she gave our dog, Sultan, his dinner. She didn't speak Hindi so we couldn't ask her why she had hidden her food. We called in the maid from next door to find out what the problem was. She reported back that Mangri was accustomed to eating only once a day. She'd placed the leftover lunch under her shirt in case she got hungry again. A few days later, Mangri was spotted with a plate piled high with a mountain of rice covered with rivers of lentils, vegetables and four thick rotis forming a bridge over it all. Mommie had decided to feed her up and it was enough food to feed four people. Mangri was more than happy to finish it all, as she now knew she could eat whenever she felt hungry.

Around the same time we had a crisis. A scraggly, demented, but harmless old lady started hanging around the corner of the lane. She hadn't bathed for at least four months and was covered in filthy rags. The families on the lane gave her something to

eat every day, as reporting her to the police might result in her being locked up in an institution of medieval standards.

When Mangri walked past her one day, the old lady gesticulated for her to open the gate of the house belonging to the Egyptian family. Our girl did what she asked and came home. Next thing we knew, there was a police Jeep and two khaki-clad policemen on the lane. The old lady and the woman of the Egyptian house were both wailing at the tops of their voices, with the latter seeming to be the most in need of an institution. She screamed hysterically, her eyes bulging and her mouth twisted into a ghost-like grimace. I stepped out into the garden and peeped over the chest-high wall to see fingers pointing towards our house. I quickly grabbed Mangri, who was sobbing her heart out, and hid her in the bathroom, not really knowing what she had done wrong. When the police arrived at our house to question us, I pushed Mommie inside and pretended not to understand Hindi. They left soon after, taking the old lady with them.

Subhead: Complete Chaos

By this time my adorable children were three and five. They had their own opinions, which resulted in sibling disagreements and fights. Hyper Samir frequently beat his sister who provoked him by interfering when he played with his friends on the street. She liked to get her brother's attention and sometimes slapped him to ensure it, big tears running down her cheeks before he could respond.

I got up every morning at eight, woke the kids, bathed and fed them and then took them to the bus stop. Then time slowed down, as I had nothing to do until the kids came home again, bringing chaos with them. Trying to do homework with Samir was a nightmare and a pure battle of wills. He refused to sit still and was distracted every ten seconds. He had a hard time figuring out what was he was supposed to do, no matter how many times it was explained to him. I'd get so exasperated I'd end up confusing myself.

Mommie loved dressing Samir, but she made a mess as she pulled his clothing out of the cupboard any which way. Then she'd complain, "You never clean up!" I stopped trying to keep it tidy - it was pointless.

I felt like I had a part in a mad circus movie and my role was the magician's assistant. Satish was the producer and provided the background music, and Mommie was the inept scriptwriter. Sunita played the supporting cast parts and Sharika was the tiger cub undergoing training. The lead child performer was Samir, who was mostly dressed like a joker. A typical outfit comprised sandals, knee-high socks decorated with windmill print, bright Bermuda shorts and a checked shirt. This was topped with those weird glasses and a bald head! Mommie had taken him to the barber on the spur of the moment and instructed him to give Samir a

crew cut. This ended up being so short his skin showed through his blond hair and it looked as if he suffered from very premature hair loss. I didn't see the point in saying anything. This was one battle that wasn't worth fighting.

I needed to save my energy for occasions such as ice cream wars. If I said no to buying a treat for Samir and Sharika from a street cart, Mommie butted in and said, "Poor children, they are so small. Let them have an ice cream."

This discussion took place with Samir and Sharika performing a crying opera in the background, and the scene was repeated on a daily basis. The children were receiving their first lessons in politics. I wasn't being deliberately mean. A child specialist told me the ice cream wasn't made under hygienic conditions, so the kids were at risk of stomach bugs. It was still possible they got their way when my back was turned. The ice cream contained milk and this was enough to convince Mommie it was good for them.

Even if Samir kicked, bit or slapped Mommie, she still didn't like it if I said, "Kids, stop this behaviour."

"They don't mean it," she'd argue.

This frustrated me further and I'd put the kids in the bathroom for time out. Mommie always plonked herself down at the other side of the door and started crying.

"Mommie, you cannot disagree with me in front of the children," I'd tell her. "It's bad for their behaviour. But you can always tell me your opinions privately!"

This fell on deaf ears and Mommie insisted all I had to do was talk things over with the children. But I knew when Samir was hyper it was impossible to get him to listen to reason. I had to let him calm down first.

Subhhead: Naughty Times

Samir was very excited after seeing the movie Superman and felt he could fly like his new hero. Trying to talk sense into him had no effect. He jumped from the dining table onto chairs, which had a tendency to topple over, and leapt from the roof of our car, sailing over Sharika's head, before coming to land on the driveway. His main goal was to jump from the roof of the house, so Mangri and I had to keep a close eye on him. On numerous occasions I had to grab the nearest part of him just to prevent him from attempting his mission. He was so determined he managed to get onto the neighbour's roof, which didn't even have a staircase leading up to it. God knows how he got up there. He slipped while attempting to jump and luckily the neighbour's maid saw him dangling from the side and rushed over to hold his feet until someone was able to help him down. After this misadventure he gave up the flying idea. But we weren't out of danger. Samir's next interest was fire. Now we needed to watch out for matches going missing from the kitchen. This was easy enough, but what we couldn't do was keep such a close eye on the neighbours' kitchens.

Samir's favourite form of fire was a bonfire, and together with his friends – the 'gang' – he surreptitiously collected newspapers and other flammable materials, such as packing foam and plastic bags. I saw the result of this one day when he came

home with a hole as large as my hands in his pyjamas. Surprisingly, not a hair on his leg was burnt.

Samir was not so lucky the next time. The ‘gang’ started another fire on the side of the road and Sharika stirred it with a stick. The melting foam became airborne and landed on Samir's foot, which sent him running home screaming. I put it under tepid running water, dried it and saw a really deep hole, with bone glittering white at the bottom. I slathered it with antibiotic ointment, bandaged it up and off we went to the doctor’s.

The children were often invited to birthday parties and for one we all climbed into our old Cadillac and drove into town, with a song called *Let Me Roll It* by Paul McCartney and Wings blaring loudly from the speakers. The party was in full swing when we arrived, with children running helter-skelter everywhere. Their parents were looking on from loungers sipping wine, but I couldn’t indulge as I had my hellion to keep an eye on. I saw him bouncing up and down in between balloons and children’s heads and then I spied him approaching the birthday cake, his gaze fixed on the matchbox next to it. He grabbed it before I had chance to tell him ‘no’. I managed to get hold of him and made him open his hand to show me what was in it.

“Samir, go and put the matches back next to the cake,” I ordered. “I will be watching you.”

Samir did as instructed and I was able to relax again. Later, long after the cake had been served, my boy came running towards me, tears streaming down his face. He was clutching his pocket and refused to let go. Prying his hands loose, I saw a huge blister at the bottom of a hole in his pocket.

“How did you do this?” I asked, applying ice water to the wound.

“Mama, I took out some of the matches from the box and put them in my pocket. I was playing and suddenly there was a fire in there!”

Unfortunately, this wasn’t the end of dramas involving Samir. Soon after, a passer-by stormed into our house through our open doors. Samir had thrown a big stone at him as he was riding by on his scooter and he was livid. A sincere apology had to be extracted from the screaming child before the scooter rider went on his way again. The children had become a law unto themselves. What I said held no more meaning in the house than the barking of our street dog.

Chapter 13

Subhead: Being Pulled This Way And That

Sunita was now 15 and competed with Sharika for my time. I was her main confidant and this wasn't about to change just because my own daughter was growing up and craved the same level of attention. Sharika cried and whined and was often lost in a whirlpool of emotions. The pair pulled at me until I felt my arms become long and stretchy, as if they were made from elastic.

In our small house, all the bedrooms led out into a drawing/dining room, while in the bathroom, the two opposite windows were just two feet apart. Mommie was aware of the progress of our morning ablutions, and it was likely she heard what went on in our bedroom too! Outside our bedroom and the bathroom, we bumped into each other all the time like bumper cars at a fair.

Mommie had changed her tactics. Rather than confronting me directly, she now displayed her displeasure with me in front of the kids by rolling her eyes, tutting and reminding me, "In India we don't do it like this. Children should not be reprimanded until they are older."

She ensured everyone knew her opinion that I didn't understand anything. I felt I was losing love and respect on all fronts.

In despair, I regularly locked myself in the dingy bathroom and secretly cried. The once white tiles were now patchy grey, matching my mood. I didn't want the kids to know what was going on. After all, this was my unsolvable problem. I was the outsider and every moment felt like an ordeal. My mothering skills were constantly being challenged and I felt like a non-person. I was like a fish on the shore of the river trying desperately to breathe. I was lost and had no energy or the confidence to deal with the situation minute to minute.

"Sterre, stop! Shape up!" I thought to myself in the grey atmosphere of the bathroom. Washing my face with tepid water, I'd square my shoulders with the intention to make the best of things again, but I was clueless how to do it. Satish carried on as if none of this had anything to do with him.

"Tell her not to interfere and argue with me about the kids in front of them," I'd beg.

Finally, Satish agreed to my request to organise a family meeting. Mommie sat Buddha-like on the sofa and I perched on the edge of a chair and did most of the talking. Satish reiterated my request for Mommie not to interfere, his words flying like frustrated mosquitoes trying to find their target in the dark. Following the meeting, not five minutes passed before Mommie corrected me again in front of the kids, clicking her tongue in disagreement. I picked up a book and escaped into another world, which had become a daily habit. I wasn't getting anywhere, except in my imagination. Following the meeting, Satish made it impossible for me to broach the subject of Mommie's meddling. He shut me down before I could complete my first sentence. I went for a long walk to think about what to do about my seemingly hopeless situation. As I quickened my pace on the poorly lit road, it crossed my mind to leave and take the children with me.

Half an hour later, I turned around, having reached the same conclusion I had numerous times before. I couldn't see why I should give Mommie the power to break up my little family. After all, I loved Satish and he loved me. I could see she made him powerless by guilt-tripping him with daily reminders of the sacrifices she felt she'd made for him.

"I took such great care of you as a baby and I even ironed your diapers!" she'd regularly point out.

I knew I was on my own and needed to come up with the solution for myself. Some days I'd feel so frustrated I'd run out of the house gasping for air as if I was being suffocated. Years later, I found out Mommie used to say to Sharika and Samir whenever I left this way, "See, your mother doesn't care for you, but don't worry, I'm here."

Subhead: A New World

Finally, I decided a job might give me some much-needed space outside the home. To my surprise, Mommie was happy about this, but Satish screamed, "You will get raped and taken for a ride." He was so loud I was sure people could hear him on the main road down the block!

"You should have more confidence in me," I told him. "I'm not going to let anyone take advantage."

"What job would a foreigner get in India?" he responded.

Back in high school in the US, I'd been part of a pioneering youth experiment and was selected for a fashion merchandising class. As part of the learning programme, I was employed for a paid internship in a store. This two-year, on-the-job training gave me plenty of customer service experience. Now those long hours were going to benefit me for a second time.

I'd become close with the large family in the neighbouring house – the one where the man had two wives – and we often spent time in each other's houses. The children of the family were growing up and the couple's identical twin daughters were in their early 20s. The girls had shoulder length ebony hair, big, dark eyes and fair skin. One day one of them announced proudly, "I've got a job in the garment export business. I'm the boss of a sampling unit and have twenty tailors working for me!"

"Now this is something I could do too," I thought to myself. When I was 10, Mother taught me how to stitch garments on a sewing machine and I was also a good seamstress. I could even sketch and make up my own designs. This prompted me to start looking for a job in the fledgling Indian garment export industry. One day, sipping one of Mommie's fragrant cups of morning tea, an interesting newspaper ad caught my eye. A Dutch company was looking for employees.

"You have to drive me to the interview," I told Satish. When we got there, I was shocked to see hundreds of applicants waiting in line, which made Satish's big eyes sparkle with glee. Throughout the morning, around 3000 people turned up and I had to wait four hours for my first interview.

The person doing the interviews was shocked to find a Dutch person sitting opposite him, especially one who'd studied fashion design and could sketch well to boot. Even so, after so many people had applied for the job, I was surprised to be called back for a second interview the following week. I was prepared for another long wait before it was my turn, but this time there was only one other person in the running.

I was called into a big, white room. At its centre stood a glass table that could seat 15. A wall-to-wall white, shag-pile rug covered the floor and the walls were lined with rows of dresses and shirts on hangers. At the far end of the table, I could see the silhouettes of four men outlined against the bright light pouring in from a large window. I lowered myself into a lonely chair opposite them, the large expanse of glass between us making me feel really small. The four men proceeded to fire questions at me in English, even asking me to sketch a fashion design on the spot.

Just when I thought the interview was over, they asked all the questions again in Hindi, which by then I knew quite well. As I stood up to take my leave, one of the men made it clear we weren't finished and then interviewed me in Dutch! Exhausted, I finally left. Although they had not told me officially, I knew the job was mine. I was on cloud nine! A week later, I received the news I was being hired to coordinate for Dutch designers and translate new designs to the workers who executed collections for a big clothing company called Shefferson Chads. I was so excited my head spun.

Initially, however, the job proved problematic. The Indian managers wanted me to be their secretary rather than putting me to work on the design side. This was difficult as I am dyslexic, so I struggled to write even a sentence correctly. As a consequence, I became the butt of my ego-ridden co-workers' jokes. What fun they had ridiculing me to each other.

"My God, she is stupid and can't even put one set of numbers in a row without making a mistake," I'd hear them whisper. They also speculated how long I'd last before being fired. I just wondered when my designing role was going to start.

My day came two months later when three designers and one pattern maker arrived in the office direct from Holland. All hell broke loose, but I was in my element. For the first time, I got to speak Dutch in India to people of my own age.

The room where I'd been interviewed became a haven for creative activity. One designer looked at large paisley swatches as another sorted through a pile of multi-coloured checks. A third waved red sample dresses around while a fourth toiled away in the corner, sticking magazine cuttings onto chart paper. Cloth was everywhere and no one could find their scissors, measuring tape, drawing paper, stapler or pens.

Each designer was eccentrically dressed. English Maureen had waist length, straight brown hair and wore dark, faded and loose fitting vintage clothes over wide hips. Dutch Joop's legs were encased in tight, cobalt blue pants, which emphasised his thin frame. His whole look was sparse and within his narrow face his small blue eyes twinkled like tiny Christmas lights. Buxom Ietje was also from Holland. She was of short stature and always looked slightly off balance as she moved around busily in her trademark ankle-high boots supported by stiletto heels. Her short curly copper hair

gave her a wild look. Last but not least was Ingrid, the pattern maker. She was a blonde, Dutch bombshell, with waist long, white hair covering her back like soft snow on a mountain slope. She favoured black and her fair skin had a lovely glow about it.

While I was at work, Mommie and Mangri got the children ready for school. They came home at 2pm, had lunch and then played outside. By 6pm, I was there to do homework with them, give them a bath, make dinner and tell them a bedtime story. If work was slow I often came home early.

Naturally, Satish's job wasn't nine to five. There were days when he wasn't flying and was at home all the time. Then he'd laze about on the sofa in the living room, throwing puzzled looks at the children now and again, as if they were an unsolvable mystery. Whenever Sharika cried, Satish picked her up no matter what the reason. Then she'd cry even more, only this time they'd be crocodile ones. When The Captain went off to work, she'd start sobbing all over again.

Meanwhile, Samir was a mystery to Satish. The child had so much energy and could rarely be stopped in his tracks. The one exception was their trips with Sharika to the Prince Paan shop, where concoctions made from betel leaf and areca nut were sold. Satish always bought a paan for himself containing enough tobacco to explode his teeth. Sweat poured down his face as he chewed it. In the back of the car, two little faces would bounce up and down, cheeks bulging with sweet paan filled with raisin and rose petal paste. The fresh smell of cardamom, rose and mint spread through the vehicle as they drove home.

By this point, the Herald was no more and we had a large, navy blue, 1957 Cadillac, which resembled an airplane on wheels. Curvy chrome protruded from the front and back like breasts, and these were topped with red lights. There was no doubt the car was female, and we'd obtained her by complete fluke. While sitting at the dining table at the Gandhi's one day, Sanjay mentioned he'd been gifted an old caddy by the Maharaja of Patiala.

"How can I get rid of it?" he wondered out loud.

"Give it to me!" Satish replied, jumping from his chair.

"I will give it to you on one condition," Sanjay said. "You pay me by weight - one rupee per kilo."

The deal was struck. The car was estimated to weigh two tonnes, so we paid two thousand rupees for it.

Subhead|: News From America

We received news from Girish in the United States. He was now 26 and had completed his studies. He wanted to stay in America but was having trouble with his visa and expected us to do something about his predicament. Mommie's brother, who lived in Kansas City, came to the rescue. He offered to sponsor Mommie and Sunita, now 17, for their green cards, which meant Girish would then be able to apply for one for himself.

Years earlier, this same brother had invited a 20-year-old Satish to travel to the United States for a visit. This was his first trip abroad and when he'd excitedly announced the great news to his grandmother, Mataji, she'd invited herself to come along. Grandmother and grandson flew nonstop to New York and by the time they landed, Mataji was famished. She'd refused to eat anything on the plane for fear her veggie food had been inadvertently placed next to meat. The moment they reached the hotel, Satish went out to find food. He surprised the staff at the nearby McDonald's by requesting a meatless hamburger. Meanwhile, Satish's uncle called the hotel from Kansas City. He became worried when Mataji revealed she was locked in the room. Satish had been afraid to leave her alone as he suspected she might go out on her own and get lost – a disaster in the making as she didn't speak a word of English.

When they returned to India, Mataji told everyone, "The best thing about America is the good milk and the sleep you get there."

There was only a nine-year age gap between uncle and grandson, so while Mataji had been getting some shuteye they'd been out gallivanting, going to college parties and bars and having the odd fling. Mataji's good sleep was down to the fact the two men put an anxiety drug called Calmpose in her milk (I wouldn't be surprised if this was Satish's idea.) When she discovered this back in India, Mataji took this news in her stride – she was an extremely easy-going lady.

We began the process to help Mommie immigrate, so she could then sponsor Girish for a green card. We even took her to the US for a holiday to get her used to the idea of living there one day. We joined her for three weeks and the experience was quite an ordeal for me, as even at the airport I had to ensure the kids weren't racing around with trolleys or trying to run or crawl onto the baggage belts, while at the same time teaching Mommie how to use the escalators. Satish was in charge of organising everything: the tickets, the trip and the money, and I was responsible for the more mundane things, such as packing, carrying the bags and gathering the children together, the latter of which took great effort. We were also financially strapped and had only $500 between us for our entire stay. Thank God nobody got sick. My parents were on holiday so we were able to stay in their house. However, when they returned I immediately predicted a clash between Father and Mommie. She wanted his kitchen to be vegetarian, which was a no-no for Father, who was a steak lover. Finally, a compromise was reached. Half of the kitchen was to be vegetarian, while the other half was to be for meat. This was a very uneasy arrangement and tempers flared. After four days, Father screamed, "They have to go, this minute!"

His face was all red, his eyes were bulging and he'd raised one of his hands. He resembled a steam engine about to be derailed.

Shame filled my heart and I couldn't bring myself to hold my head up. The kids and Mommie went to stay with Sarla DiDi for a few days.

Mommie always put Satish in charge of solving the family's problems and after working hard for six months, he managed to get a green card organised for her and Sunita. Now all we had to do was get some money together for them; we couldn't let them go empty-handed. The only way we could do this was by selling our prized plot of land. Soon, our dream was gone and the money was in Mommie's hands.

This turned out to be a good thing, as Girish was unemployed - something he'd failed to mention. He'd also failed to get his qualifications, so Mommie had to use the money to keep a roof over his head.

Back in India, we were a nuclear family for the first time and things quickly fell into place. I instilled strict routines in the house, which the children duly began to follow. They didn't improve overnight, as bad habits die hard and they had learned to argue about everything. I realised changing this was going to be a major task.

Mangri was now around 19 years old. We never knew her exact age, as she didn't know when she was born. Despite our initial misgivings, she'd shown herself to be quite intelligent and had learned how to do the cleaning and cooking well. A friend from her village was hired to help her and the two managed the house while I was at work. The kids had a blast doing all sorts of naughty things with Mangri, such as going on flower hunts in neighbours' gardens. When I came home, a lovely, creative bouquet made of stolen flowers was often waiting for me. On the black sideboard, our cactus was lovingly dressed in a coat of flowers. Later I had to pay for the pleasure by listening to neighbours complain about their bare gardens.

"I've been waiting every day for my rose bud to open," one grey-haired old man cried, with tears rolling down his cheeks. "But the moment it did your kids cut it!"

Subhead: Dogs And Other Creatures

Our dog Sultan, the stray we'd taken in, was still alive back then and inventing ingenious ways to cause mayhem around the neighbourhood. He'd fight with other dogs and chase bitches - really living up to his name! He came home with such a bad gash one day he needed 35 stitches. As with the children, I created strict rules for him. He had to be tied up and taken for regular walks in areas where there were no other street dogs. The main road was to be strictly avoided.

Mangri, who by this time had become quite a flirt, often used the dog walking as an opportunity to show off her charms. She'd dress especially for the occasion, sporting bright bold prints, flowers in her hair and a sparkling chain around her neck. After making all this effort she decided there was a better chance of attracting male attention by disregarding my instructions and walking Sultan on the main road. One day, he duly took a fancy to a fully-grown male goat, got loose from his chain and managed to kill it. I was about to leave for work when a group of rowdy villagers gathered in front of our gate protesting about the death. I didn't understand in the din of shouting whether the goat died of a heart attack when it saw this wild dog charge at him or if an actual bite had killed it. I appeased the crowd by paying 200 rupees for the goat. All those protesters must have enjoyed a nice free meal that day.

After dinner at night, I often took Sultan for a walk myself. At this time, there weren't so many street dogs roaming around for him to get into a fight with. As a precaution, I took stones in my pocket should any emergencies arise. One evening, all was quiet and Sultan was walking on his chain quite peacefully, when I spied from the corner of my eye an old, limping man. He was wearing a crumpled white kurta and a dog walked by his side.

“Tie up your dog,” I shouted into the muggy air. “Or at least hold it.”

The man ignored me completely. Sultan pulled so hard on the chain it ripped my hands and I had to let go. I curled my fingers around a big stone in my pocket and threw it, hitting the old man by accident and knocking him off his feet in the middle of the road. Barking and growling dogs circled around him and cars whizzed by while honking their horns. I weaved between them and knelt down in front of the groaning old man.

“I am so sorry I hit you,” I said, “but why did you not stop your dog?”

The man looked at me with faded runny eyes and replied in perfect English, “I had one good leg and one bad one, but because of you both my legs now hurt equally and I can’t stand up. The dog doesn’t belong to me, what could I do?”

It took five minutes to get the old man to have a go at getting up. With my help, he finally limped away. I stood still and watched him until he was out of sight. Meanwhile, Sultan, still barking, ran fast in the opposite direction with his chain rattling on the pavement behind him.

Whenever Sultan got loose we’d only see him again when he was starved. He’d turn up with his head hanging, often bearing injuries. But he was a smart Indian street dog and crossed the road in heavy traffic, looking left to right and dodging cars as if he was a human being.

Chapter 14

Subhead: Further Goings On At Work

I'd been in India for five years and in all this time I'd maybe spoken Dutch three or four times per year outside the three-minute phone calls with my parents and the occasional visits. Now I was getting to speak it in the office and discovered I wasn't at all rusty. I was also picking up the ins and outs of the job. Everyone in the office was just one or two years older than me, including the boss, who lived in the Netherlands. I'd been at my job for four months when he visited India and stayed at the company's guesthouse, which was just walking distance from my home. One Sunday, I took Satish over to meet him. Bursting with pride, I began to make the introductions. But, before I'd even said my husband's name, Satish ran to my boss and shouted "Ratan!" The two men jumped across the room and hugged each other, leaving me standing there open-mouthed. It turns out they'd both lived in the same bachelor pad together in Defence Colony, where I'd first stayed. Satish was already flying by then and Ratan was studying at college in Delhi. He got involved in the fashion industry after offering to help out his sister, who ran her own business exporting clothing to the Netherlands. Her buyers there rejected one of her shipments of shirts, resulting in a massive loss, so Ratan offered to travel to the Netherlands to see if he could salvage the situation. Somehow, he managed to get the shipment released and started going to different stores to see if he could earn some money by selling a couple of the shirts here and there. He drove around the country with them in the back of his car and managed to sell every single one. From these humble beginnings, Ratan went on to build an empire spanning continents.

The guesthouse was lively entertainment for us. Six designers moved into it every season, staying for three or so weeks and partying hard. The four attractive female designers had a line of men waiting to take them out. Often the parties spilled into our house and carried on until the early hours. I cooked dinner for all the guests, which sometimes numbered 15 or more. At around 1am if I was lucky, or later if I wasn't, I'd sit on our bed with eyelids so heavy I'd fall asleep with my feet still on the floor.

The children got used to having all sorts of people around…it was as if they had suddenly acquired an extended international family. My job involved a lot of material sourcing, so I got to know every nook and cranny of Delhi. I knew where camel bone buttons were made by hand in Old Delhi, could locate where tie-dyeing and screen printing took place in the suburb of Okhla and could organise for block printing to be done in West Delhi.

I was transported to these places via taxi. The drivers were often excited about having a young foreign female in the back of their car, and they sped about as if they were heroes in a Hindi film - sometimes even singing a romantic tune! They drove recklessly fast, swaying left and right as if they were drunk.

"God spare me, I'm going to get killed like this," I thought to myself, frantically gripping the seat.

Nothing I said in either Hindi or English could make them slow down or be more careful. Finally, I hit upon an idea, which worked every time.

"I'm the mother of two children," I'd say. "If you carry on driving like this they will become orphans!"

I often visited manufacturers to find out whether collections were being made correctly, and if the fabric had arrived on time. If I tried to establish this by telephone, I was often fobbed off with lies, so it was worth a visit in person to discover what was going on. Some of the manufacturers were on the way to my house, which enabled me to stop off there for the occasional surprise visit too. On one such occasion, I turned into my lane to see our 1957 Cadillac being hosed and washed down by a dancing and singing Mangri, who was wearing my raincoat. I was understandably quite angry about this and worried she might have gotten into the habit of wearing all my clothes while I wasn't around.

During this time, I became an expert concerning the lies manufacturers told about why the work wasn't being done. One stands out in my memory above all others – it was the king of excuses!

"Has the grey fabric arrived?" I asked the manufacturer over the phone.

"Of course," came the reply.

I didn't believe him, so I went to the factory and asked him to show the fabric to me. Of course, it was nowhere to be found.

"The problem is the material is being woven in Amritsar," the manufacturer explained, "and it's so foggy there the weavers can't see their looms!"

I generally didn't tell suppliers when designers were leaving for the Netherlands with their collections. On occasion, they'd chased them all the way to the airport clutching last-minute samples to give them. Alternatively, the habitually late suppliers expected me to deliver their samples to the designers at the guesthouse.

One day, a delivery wasn't made to the guesthouse as promised and a Netherlands departure was imminent. I called to find out why and was told by the supplier, "Everything was ready and I sent my man to the guesthouse, but he was too afraid to go inside and deliver the samples."

He explained it was around ten when he arrived and found all the windows of the residence glowing brightly while blood-curdling screams echoed off the surrounding walls for at least ten minutes. The man sat in his car petrified. He decided someone was being murdered and sped off before the finger could be pointed at him!

"I've heard a lot of excuses in my time," I thought to myself, *"but this one might be genuine."*

When I questioned Maureen, she said, "I was screaming as there was a cockroach in the bathroom!"

I didn't believe this, but we never got to the real truth.

A few days later, I travelled to the office with Joop in the most ramshackle taxi I'd ever seen. It was so bad I refused to get in it, but the large, aggressive driver

opened his mouth, revealing a row of broken teeth, and said, “Madam, you have no choice. I’ve been standing in line and it’s my turn. Besides, no other driver will dare come in my place.”

I felt the whole car might fall apart if I looked at it too hard. Once we got on the road all four doors started rattling like crazy. Hot wind blew through gaps, the windows were stuck halfway and wouldn’t go up or down and the rusty floor had so many holes in it the road underneath us was visible. The seats were so bouncy our heads touched the inside roof as we travelled over every pothole. On top of that, an open can of petrol was tied to the meter (which also didn’t work) on the bonnet. Petrol sloshed on to the hood whenever we hit an uneven patch and the stench was overpowering.

Joop clutched the doorknob on his side, just in case we needed to jump should the taxi suddenly catch fire. Despite the danger, we felt as if we were acting in a comedy and laughed so much we got stomach cramps. This drive was an hour-and-a-half long and our jolly moods brought us onto the subject of the female designers and the effect they had on the young men in their presence. The girls liked the attention, but one night two of them were at a loose end, as none of the men had come to call for them. Randomly, they decided the lift in the five-star Oberoi Hotel would be a good place to meet someone. They spent half an hour going up and down in the lift without success and reckoned it was the most frustrating night they’d ever spent in India!

About 10 minutes from our destination, the taxi refused to move and gave up on life, so we jumped out and climbed into a three-wheeled scooter, happy to finally reach the office alive.

The pair of us usually worked in the conference room, but as we opened the door to it we saw a row of gloomy faces sitting at one end of the table. A portly policeman with a big moustache was holding forth as Ratan leaned forward and listened intently, his eyes round and innocent. Next to him sat the sour office manager. He nodded in agreement as his habitual tick worked his jaw muscles.

It turned out there’d been no less than 16 complaints filed by residents living in the vicinity of the guesthouse. One of them had seen two naked people running through the area in the middle of the night. The offending pair was the Italian designer Donna and one of the swarthy deliverymen, who’d stayed to party at the guesthouse. Feeling hot, the devilish duo decided to have a midnight swim in the local club pool. They walked 10 blocks, climbed over the club boundary wall, took off all their clothes and jumped into the pool, feeling safe under the cloak of darkness. Only the moon bounced up and down on the ripples as they swam in the black water. However, the usual night watchman was there with his stick. He panicked when he saw the couple and called over some more watchmen, whose dark forms hovered around the pool as they hit the sides with their sticks. The skinny dippers were so frightened they clambered out of the pool like two crabs and ran home, leaving all their clothes behind!

Upon hearing this, Joop and I felt our cheeks redden, as we were itching to laugh some more. Ratan’s stern look forced us to compose ourselves and show shock instead. After the meeting with the policeman, things calmed down for about four days, after which time the place was swinging again. It was great to be surrounded by

so many creative and eccentric people. Suddenly, we had so many friends to hang out with.

I often put in long hours before a collection was due to leave for Holland and on one of these occasions, Satish came to pick me up with a surprise. He had spent the day getting the broken air conditioning unit in our Cadillac going. My immediate reaction was to close the open windows to test its effectiveness.

"Don't do that," Satish said.

"But how can we test the air conditioning otherwise?"

Satish asked me to open the glove compartment to feel the cool air in there. It turned out its effectiveness was so limited this was the only place keeping cool. I'm sure we must have had the only car in town with an air conditioned glove compartment!

Subhead: Art

No matter how difficult my circumstances were, painting remained a constant feature in my life. In the hand pump house, I tried to work on the veranda dining table, which was difficult as the flies often landed in the paint and got stuck. As we moved from house to house, the dining table remained my temporary artistic area, meaning every time I painted I had to clean up everything - a real inspiration killer. Even getting the right paint wasn't possible and I had to make do with oils, which, over time, gave all colours a yellow tint. I stretched the canvas over the frames myself and treated the cloth. Even now, these paintings still look as if they were completed yesterday.

After moving to the lane, I managed to get a tiny room to paint in. It was so small that when I wanted to view a whole painting from a distance, I had to step outside, stand in our tiny patch of garden and squint through the small window. *"Maybe one day I'll have an exhibition and sell my paintings,"* I thought to myself.

I worked on my canvasses whenever there was a gap in my life between taking the children to school and the doctor's, dealing with the in-laws, cooking, entertaining, going to work, shopping and keeping my husband happy.

Sharika, who was now six, often kept me company as I worked. She dreamt of becoming a singer one day and practised the songs she'd written in a nice, husky voice using her hairbrush as a microphone. Once, I was painting away when she started to gag in the middle of a song and struggled to catch her breath. My heart stopped. What was happening? I opened her mouth to see what was wrong and saw something stuck in her throat.

"What is it and how do I get it out?" I wondered, my head spinning.

Desperate to do something, I placed my trembling finger on Sharika's tongue and she gagged again and spat out a small piece of a stick. My heart started to pound so hard I saw everything in pink. It turned out Sharika had decided to use a thin stick

from a broom as her microphone. While singing, she'd got so carried away it got stuck in her throat

Subhead: Coping With Differences

Every year I was given six weeks annual leave from work. We often travelled to Washington or Texas on free tickets from Satish's airline and we went shopping to buy the things we couldn't get hold of in India. I bought sneakers in several sizes so the kids wouldn't run out of them when their feet grew. In my opinion, only two types of shoes available in India were a comfortable fit for children; either standard black school shoes or the plain brown sandals you could buy from a shoe company called Bata. Plenty of beautiful-looking models were available in the Delhi markets, but the trouble was the children's feet were expected to magically transform into their shape, and some didn't even have a left or right.

The kids were extremely naughty whenever we travelled on long haul flights. I always sat with one child either side of me, but Samir got up every 20 minutes to run up and down the aisle. I'd run behind trying to catch him while profusely apologising to every Tom, Dick and Harry whose arms, legs or head he'd bumped into. While I was busy with this, Sharika whined and squirmed in her seat, desperately trying to open her seatbelt so she could do the same thing as her brother. On one occasion, Samir stood on his seat and leaned forward to firmly grab the hair of the passenger sitting in front of him. Prying his toffee-covered fingers loose to force him to let go took quite some effort. The moment I'd achieved this task, Sharika decided to join in the fun and grabbed hold of somebody else's hair. Satish didn't react to any of this and I felt he was more like a grandfather in the way he indulged. He was a softy and told me I was overreacting whenever I complained he wasn't doing enough to back me up.

"You are breaking their spirit," he told me.

"But my spirit is being ground to pieces by all of you," I thought to myself bitterly. "*Do you not see how no good will come out of this?"*

During our first trip to the United States, we visited Mommie and Sunita, who were still living with Girish in Texas. On the way to their flat, I remember seeing a sign declaring, *"Welcome to the land of the Rednecks."* Everywhere we went, people were wearing big cowboy hats and they were also displayed in many of the shop windows. While driving fast on the highway, I was fascinated by a pair of cowboy boot sculptures, the equivalent of three floors high. Later, we stopped to get gas and were abused by some customers at a petrol station for being a mixed couple. Sadly, this wasn't our first experience of racism in the US and once in New Jersey we were the victims of road rage. As a result, we didn't feel America was the country for us.

Our first couple of days with the family went okay, but inevitably disagreements about the children sparked up again. I wanted to follow the strict bedtime schedule I'd devised at home, but Mommie challenged it.

"Why can't the children watch some more TV?" she'd ask. "They're really enjoying it. Besides, they're on holiday."

At mealtimes, Mommie wanted to allow the children to carry on playing.

"They're so happy, why disturb them?"

As a result, the kids went to bed and ate whenever they felt like it, and when I tried to intervene they looked at me as if I was a nuisance.

Back in India, it took six months to get them to listen to me again.

The same thing happened a year later when we visited Mommie again. The only problem was the children never listened to me again about anything for the rest of their lives! I hadn't anticipated this - otherwise I'd never have taken them to visit the family. I'd given into pressure from all sides to go, as I knew I'd be blamed for destroying everyone's happiness if I didn't. However, this turned out to be the wrong decision.

On the way back to India, we always had a problem trying to get our luggage onto the flight, as inevitably it was over the allowance – sometimes by as much as a hundred kilos. On this particular occasion, after flying for many hours, we landed at the airport in New Delhi feeling totally exhausted, groggy and irritable. The customs officers were very difficult and opened each and every one of our bags, going through our possessions with a fine-tooth comb. As they looked at all of our new things, I distracted them by speaking Hindi with the children. Seeing a Westerner speaking their language piqued their curiosity and they started chatting with me. As a result, we managed to get the bags through without paying a surcharge. This was a massive relief, as by this time we were so broke we weren't going to be able to eat meat for a month.

On another occasion, we came back with some extra bottles of whisky, one of which I carried in my handbag. I was standing in front of the customs officer when I plonked down my handbag too hard, breaking the bottle inside. A puddle of whisky slowly dripped down onto the floor and the entire arrivals hall filled with the smell of booze. I had to put on quite a Hindi show so the officer wouldn't notice!

Mommie had been in America for 18 months when she decided to come back and spend some time with Mataji. During this period, we unusually received a tape in the mail from Sunita, who was now 20. We'd been eager to hear from her so we hunted around the house for the good old tape player, finally getting it to work after fiddling with the knobs. Her staccato voice didn't bode good news and disappointment flooded our hearts.

"I have decided to stop my studies in Texas and come back to India to become a doctor," she said.

I felt floodwaters rise over my head and was left gasping, as I knew exactly what this meant for me. The struggles with Mommie were about to start again. I could see Sunita's studies proving problematic, too. She'd never exactly been a top student and in Texas she'd just been studying for a regular bachelor's degree. Still, we couldn't refuse to help her realise this dream. From then on, Satish walked around with a permanent frown on his face, which only softened after he'd downed a good quantity of whisky. Selling our plot to send Mommie and Sunita to America had gone

to waste, along with our investment in our future.

Subhead: Things Become More Difficult

Before long, everyone was living with us again. Sunita had the hardest time with her pre-medical exams, which resulted in her failing tests and frequently crying and finger pointing.

"This family is as noisy as a circus," she'd complain. "How can I concentrate on my books?"

She had a point. Samir spun around the rooms as fast as an acrobat, Mommie provided the background music with her grumbling and Sharika whined like a worried pony. As usual, it was up to me to try and calm everyone down.

"Samir, don't go into the study room, Sharika, stop crying otherwise you won't get a sweet, Mommie, don't interrupt."

If we wanted to listen to music we put headphones on, but Sunita even complained she was distracted by the buzzing sound they emitted.

With help, and after several attempts, she managed to pass her exams and gained a place at a medical college in town, where she also boarded. But even while living away she turned to me to solve her problems. All the emotional issues she'd suffered as a teenager resurfaced. I believe these stemmed from when she had to move to Hyderabad following Daddy's financial troubles. She constantly worried about the way she looked and if a single hair was out of place it ruined her peace of mind.

On the way to a party one-day with the family, she ruined the jovial mood by crying and saying, "Everyone looks good except for me - there is a wrinkle in my dress!"

I tried to persuade her to try on her outfits a day before social events, but this didn't help ease her nagging doubts, and she asked me repeatedly what she should wear, changing her mind several times before finally selecting what I'd suggested. Then, once we were out, she'd turn to me and say, "I shouldn't have listened to you. I hate the way I look!"

In the end, I stopped giving her any advice. At times she blamed me anyway for what she felt was a wrong choice, even though I'd done my best not to react to her doubts or try and influence her decision.

"I knew you wanted me to wear this, I read it in your mind!" she'd say.

"How do I get out of this?" I thought to myself.

Sunita was finicky and when she felt argumentative no one dared disagree with her. Words fell from her lips like fast bullets from a machine gun and stress rocketed from the walls of our small house. I was constantly on guard and watched everything I said, conscious of the possibility an issue could arise out of nowhere and create a storm of unhappiness.

Sunita treated Sharika as a little sister and they spent a lot of time confiding in each other, whispering secrets in corners. And, just as in the old days before she left for America, Sunita was possessive of me and hated it when Sharika demanded my attention. This made me very tense, as I didn't know how to handle the situation without making things worse. I knew either my daughter or

sister-in-law would hold anything I said against me.

Chapter 15

Subhead: Political Changes

In 1975, Indira Gandhi declared an emergency. An Indian court had ruled her election win in the Rae Bareli Lok Sahba constituency null and void, punishing her on a technicality and barring her from elections for the following six years. Suddenly things changed and the country entered a dark phase. The president passed an order giving the PM the authority to rule by decree, which resulted in the suspension of elections and the curbing of civil liberties. The press was also censored.

The police went from being friendly and flexible, giving warnings and letting people off for committing minor offences, to applying the rules of the law more stringently.

Sanjay felt it was necessary to reduce India's population growth and introduced several measures to curb it, including implementing sterilisation on a massive scale. In the markets, the shopkeepers, tailors and washermen spread rumours that poor people were being forcefully sterilised. They claimed every area had a target and the authorities were being overzealous about meeting them. This later came to haunt Sanjay and his mother.

Much has been written about this period, so I won't dwell on it in this book.

A year later, in 1977, Mrs Gandhi called for an election, as she was convinced things were going well for her party, the Indian National Congress. In reality, the underlying mood was very negative and had been provoked, by and large, by the forceful sterilisation stories and the unfair imprisonment of opposition party members and leaders.

On the night Mrs Gandhi lost the election, we were at her family home as hordes of people celebrated in the distance. We could hear them getting closer and feared an attack. Satish and Rajiv took Sonia and the children to a safer location and while I waited for them to return, Mrs Gandhi came into the room. She was very upset not to see the family there, so I jumped up to give her a hug. I realised then how petite she was. As my arms squeezed her fragile frame she felt as small as a sparrow.

A time of upheaval followed for the Gandhi family, which included moving into smaller accommodation. They had been living at 1 Safdarjung Road for a long time and every corner of the residence was stuffed with things they'd collected over many years. When I arrived during the move, old Venetian blinds, broken vases, frayed umbrellas, tobacco pipes and boxes of all sizes filled with dusty, unidentifiable things, were spread out on the terrace. Some of the items had belonged to Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India. I was gifted Nehru's smoking pipes, a wooden walking stick with a silver, animal-shaped handle, and a vase that belonged to Motilal Nehru, Jawaharla's father. Mrs Gandhi also gave me some of her own Chinese parasols. In addition, the Venetian blinds were delivered to our house and took residence there for years, as Mommie refused to throw them out. We couldn't use them as they were damaged, old and the wrong size. I finally gave them away to a ragmonger on the sly.

During the big move, Sonia and Rajiv's kids, Priyanka and Rahul, often spent the night at our house and got involved with the neighbourhood gang. They played hide and seek or went on imaginary safaris in the park behind our house, running around barefooted, bouncing around and making a general racket.

The Ghadhi family hadn't been living in their new house at 12 Willingdon Crescent for long before tensions arose. When Mrs Gandhi was the prime minister, the government provided staff to look after their household affairs, but most of these perks had been taken away, causing quite an upheaval. Cooks, cleaners, caretakers and drivers had to be quickly found and employed, only this time there wasn't as much space to keep so many staff, and there definitely wasn't much room for political maneuvering.

Mrs Gandhi had more time on her hands and came to have lunch with us in the lane. She got to know our neighbours, as if this was the most normal thing in the world. I recall spending several days in the garage slamming pots and pans around as I prepared to feed my guests and 38 neighbours and close friends. The feast consisted of shrimp curry, roast chicken, sausage rolls and cake for dessert. In the meantime, Mommie cooked vegetables, lentils and rotis. Everyone was chatty and happy and constantly praised the food. I was very relieved later when I was able to put my feet up and drink a glass of wine.

Soon afterwards, Satish and I went with Sonia, Rajiv and Mrs Gandhi to see a movie in a regular theatre. It was late afternoon when we arrived in the car park and people encircled us, staring with unsmiling faces. An eerie silence prevailed and while a few of the crowd folded their hands in a traditional greeting, it felt as if a trial was taking place right there in the car park. Ironically, the name of the movie was *"Witness for the Prosecution."* Mrs Gandhi was casual about the way she was received, as if this was just a nice, ordinary meet-and-greet. This was her unspoken way of saying "not guilty".

Following her election loss, more than a hundred court cases big and small were launched against her. One of the most frivolous ones, her lawyer told us, was that she had stolen chickens from someone's house. The idea was to keep her so busy defending herself she wouldn't have any time to take part in politics.

In late 1977, the police arrested her and took her to an undisclosed location. She told us later how she was taken for a long drive towards the border of Delhi. When they arrived, she opened the door, sat down on the side of the road and refused to move, much to the confusion of the police, who were then informed they didn't have permission to take her into another state. The judge declared the charges against her flimsy and she was allowed to go back home. This was just one incident in a long run of politically motivated inconveniences.

Elections came around again in 1980, spelling further change. Priyanka and Rahul now came to visit our house with a discreet armed guard in tow. They arrived clutching a big box of election materials, including flags, badges and leaflets. The neighbourhood gang decided they were going to do some electioneering and formed a small parade, waving flags with Rahul and Priyanka in the lead. As they canvassed the cars waiting in front of the traffic light on the main road, the passengers weren't aware they were being asked to vote for Indira Gandhi by her own grandchildren.

This time, she won the election and the family was able to move back into 1 Safderjung Road, minus the extra baggage.

A few months later, Sonia paid us a surprise visit to pick up her children and saw them gallivanting all over the neighbourhood without shoes.

"Capi, it's not safe for my kids to run around in this manner," she said with a frown. "When they are here the gate has to be closed and they have to stay within the property."

This curbed the children's fun and they became less enthusiastic about visiting us. Rajiv and Sonia looked after Rahul and Priyanka extremely well, but it was difficult to stop sycophants from disproportionately praising them and treating them as if they should be wrapped in cotton wool.

Subhead: A Knock On The Bedroom Door

On a warm morning, in June 1980, an insistent knocking on our locked bedroom door woke us up - it was Mommie saying one of our neighbours wanted to speak to us urgently.

"It's Sanjay Gandhi," the neighbour told us. "He's died in an air crash."

We couldn't believe it and rushed to our old fashioned black telephone to call the prime minister's house.

"Yes, the news is true" the voice on the line said.

We threw on some clothes and rushed over there. It turned out daredevil Sanjay had lost control of the tiny Pitts aircraft he'd been flying. He'd been doing acrobatics but dipped too low, crashing very near where he lived. Satish and Rajiv had warned him not to fly rashly with this highly sensitive aircraft, which had been loaned to him by his close friend, the spiritual leader, Dhirendra Brahmachari, who later, in 1994, died in an air crash himself.

We were told the prime minister had rushed to the crash site and demanded to see the body, which her personal doctor had already covered with a sheet. She was shocked to find the body of her beloved boy in four pieces. Despite her grief, she didn't shed a tear, not wanting to share her pain even in the privacy of her own home. But her pallid complexion and the dark circles under her eyes gave away the story of her suffering. She was never to be the same again.

Sonia, Rajiv and the kids were holidaying in Italy and rushed home. This was the first funeral of a Gandhi I attended, and it wasn't to be the last.

There was utter chaos at the Gandhi household when Sanjay Gandhi's body was taken for his final rites. Family members, politicians and hangers-on all milled around on the lawn. The actor Amitabh Bachchan, his mother and I sat together waiting for someone to tell us when to board a bus that had been laid on to take mourners to the funeral. Mrs Gandhi had asked me to look after the actor's aged mother. No one came to take us to the bus and we discovered it had left, so someone found us a trusty Ambassador car to transport us. We stepped out of the door and

were immediately mobbed by a wall of bystanders, so it was a struggle to protect Amit's mother. Security men pushed the crowd away and we got into the car, but our ordeal had only just begun. The body of Sanjay Gandhi was far in front of us, as the motorcade had left some time before, and thousands of people lined the route to the site where the funeral rites were taking place. Unfortunately, the moment they saw the popular movie actor they lost all decorum and our car was mobbed. We had to close the windows as people put their arms into the car from all sides - it was extremely stifling as people climbed on top of the roof and jumped on it in an attempt to get us out. At one point, the horde lifted the car from the ground and swung it from side to side, while the driver helplessly put his foot on the gas pedal and steered frantically. Some police appeared sporadically out of nowhere and tried to beat away the mob with long bamboo sticks, but this gave only momentary relief, as the crowds soon returned.

Finally, we reached the funeral site where the rituals had begun and watched in silence as the flames consumed our friend's body. It was very hot and it felt as if the air we breathed was on fire. Here and there I heard people crying out in Hindi, "Long live Sanjay Gandhi!"

We stood up when the last chants faded in the smoky air, but the masses spotted tall Amit once again and surged forward, making it impossible for us to get to our car. People ran at full speed towards our small group, like hunters searching for their prey. Frantically looking around, I felt several hands on my back. The police tried and failed to hold back the crowd as we tried to reach the safety of a police truck. People were now pulling me by my clothes and the sounds of cloth ripping and screaming filled my ears. Finally, we scrambled into the truck, grabbing Amit's mother in the nick of time before we were trampled in a stampede. The driver realised the precariousness of our situation and pressed his foot on the gas pedal with all his might. We moved at the maximum speed of 20 miles per hour, all the while being chased by an unruly crowd. As the driver hopelessly tried to build up speed, the truck shook and swung from left to right.

"Amitabh, cover your head," I said.

I thought things might improve if he couldn't be seen, but he refused to hide himself away. Eventually, we reached the Gandhi family home. By a miracle we were all still in one piece.

Subhead: Life Moves Along At Home

We had many friends at the time, and one of them was a junior Italian diplomat, who, within two days of arriving in India, lost his wife to a brain haemorrhage. Father had called and asked us to help him get through this difficult period and adjust to India. The first time we invited him for dinner we were sat in the garden chatting, when suddenly we heard a loud screaming noise coming from the garage. In respect of our guest, I didn't investigate but the commotion continued for 15 minutes before abruptly stopping. Then Mangri turned up and swung a broom with a dead mouse attached to it in front of our noses. Our guest didn't move a muscle or change his expression.

"Please leave immediately," I said to Mangri and we went on as if nothing had

happened. This was the poor diplomat's first introduction to our Indian home life. Mangri was an expert mouse catcher and had a variety of ingenious ways to trap them. She told us she was so good at it because her family sometimes ate mice.

One day, after one of our parties, Mangri, with tears in her eyes, told us how she had been standing in front of our house when one of the neighbours' servants came over and molested her. An understandably furious Satish stormed over to the neighbour's house, and, when no one answered the bell, he climbed over the gate, burst into the servant's quarters and beat him up. Later, we discovered Satish had punished the wrong servant. The guilty one had jumped over the back wall when he heard the doorbell ring, never to return. Our Muslim neighbours never found out what had taken place and must have wondered why their servant had suddenly disappeared. In retrospect, it's likely Mangri had been flirting with the servant by doing a Hindi dance to the blaring music coming from our house. As we got to know her better, we began to doubt her version of events.

Satish was always the loudest person at any party and enjoyed himself the most. We could be at one of the wealthiest homes in Delhi or at a foreign embassy and he'd boast to his friends, "I am the greatest person you will ever meet!" And he usually said this more than once. Satish was happy, but sometimes his behaviour left me feeling embarrassed.

Meanwhile, I was developing my green fingers. I'd planted a few saplings in our tiny front garden, which was no bigger than the size of a large rug. Each day, I lovingly checked out my little plant babies. One day, I came home from work and was horrified to find all my plants trampled and our driveway covered with hoof marks and cow pats.

When I went inside, Satish explained how a young man grabbed Mangri while she was playing hide and seek with the kids in the park behind our house. Upon hearing about this, Satish rushed to the scene of the alleged crime to discover the accused was a cow herder. He'd run away and the villagers present refused to give Satish his name. However, the young man's buffalos and cows were still grazing so Satish grabbed a small calf by the ear and pulled it to our front garden, knowing the rest of the herd would follow. He then locked them all up in our driveway and garden. After some time, the young man's friend turned up begging for the cows to be released. Satish agreed to let them go in return for the address of Mangri's molester. Satish promptly sent a policeman over there and although his parents swore he wasn't there, Satish was certain he'd got the message and no more incidents of this nature occurred in the area again.

Every year, Mangri left for a month's leave with her family. It just so happened that after one of these trips she brought back a husband. He was dark, tall, gangly and illiterate. I gave Mangri the small spare room so she and her new spouse could have privacy. Under her new bed was a big jute bag and if she had looked inside she would have found a real human skeleton. Sunita had brought it home for her doctor's studies, but she had been too scared to use it, so there it was hidden under the bed as Mangri enjoyed her honeymoon.

A Sikh, turbaned man was working as our driver. He was, to put it mildly, a terror on wheels. He casually cut corners over sidewalks, bouncing us up and down in

the process, and he thought nothing of driving on the wrong side of the ring road. Without asking us, he decided to use our Jeep to teach Mangri's husband to drive. A few months later, Mangri handed in her notice, telling us her husband had promised to drive her to America. We never heard anything from her again!

Chapter 16

Subhead: If Wishes Were Horses

I had fond childhood memories of Christmas time and wanted to share this experience with Samir and Sharika. One winter, I travelled on my own with them to Washington to spend the festive period with my parents. Samir was eight by this point and Sharika was six. I hoped and prayed for snow, which usually didn't occur so early on in the winter. But we were coming back from a shopping trip in town to buy some much needed clothing when small snowflakes came tumbling down from the bleak, grey sky. The kids were jumping up and down, catching flakes with their tongues and screaming, "Wow, the snow is cold!"

To my surprise, two-feet of snow fell and the children were in their element using Mother's sled and building their first ever snowman. It was great to see them enjoy a traditional Christmas and witness my parents' happiness. During our visit, Girish called and said, "I want to send some gifts for the family in Delhi for you to take back."

"Sure, Girish," I replied. "But make sure they arrive before I leave."

The day before I was due to depart for home, four large cartons turned up. It was a mystery to me how I was going to take care of two wild kids while carrying our overstuffed suitcases as well as four huge boxes filled with presents. What customs would make of it also didn't bare thinking about! I opened the boxes and found them filled with second hand toys, cutlery, plates, an old hair dryer, a toaster, and more. So I filled an extra bag with the things I thought would be useful and appreciated back home and left the rest behind. There was no point taking back any of the electrical appliances as India used a different voltage and converters weren't easily available.

Following an exhausting trip home, Girish's gifts were distributed and gratefully received, but it wasn't long before Mommie found out from her son about the four boxes and the missing items. From that day on, whenever we needed something in the house she'd say, "Girish told me he sent it in those boxes, but YOU left it behind."

If Sunita was washing her hair and it didn't dry as fast as she hoped, Mommie brought up the fantastic hairdryer Girish had got for her. When a pair of scissors weren't up to the mark, a newer, better version had most definitely been left behind. Mommie persisted with this for two years before finally giving up. My children heard all these complaints, and the look in their eyes made me suspect they believed I'd done wrong and was a useless blunderer, just as Mommie said. Was everybody crazy or was it me? I decided it must be me since everyone else seemed to agree with each other all the time.

Meanwhile, we heard through the grapevine that Air India was hiring pilots, and Satish considered applying for a new job. We'd have to uproot and move to Mumbai, which involved certain sacrifices. Mumbai had many high rises so we'd no doubt have to swap our house for a flat. We'd also made lots of friends and the children were settled in good schools. Nevertheless, Satish felt it was a good career move, as he'd be flying internationally. I didn't think I'd struggle to get a job if we

moved, but after some debate we decided a decent quality of life and staying near our friends took precedence over a good career move. Besides, the difference in pay was minimal.

Our privacy as a couple remained a problem. Every decision, discussion or disagreement between us involved the entire household. Even at night when the lights were out and we were in our bedroom, Mommie often sat in a chair making shifting and scraping sounds against the mosquito mesh of our open French windows, which were only a few feet away from our bed. If I had reached out my arm I could have touched her. We craved privacy so we could share some romantic moments.

During the summer, we always slept with the French windows open and a fan whirring overhead when it was particularly hot. At times, power failures brought it to a standstill, causing us to swelter. This also often caused me to have nightmares. One night, when the fan was working, it swirled my hair, tickling me. I sleepily started to scratch and realised with a start that my hair appeared to be moving on its own. Just then, a mouse ran over my chest and jumped off the bed. Now I was wide awake! I think the mouse thought it had found a soft, golden paradise to start making a nest in. When one of our friends moved away they gave us five broken air conditioning units. We managed to get one fixed for our bedroom and it became much easier to sleep.

Subhead: Rajiv Decides

On a beautiful, clear winter's day we went with Rajiv, Sonia and some friends to Batcal Lake for what transpired to be the last time. The weather was nippy and as we relaxed in the guestrooms overlooking the lake, Rajiv got angry with his son Rahul for leaving the door open and letting the cool wind blow in. He'd been told to close the door behind him many times, so as punishment, Rahul was made to close the door a thousand times. We all suffered as a result, as the door in question constantly creaked so all conversation had to cease until the ordeal was over. No amount of pleading with Rajiv could make him reverse the punishment.

Rajiv was a very happy family man and content with his professional life as a pilot, but a prevailing sadness clouded his home. The empty space Sanjay left behind was impossible to ignore. Even his old room, which was situated just yards from Rajiv's living room, was a consistent reminder he was no longer with us. Furthermore, a trickle of insistent, wheedling, pushy political voices turned into a flood; they wanted Rajiv to fill the hole left by his brother. Rajiv had seen it coming and succumbed, hurtling his powerless family towards a different destiny.

I watched his life change as he gave up his flying career for the stiff, unyielding ropes of politics. It was hard for someone who was so direct, straightforward and sincere, but he did what was expected of him and worked hard to learn the ins and outs of politics.

Our cosy times together as friends lessened and relationships changed. There was too much work and fewer private moments, but Rajiv's friendship with the intelligent, blunt, rustic and noisy Satish remained the same.

However, one of the relationships that did drastically change was the one Rajiv shared with Maneka. She was disappointed not to have been given the

opportunity to take Sanjay's place next to her mother-in-law, and over an extended period of time her relationship with the Gandhi family totally broke down. In a big display of anger, she left the household. The press covered her grand and final exit from the gate with her child.

Subhead: Looking In From The Outside

By this time, I had been working in the garment industry for a number of years. One of my best friends was Rashmi; she wore hand-loomed saris or baggy Punjabi suits with traditional leather slippers. She topped these outfits off with some real pearl or gold Indian jewellery. In her square face, her strong nose seemed to be making a point.

Rashmi was the first person I met when I started working. As my senior, she taught me the ropes and I took over her job when she left, though we remained firm friends. Soon after we first met, we started to fantasise about one day owning our own store. For the next decade, it was a constant topic of conversation. We imagined having a bakery and eating our own pastries.

Our latest dream was to open a ready-to-wear garment store for children and this time we decided to try and make it a reality. I shared my plans with Satish, who excitedly announced the news to Sonia and Rajiv.

"Why doesn't Sonia also join you as a partner?" Rajiv suggested.

I wasn't present at the time and was quite upset about it, especially when I had to tell Rashmi about this complicated development. A few days later, Sonia called.

"I've decided against becoming your partner in the store," she said. "And you must not start the venture yourself, it's out of the question."

Sonia refused to explain her reasoning, but I can only guess it was related to politics. By then, Satish was sorting the mail for Rajiv, so in a small way he was involved in political life and I assumed this had become the spoke in my wheel. I was perplexed regarding my next move.

For the following two years, I continued working and then decided to start the shop as planned anyway. I was 32 when our new children's ready-to-wear business, Balloons, opened in a residential house where Rashmi ran a garment design unit. We both enjoyed designing for children, and five tailors worked on our creations on traditional pedal machines. Soon after, we shifted our location to a proper shopping market. The opening was a grand affair and Amitabh Bachchan's wife Jaya cut the ribbon during the ceremony. Thousands of people thronged into the market and snapped up the merchandise. We were filling a void in the growing ready-to-wear market. Up until then, parents went to a tailor to get mostly shapeless clothing made for their children. The store became famous and business grew. Soon we got orders to export and were sending shipments all over the world.

Marriage In The Family

As I was growing my business, Mommie spent all her spare time obsessing about Girish and the fact he wasn't married. In her mind, it was now or never. He was already in his mid-30s, which is old for tying the knot by Indian standards. Mommie nagged her son day and night, phoning him at all hours. Finally, he succumbed and told her to find him a wife who was a doctor. This gave Mommie a sense of importance, as she was finally arranging her son's marriage, something she'd been unable to do with Satish. However, on his next trip to India, before Mommie got a chance to line up some lady doctors, as she put it, Girish met Sunita's friend Sarita, who was a student at the same medical college. The families from both sides agreed these two should get engaged and be married the following year. An engagement party was held at the Delhi Flying Club and a hundred family members and friends dressed in their best finery for the occasion. Pure gold ornaments glittered on ears and necks as the couple exchanged engagement rings, which was followed with a sumptuous high tea.

Shortly afterwards, Girish returned to America leaving Mommie happily dreaming of the future wedding and all the arrangements to be made. In her mind, she'd already made the guest list, selected the location and fantasised about gifts bought and received. She talked about the wedding to everyone whenever she got the chance.

A few months down the line, a phone call changed everything.

"I'm not getting married to Sarita," Girish announced. "I've fallen in love with an English girl and she's now my wife. I've already told Sarita."

Soon afterwards, Sarita's parents arrived at our house, their eyes brimming with tears.

"This is a great shame for our daughter," they said. "She is so capable and was seventh in India for her medical entrance exams. How is it possible for anyone to reject her?"

Sarita's parents stayed for two hours, but we were nonplussed ourselves and had no answers to give them. Irritatingly, Mommie cried her eyes out day and night.

"Now I will never have any proper grandchildren," she cruelly stated.

The message was clear - she meant racially pure Indian descendants. At night in our bedroom, I'd whisper to Satish, "She doesn't think our children are proper grandkids because they are mixed."

"Just leave it, Capi," was all Satish had to say on the matter.

I was alone and sad again. Later on, Mommie looked at me across the dining table as the kids were having lunch and said, "I am only doing all this for the family out of duty."

"You say you're doing your loveless duty, but it's me who has to put up with all this shit," I thought to myself.

A few months, later we received another call from Girish. "I have changed my mind," he announced to Satish. "I will marry Sarita and I have told the English girl to leave. Please inform Sarita's parents the planned marriage will go ahead."

Satish was still on the phone as he told Mommie and me the news.

"There is no way we are going to tell Sarita's parents how he's changed his mind," I protested. "Girish needs to call them himself, we can't do his dirty work for him.

Sarita's father, Ishwar, worked two floors below my office and before long he came up to see me. Then he placed a big burden on my shoulders.

"Capi, you have to tell me the truth," he said. "Sarita's future depends on it. If Girish married the other girl I can convince her not to go through with the wedding."

My mind raced as I wondered what to say. After all, Girish had lied to us before so I couldn't be certain about whether he'd married his English girlfriend or not. I had to make a decision, and fast.

"No, I don't think he was married," I said, looking directly into Ishwar's eyes.

Shortly afterwards, I was in my office when I received an international phone call from someone with a British accent

"My heart is broken, how did this happen?" the caller said.

It turned out Mommie had put extreme emotional pressure on Girish, calling him repeatedly and crying, which no doubt affected his relationship with the girl crying down the phone to me.

I consoled her as best I could and soon it was as if this 'blip' with the English girl never happened. Later on, I thought about my own role in the sorry affair with sadness.

The next time Girish was in India, a quickie marriage took place in Mommie's favourite temple in front of close friends and family. But the newlyweds weren't together for long. Girish returned to the US, leaving a sad Sarita behind. She stayed with us as she waited for her American visa to come through.

Subhead: Puppies And Dogs

Satish and I have always had a place in our hearts reserved for canine companions. When Sanjay was alive, we were invited to have dinner with his friend Vijay. In the middle of eating, we were stopped dead by furious barking coming from the garage. We insisted on seeing the dog, but it turned out there was more than one. Vijay owned a couple of Great Danes, whom he was crazy about. His wife even told me, "On our wedding night, Vijay slept with the dogs in the dog house instead of with me!" When Vijay saw how much we loved his dogs, he offered us a puppy from his next litter. When the promised puppy failed to arrive, we forgot all about it.

Several years later, Satish happened to meet Vijay and asked him where his dog was. Vijay immediately showed him a picture of a puppy he wanted to give to us.

As usual, I had no idea about this exchange until I came home to find a giant, silver/grey pup with yellow eyes waiting for me. He was six weeks old but already as big as a fully-grown Cocker Spaniel. He acted like a puppy but that was all. We called him Napo and were horrified to note he did the stinkiest of farts imaginable. His urine also turned the colour of our floor from white to pink. When he managed to do his business outside he turned the green grass yellow. It's safe to say Napo was one unique specimen.

Two nights after he arrived, one of Satish's friends came for dinner and started playing with the pup, who didn't appreciate the attention and growled menacingly. Our friend found this very funny and teased him some more.

"For God's sake stop," I warned him. "We don't know anything about his character yet and he's going to turn into a giant - you won't want him as your enemy!"

Our friend refused to listen and the little one grew into a really big dog. In fact, he was as tall as a donkey. Whenever he misbehaved, which was often, we called him Napoleon. Napo was the name we gave him when he was good. Napoleon had a good memory and remembered the friend who had irritated him very well. He was never happy to see him and I had to agree with the dog's opinion - we were seeing the man too much! One day, I heard him scream, "Capi, please get me out of the bathroom." I guessed Napoleon was trying to get his pound of flesh, but I let the yelling continue for 20-minutes before deciding the punishment had gone on long enough. I removed the growling dog from his position in front of the bathroom door and liberated his prisoner. The friend wasn't the only person he took a dislike to; he didn't really like anyone who wasn't family. Each day the ironing man came to take our freshly washed clothes, which he wrapped in a cloth and swung over his shoulder. Without fail, Napoleon chased him out of the house, barking ferociously and nipping at his heels.

"*What is this man doing with my property?*" the dog obviously thought!

Every stranger who came in got the same treatment. The dog was nasty and bit numerous guests without provocation. It was very tiring and I had to be on my guard all the time. Whenever Napo was going to be left alone we had to tie him to a post with a strong chain. Hyper Samir was partly responsible for the dog's naughtiness. He taught him to chase people and be as disobedient as he had become. I recall finding visitors backed up against a wall or door with their hands in the air as Napoleon leant

his gigantic forehead on their genitals. I always wondered why, without fail, our male guests seemed to be more concerned about protecting their hands than other vital parts!

One day, Napoleon got fed up with being stuck behind a skipping child during one of his walks. He caught the back of the child's sweater, causing the youngster to run off in fear. However, the dog's tooth had become caught in a strand of yarn and the sweater unravelled as the child made his bid for escape. When he finally extracted himself from the dog, the maid who had been walking with the boy said, "This is what happens when you don't listen to me - I told you to stop skipping!" She was definitely not sorry about what had happened. It wasn't long, though, before the mother was in front of our gate complaining profusely, which meant I had to apologise for the dog once again. He had never bitten anyone in the street before so we had to put a muzzle on him for future walks, though we could hardly make him wear one at home as well.

There was one God man who regularly came to visit. He was shaped like a large mountain and chains with golden God charms glittered on his snow-white tunic. He also wore a loincloth and used a walking stick with an animal-shaped gold handle. Napoleon didn't just rest his great, threatening head on this man's genitals when we left him alone in the living room for a while, he went as far as to put it *inside* the poor man's loincloth. The pair remained in this position on the sofa until one of us came in and dragged the dog away.

Sharika used Napo to take revenge on a hated classmate who lived two doors down from us. She trained him to only use the road in front of her house as his toilet. It became difficult to pass it, as it smelled so terrible, as if an invisible wall made of stinky garbage and shit had been erected there. But the dog refused to go anywhere else and the idea of picking up dog poo with a plastic bag had not caught on in India.

Chapter 17

Subhead: Changes In Our World

Rajiv appointed Satish to look after India's aero sports industry and make improvements to 28 flying clubs. In this capacity, he got the opportunity to represent his country at an international aero sports conference in Los Angeles. He was able to use free tickets from the airline and we planned a worldwide trip around it.

As we travelled the lap between Tokyo and Los Angeles, flying over Hawaii, Satish turned to me and casually announced he had resigned from his pilot's job.

"Satish, how could you do this without discussing it with me?" I said. "We don't even have a roof of our own over our heads!"

I remained silent as I thought about this new development. Satish was swaying towards a political life, but he was also giving up our security.

"We need to use the money the airline owes you to buy a property in our name," I told him.

"Fools build houses and wise men live in them," Satish argued.

"Then I want to be a fool!" I replied. "You need to do this to make me happy. You owe me one for resigning."

Satish was stumped and I managed to relax for the rest of the holiday by avoiding thoughts about the uncertain future awaiting us back in India.

When we returned from our trip, I was walking to my office when a man on a Vespa scooter pulled up beside me. He was wearing a white, traditional kurta and loincloth and I realised it was Noor Mohamet, who had sold us our first plot. An idea immediately came to me.

"Can you show us different plots?" I asked him. "And do your best to push Satish, he has money."

Noor Mohamet's eyes lit up!

"Sure, sir, what time?" he asked. I always liked it when he called me sir. This was India's version of women's lib!

Over a succession of Sundays, Noor Mohamet took us out in our car to show us land. The search became more tempting as each Sunday passed and soon enough we saw something which suited our seven-lakh budget. The land was eight acres and situated at the edge of Delhi, a stone's throw away from the neighbouring state of Haryana. A road made of pure dust led to the plot and there was no electricity or a telephone line in sight. The only green to be seen growing from the rock-hard soil came in the form of four trees, and the property was encircled by barren, rocky hills. Deforestation had occurred as far as the eye could see in any direction, and parts of the area flooded every monsoon. However, we loved this patch of land, mainly because it was big and very cheap! We spent all we had to buy it in Satish's family

name. However, the sale didn't bring luck to the people we brought the land from. Through the village grapevine, we later discovered the poor farmer who'd owned it proceeded to spend all the money he made from the sale on drinking and merrymaking. He died in a five-star hotel room, leaving the money to his six sons. Five of them met the same fate as their father after they used their inheritance in a similar fashion, leaving only one surviving son, who now tends cows for a living.

We hoped the land would bring us a better destiny, but when we showed it to our friends they thought we'd gone mad. It was a 45-minute drive from the city and I must admit, when I stood in the centre of the land - a hot, dusty wind blowing through my hair - and looked across the barren expanse in front of me, I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the task stretching in front of us.

We asked Sarla DiDi's husband Shivnath to design our new home within the limits of the strict city bylaws. He proposed constructing two simple cottages with picture windows, round roofs covered in brick and tall walls crisscrossing between the two buildings. The floors were to be of a rough, grey, unpolished kota stone. Rather than using lots of heavy machinery, our builder employed 100 labourers for the job, which took a total of two years.

During this time we visited the site every Sunday to check on progress. The construction workers often brought their families to help out and I'd sit on a small, green patch of lawn and give their children healthy snacks and knickknacks such as hankies, hairclips, combs and socks. We planted saplings but the younger children continuously pulled them out. It was impossible to keep a constant eye on them and they ran all over the place playing in the heaps of sand, spraying water on each other and climbing everywhere. Mothers carried small babies in slings on their backs while carrying piles of bricks on their heads. Here and there babies hung in hammocks while their parents dug the barren soil.

Subhead: The World Shakes Under Our Feet

In June 1984, Indira Gandhi decided drastic action was needed to control terrorists fighting in Punjab for an independent state called Khalistan. These terrorists were directing activities against the Indian Republic from their base in the Golden Temple, the holiest seat of the followers of the Sikh religion. In an operation called Blue Star, the prime minister decided to ask the army to enter the temple to flush out the terrorists. The army was successful in getting rid of them, killing some and taking others prisoner, but in the process a large part of the temple was destroyed. The Sikhs were deeply hurt and felt their religion had been insulted.

At 11 o'clock on the morning of October 31st 1984, I received an urgent phone call at my office informing me Mrs Gandhi had been shot by her Sikh guards.

I struggled to grasp what I'd just been told. My vision became shaky and I couldn't catch my breath.

"*My God, where is Sonia?"* I wondered. "*Was she at home with her mother-in-law when it happened? What about Rahul and Priyanka?"*

I decided I had to leave work immediately to see if I could help and I rushed

straight to the hospital where Indira had been taken. When I got there, I saw many people standing around the hospital, including Indira's estranged daughter-in-law Maneka. Seeing her brought up so many emotions.

"It's such a pity your little son hasn't seen his grandmother for two years," I told her.

"From now on I will send him to visit," Maneka replied, but it was already too late. Shortly afterwards, it was announced Indira Gandhi was dead.

Someone gave me a message telling me to go to the Gandhi residence. When I arrived, I spotted a pool of fresh blood in the corner of the driveway where they had lifted the prime minister into the car to be taken to hospital.

I found out how Sonia had been taking a shower when she heard unfamiliar sounds.

"Go and see what's happening," she told her maid.

The young woman returned in so much shock she was unable to utter a word and could only point. Sonia immediately got out of the bathroom to find her mother-in-law in a pool of blood. She cradled her while a car was found, her white dressing gown turning crimson.

Priyanka, 12, and Rahul, 14, were driven to the hospital for safety and to be near their mother. Several hours later they returned home with their trusty bodyguard and witnessed some rioting. Priyanka saw a Sikh being set on fire. She must have blocked it out, as later she said she could recall nothing of the ride home. The guard told us what had happened.

The children were at the house when I arrived. Sonia had left a message for me, asking me to keep them locked in their apartment and not to let them near the windows. She feared there might be more assassins lying in wait to attack family members. I closed the curtains on the world. No one else was allowed into the house. The ones present stayed and assumed different responsibilities; mine was to provide emotional support to the kids.

In the wake of his mother's death, Rajiv Gandhi was made prime minister and over the next few days his leadership was tested to the limits as mobs rioted against the Sikhs.

The streets were on fire and many people were dying. I realised my own family was in danger and organised armed guards to protect them. Meanwhile, I stayed with Priyanka and Rahul, only going home for an hour each day to deal with any urgent problems. As I travelled back and forth, I saw fires burning everywhere, but thankfully didn't witness any murders. Mommie, Sunita, Sarla DiDi and Girish's wife Sarita stayed with Samir and Sharika, a strange silence enveloping the usually noisy group. One night, a mob of about 500 people arrived at our gate and sprinkled our jeep with kerosene with the intention of setting it on fire, all because they knew we had a Sikh driver. They accused him of smiling broadly and dancing a jig when he heard the news Mrs Gandhi had been assassinated.

Sunita informed the crowd the jeep belonged to us, not to the driver, and our bodyguard ordered the rioters to leave.

Two days after the assassination, Rajiv and Sonia came home to take a shower. I realised they hadn't eaten a single morsel for 48-hours. I gave them both an apple before they left, but I have no idea if they managed to eat them or not. With the fear of more assassins on the Gandhi premises receding, I was able to stay at home, but for the following two nights I barely slept. There was hardly anything in the cupboards or fridge to eat and it wasn't possible to go to the shops. I could hear the rioting mobs getting closer and thought how innocent people were being killed all over Delhi. I was so afraid I had nightmares even while my eyes were still open. My brain felt muddled by images of my friends, family and neighbours being murdered.

Two weeks before the assassination, Indira Gandhi mentioned to Rahul how the Sikh guards were looking at her strangely, but she didn't feel this was reason enough to have them removed. When they attacked, the police guards, who were a little distance away, were so shocked they froze on the spot. An attendant named Natu, who had been holding an umbrella over Mrs Gandhi's head to protect her from the sunlight, grabbed one of the assassins and the husband of the maid grabbed the other. The police then gathered their wits and shot the killers.

At the time, Satish was in Czechoslovakia for a meeting organised by the FAI (the World Air Sports Federation). He frantically tried to fly home but flights to India were disrupted and he ended up taking a bus to a distant airport and arriving home following a two-day journey. Upon his arrival in Delhi, he found a group of his Sikh pilot friends holed up at the airport – they were afraid they would be killed if they tried to go home. Satish spoke to Rajiv and was able to reassure them of their safety - enough for them to gather their courage and take the airport transport cars home.

Meanwhile, I returned to the Gandhi household to stay with the children while Mrs Gandhi's body left her home for the final time. As a result, I was spared from going in the long motorcade taking her to lie in state.

Several days later, Satish drove me to the cremation through the well-protected streets where so much violence had taken place. Amid Vedic chanting, I circled the funeral pyre with Satish and placed a small piece of sandalwood where Mrs Gandhi's head rested.

Mother Teresa, one of the dignitaries who had travelled to Delhi for the funeral, was seated near us and we exchanged a few words before silently watching the flames rise against the copper sky of the setting sun. The departure of the great woman's spirit was so clear and light, like the wave of her hand giving a final blessing.

It was difficult for us to believe our good friend Rajiv was now India's leader. In public we had to follow etiquette and address him as 'Prime Minister'. I was never the kind of person who liked following rules and formal rituals, but now I had to think before I did anything. It wasn't possible to react to something on impulse.

Afraid we could be kidnapped as a result of our relationship, Rajiv organised a large group of guards for our home. It was hard for me to take in how the girl from Itterbeek had personally witnessed world events being shaped.

A couple of months later, resident associations were formed all over town. Gates were erected at all the entry and exit points of colonies and were manned by guards. Peace had returned.

Subhead: Treated Differently

When Satish left the airline, many important people started making jokes about him and calling him the 'mail boy', as his job was opening Rajiv's private post. Now Rajiv was prime minister, Satish started helping him in his constituency, Amethi, and he organised congress workers into groups. He learned everyone's name and spent time building strong personal and political ties, driving for long hours on potholed roads in the heat and dust in order to visit villages, coordinate elections and listen to people's problems. Journalists, sensing a story, began to visit the constituency to interview him. One reporter wrote, "Capt. Satish Sharma has a crate of bottled water in his room." This was meant to be a criticism, as bottled water was taken as a luxury. I laughed when I read it, thinking, *"They were lucky it wasn't a crate of whisky bottles!"*

Satish had promised Rajiv he wouldn't drink alcohol in the constituency and he kept his promise. In addition, the tight t-shirts and jeans he wore every day were replaced by a white pyjama and kurta. With his tanned skin, he looked very handsome in this outfit.

Suddenly, everyone started to treat us differently. People gave us more respect, wanted to be seen with us and were interested in everything we had to say. Others claimed to be our friends, even when we'd never heard of them. Our pictures frequently appeared in the press when we attended formal social events, and even for a small celebration or festival we were inundated with truckloads of bouquets and boxes of sweets, which were mostly eaten by Mommie and the staff.

Every morning, Satish accompanied the prime minister to public meetings to hear grievances from hundreds of people – it was his job to follow up on Rajiv's instructions, and he became known as a mover and shaker. Our house filled at night with new guests who were mainly wealthy businessmen and politicians. They stayed late, sometimes until 1 o'clock in the morning, and then ate the simple the dinner I cooked. Mommie was greeted with pomp and gave blessings liberally to those who touched her feet when they entered the house.

Our living room was constantly crowded; glasses clinked, cigarette smoke swirled, ashtrays filled and everyone hung onto Satish's (now even louder) every word. I hardly got the chance to interrupt with a "Dinner is ready". After all, my man was the important one - I was just an attractive ornament.

While the two cottages were still under construction, we moved away from the little lane into a townhouse. The move was long overdue, as the children and Napo had grown. The commotion of barking dogs, fighting children, a complaining Mommie and a constantly ringing telephone had left me short tempered. In our new

house, Satish and I had a little kitchen and a private bedroom on the fourth floor at the top of the house. It was a good climb up and few came to visit us uninvited. At last we had some privacy.

The new house had six toilets and five large bedrooms. The biggest and best one was given to Samir, because even at 12 he was still sleeping at night cradled by his grandma. I wanted him to become more independent and the room was a bribe he couldn't resist. Sharika, now 10, was given the small study and slept with Mommie. She was unhappy, even though I promised her a room in two years' time.

"You don't care for me," she said, "and believe me, I will never care for you or what you think." That turned out to be true.

Daddy moved in with us and no longer stayed at the hand pump house, although Mommie still hadn't given up on her dream of buying it and living there happily ever after. I'd had to put my foot down over Daddy sleeping there, arguing it was irresponsible to let him stay there alone. On one occasion he'd fallen down and lain on the floor for four hours before Mrs V found him and got help.

"What if he dies there all alone?" I said to Mommie. "No one would know!"

Mommie grudgingly relented and we asked our driver to housesit in Daddy's place.

It wasn't long before Mommie went to Hyderabad to visit her family. I had been waiting for this so I could try and establish what was wrong with Daddy. In addition to the fall, he'd been moving and talking very slowly, and he seemed to have lost all motivation. As long as Mommie was around, she was responsible for him and there was nothing I could do. She was hardly out of the door when I said to Satish, "You have to quickly find some doctors who can come and examine Daddy. We can't take him somewhere to be checked, as I think it'll be too confusing for him."

Five doctors came to see him and, at the age of just 65, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. From the day I'd met Daddy, he'd always maintained, "I want to leave this world and get moksha." (Moksha is the end of the cycle of rebirth and involves a complete union with god).

It looked like it wouldn't be long before this wish came true, but with an official diagnosis we were able to start him on treatment. I hired a young man, KP, to help him bathe, dress and keep his room clean.

Some months later, I noticed how this young man had changed his style. He strutted around as if he was auditioning for a role in a movie, and he sported a new outfit every day.

I went into Daddy's room and asked, "How is KP doing?"

"He's a thief!" Daddy replied, rolling his eyes and pointing to his cupboard.

When I asked Daddy how much money he kept in there, I realised it wasn't enough to explain the recent changes in KP's wardrobe.

When I discussed the matter with Satish, he admitted how he kept a suitcase full of money under Daddy's bed.

"I'm keeping it safe for someone," he said. "It is locked."

I went straight back to Daddy's and knelt down to look under the bed. The suitcase was there and I could see the zipper ends had been locked with an old-fashioned padlock. I managed to pry the zippers apart and was able to reach into the case and feel the money. I even pulled out a bundle of foul smelling, one-hundred rupee notes. They had been stapled together, glued with thick, transparent scotch tape and covered with red elastic bands.

"How can anyone use this?" I thought to myself.

The following day, we stopped KP from coming through the gate and told him he was never to return.

"He's built a room for himself and bought a taxi," the cook whispered to us. "He won't be bothered about you throwing him out because he has stolen what he needed."

The following day, we ensured the suitcase was removed from the house.

The colony we now lived in was densely populated and I never got used to the amount of noise created there. On some nights, there could be four weddings going on at the same time, all with loudspeakers blaring out different Hindi songs until the early hours. Nice, peaceful walks with the dog in the evening weren't possible, as there were no sidewalks and the road was lined with cars, leaving no space to walk. Vehicles of all sizes drove so close to me when I walked in front of the house I could feel the heat from their exhausts against my legs. To go to the park meant mixing with other dogs - and I was not about to try this out with temperamental Napo.

Chapter 18

Subhead: Teenagers!

With her long, thick, copper brown hair, womanly shape, ivory skin and mesmerizing golden eyes, Sharika showed promise of becoming a gorgeous young woman. In her own mind she was too big and wore the most shapeless clothes she could find, which gave the impression she was larger than she was. She was also a tidy and well-organised perfectionist who worried persistently about the perceived injustice being done to her by everyone around. She was confident she knew it all and was always right. Her nickname was Shrieky, which was given to her by one of my friends who visited when she was small. This friend couldn't get a word in because the child had screamed and cried nonstop. Sharika and I didn't always have the easiest relationship while she was growing up. Once, following a disagreement, she snuck upstairs, went through my photo albums and cut herself out of all the photos showing the two of us together.

Meanwhile, Samir was wiry and had a chiselled face topped with dark blond hair. His black eyes sparkled like the stars on a clear night and his mind and body never rested but for the five hours he slept at night. He created a buzz wherever he went, much like a mosquito. His nickname was, therefore, mosquito wrestler (machchhar pahalavaan). He had bursts of energy, which caused him to clatter up and down the four-floor marble staircase, screeching at the top of his lungs. When the mood struck, he also liked to bore his pointy finger through my shoulder. At 12, he underwent tests in the US and was diagnosed with dyslexia and hyperactive behaviour, which required medication. At the time there was some controversy about this type of treatment so we chose the tougher road of trying to manage his condition without drugs. A counsellor advised us the regular routine of a boarding school and a subsequent career in the army would benefit Samir no end.

Both of my kids didn't lift a finger in the house and never picked up their empty glasses or cleaned up after themselves. The minute I brought this up, Mommie ordered the servants to do this work for them. Everything I said continued to turn into a battle of wills.

One day, I sat Samir down and pointed out the laundry basket.

"You have to put your dirty clothes in this," I told him. "If you don't, no one is going to pick them up for you and they won't get washed."

Two days went by and Samir's clothes remained on the floor. After a week the situation was still the same. Three weeks on and there were no more clothes left in his cupboard. Samir and his room stank. Priyanka came over to visit and joined Samir in his room to look at a cartoon he had drawn on the wall. When she came out, I heard her say, "My God, Samir, I cannot even put my foot down anywhere, as the floor is completely covered with your clothes."

I waited a few days more, convinced he was about to get the message, but nothing changed. Samir continued to argue he shouldn't have to pick up after himself. A wave of frustration washed over me and I pictured a sword to commit imaginary suicide with – what a relief that would be!

I finally realised Samir wasn't going to give in and was simply going to continue to wear dirty clothes. I was the one who caved in and proceeded to wash 16 loads of laundry. By this time we had a washing machine.

The kids received regular pocket money, with the addition of cash gifts from extended family, as was the custom. This turned out to be problematic when Samir decided he wanted an air gun. I felt he was too reckless and refused, so he used his savings to buy one from the market behind my back. He practised on targets placed on our rooftop, but the pellets bounced from the walls and hit him, so he was forced to find some other places.

Whenever I had time to do some painting I used Samir's bedroom, which he naturally didn't like.

"Samir, there is no other place for me to work," I told him. "I have to share with someone and you have the biggest bedroom."

"Ma, I don't like it," Samir protested. "I don't want you to use my room even when I'm not there.

The imaginary sword appeared and I committed mental suicide once again!

When Samir was out he didn't have the opportunity to protest so I continued carrying my art stuff up to his room. Daylight flooded through the big glass windows, casting deep shadows on the floor and helping with my creativity. I planned a series of paintings based around the Indian circus. Deciding to check a spelling, I picked up Samir's dictionary one day and found its centre shot to pieces. My dyslexic boy had taken his anger out on the printed word. In the bathroom, I discovered his mug riddled with pellet holes and more like a sieve than a vessel for holding water in. I decided to keep this to myself and tidied up after myself before Samir came home. But that evening, Sharika came to me with her ornamental globe, her honey eyes filled with tears. This too had been used for target practice, with only India being spared.

I had to put my foot down when one of the neighbours across the street came to make a complaint.

"Something came flying from the balcony of your house and hit the glass window of our living room," they said. "Our grandchildren were playing there and if the window had been broken they could have been hurt."

The sword needed to make a brief appearance again!

I apologised profusely, snatched the air gun from Samir and locked it up, but unfortunately, that wasn't the end of the matter.

In the summer of 1985, I went with the kids for a holiday in Kasmir without Satish, who was busy. We stayed in the town of Pahalgam, in an old British hotel looking out over lush green hills and a river, which cascaded with speed down the rocky hillside, roaring endlessly. The sweet scent of pine filled the air. But I could

barely enjoy my peaceful surroundings, as the kids bickered every waking moment. One day, I decided to have a peaceful cup of tea and sent Samir and Sharika off to explore the spacious white hallways of our hotel. I was halfway through my beverage when Samir burst into the room and declared, “Look at what I bought with my pocket money - a Kukri!”

He then proceeded to show me the sharpest dagger I had ever seen.

“God, Samir, I know you are 13, but this is too dangerous and you will hurt yourself,” I said. “Give the knife to me.”

But before I could take it, Samir ran out of the room. In despair, I put my hands over my eyes. They were still there when he returned five minutes later.

“Look,” he declared.

I reluctantly pulled my hands away to see Samir bleeding profusely between his thumb and his index finger, an injury requiring five stitches.

When we got back to the hotel with Samir bandaged up, I tried to exchange the knife for something less harmful. This didn’t work so I had to hide it in my suitcase.

Our less than relaxing holiday was cut short by a phone call from Sunita.

“Come back immediately,” she said. “Daddy is seriously ill in the hospital and no one is home! I don't know where Satish is and Mommie is still in Hyderabad.”

Subhead: Daddy’s Gone

By the time we arrived home, Daddy had passed away. The house felt strangely empty and silent. Mommie was still in Hyderabad and Satish was mysteriously absent and we couldn’t get hold of him. Daddy's body was brought to the house. He was placed on the living room floor and covered in a white sheet. We put a large black and white photograph of him in his prime nearby. When Mommie arrived home she began orchestrating exactly how she wanted everything done. White flower garlands were placed on the photograph and over the body, and thin cotton mattresses covered with white sheets were placed around it for the guests to sit on as they gave their condolences. When Satish arrived home he got things moving and Daddy’s body was taken to the cremation ground. Several funeral fires were already burning when we arrived and the atmosphere was hot and suffocating. A thick haze of sadness and fear of death hung over the place. Satish had arranged a grand exit for his father and fifty Seva Dal workers dressed in white pyjamas and shouting patriotic slogans lined the route to the funeral pyre. Daddy would have been so happy if he could have witnessed this farewell. He was extremely patriotic and after his death he was treated as important, which often hadn’t happened while he was alive. As a fully-fledged member of parliament, Satish completed the Hindu rituals for cremation. Again, this would have made Daddy so very proud.

Following the funeral, Sunita told me how during Daddy’s final hours in hospital, she noticed his lips moving constantly.

What are you doing?" she asked him.

"I am praying for Satish and for Capi," Daddy replied.

"Are you praying for anyone else as well?"

"NO!" Daddy replied bluntly.

The reason Satish couldn't be located was because he was filing his nomination to become a member of the upper house of parliament. He had gone to complete the formalities in secret, as there were many nominations for each applicant and many people resented Satish's closeness with Rajiv and did not want to see him rise up the ranks. It's a shame Daddy didn't live to see him do this. In fact, I had always felt sad for Daddy and when he died I remembered how he liked to drink plenty of milk and used to put the bottle straight to his lips. When Mommie was in America, he finished two or three full bottles of milk a day and at times there wasn't enough left over for the kids. I'd order more instead of limiting his intake, as I didn't want to spoil this little pleasure. In all the years I knew him, I never saw Daddy enjoy anything except that milk. He had praised me to relatives for not complaining.

With Satish in parliament and sitting in an office in the Prime Minister's house, our life became very public. We received telephone calls constantly from 6:30am and it only stopped ringing around 2 o'clock in the morning. It was difficult to complete a full sentence without the sound of the telephone interrupting. Important people regularly dropped in unannounced, too.

Mommie was in her element and played the important mother to the hilt, monitoring all calls when Satish was out. She sat on the bed with the black phone within arm's reach and got so carried away she often told callers things I didn't necessarily wish for her to convey, such as, "She's in the bathroom on the toilet." Sometimes she'd lie and say we weren't home and she even instructed people not to call again because I didn't like them! My friends were questioned relentlessly, sometimes for as long as 40 minutes, about their relationship with me, and their lives in general. Mommie aired her grievances to them about what she felt were my shortcomings. Many complaints centred on servants, who by this time had increased in number. A common refrain on the phone line was, "Your friend does not know how to treat the servants and spoils them, which is why they don't listen to me!" Mommie relayed their messages to me only if she liked their answers. She complained to Sonia about her dissatisfaction with my mothering skills, who then felt the need to give me advice, even though her children fought with each other just as much as mine did. I looked her straight in the eye as she talked, without giving away my opinion on how she was handling her own kids.

We had a cook, driver, maid and Selvam – more about him later. As she now had nothing to do, Mommie nagged them relentlessly all day about one thing or another. She'd order them to bring her tea, then water, then biscuits, which meant they had to keep running all day.

"Why are you so slow?" she'd say. "Your work is not up to the mark."

In just half an hour, Mommie sometimes called the cook up to her room as

many as ten times. She required the servants to give her lengthy explanations as to why they were so inefficient. In the end, the staff got fed up and became rude. Mommie often blamed me for this, but I'd think to myself, *"God, she is a pain!"* and move on to a more important problem.

Subhead: Schools

The children went to good Indian schools and were given plenty of homework to keep them busy. We hired a tutor for Samir and each day, as well as going over his regular homework, he used a special set of books containing lesson plans for dyslexic children. As a result, the teacher raised awareness of the problems faced by dyslexic children in India.

In addition, Samir also had a potbellied, kurta-dhoti wearing Brahmin teacher with a bodi (ponytail), to teach him Hindi writing. This tutor found his student so hopeless he decided it was easier to do his homework himself, something of which I was totally unaware. In exchange he got a hot glass of sweet milk with cookies from Mommie who, for a change, was innocent of what was going on. As a result, Samir never learned to write Hindi. Things were just as difficult with Sharika. Once I witnessed her raise her hand to her Hindi teacher, who ended up in a heap on the floor. I was at my wits' end. Something had to be done, but what?

Things took a further turn for the worst when the principal of Samir's school summoned me in for a talk.

"I'm really sorry," he said as I sat behind his big wooden desk. "It won't be possible for Samir to pass his tenth board exams because he is simply too slow when he writes. You must find another school where he won't have to take these exams."

For some time, we had been receiving visits from Satish's American aviator friend, Joe, who was blue-eyed, big and jovial. Whenever he opened the big glass front door and saw Samir provoking Napo and Sharika complaining loudly about one thing or another, he'd say in his deep American drawl, "These children need to go to boarding school!"

I began investigating the possibility of sending them to one. Even Indian boarding schools required the passing of board exams, but there were two exceptions in the form of international schools. One of these schools was Woodstock in the foothills of the Himalayas, which is a good eight-hour drive from New Delhi. I went to visit the school, marvelling at how the Himalayas, the highest mountains in the world, are referred to as 'the hills' in India. I knew it was the right one as soon as I set eyes on it. There was just one problem. The waiting list for the school was already 500-children long and they didn't want to take either of mine.

I presented my case, saying I couldn't get Samir into any other school so Woodstock was my only hope. The discussion went on for days, but finally both Samir and Sharika were accepted. Many forms and formalities needed to be completed prior to admission. One of the requirements was a recent photograph of the children with both their parents. The guidelines stated no one else should be in the picture, which I believe was to make sure the kids weren't taken by anyone claiming to be a relative. The moment I returned home, I started searching for these

photographs, soon realising they were thin on the ground. After several hours I managed to find one photograph of us as a nuclear family. Generally I took all the photographs, which meant I wasn't present in many of them. And whenever we were out and about and asked someone else to take a snap, it was impossible to stop extended family members from getting in the shot. Of course, it didn't help that Sharika had punished me by cutting up all the photos featuring us together. This experience set off an alarm bell in my head. The relationship Satish and I shared with the children had been complicated by interference from the family and we weren't as close as I felt we could have been.

When the new term at Woodstock began, Satish flew the entire extended family and our driver to a small airport in Dehradun, close to the school.

"We want comics!" the kids nagged before the flight.

"I will buy them for you at the airport when we land," I promised.

As we approached the airfield, there was a sudden jerk and the plane fell through the air like a two-ton boulder. Our mouths opened in silent screams and the driver's head hit the ceiling of the plane with a thump.

"This is the end!" I thought to myself.

Suddenly, the small plane stopped falling again and I marvelled at how it flew on as if nothing had happened. As we were landing, I saw buffalos on the runway and, after making a few low sweeps to frighten them away, we finally touched down.

"How many feet do you think we dropped?" the co-pilot asked me.

"Sixty?" I speculated.

"It was more like 600!" he replied with a grin.

It turns out the plane had been struck by a wind shear. There was no doubt we'd had a near miss.

The arrival hall was a broken-down shed with a padlocked toilet, which had as much ventilation as a birdcage. There wasn't a magazine stall anywhere in sight and the prospect of no comics worried the children more than the ordeal we had just gone through.

We drove up the hill towards the big gate of the boarding school, where students of different races and heights milled around between classes. Green pines leant towards the schoolrooms, their heavy scent filling the air, and coolies carrying heavy trunks and suitcases tied to their backs made their way down the hill towards the dorms below. We followed them and entered a round tower, which was going to house my daughter for the next few years. Sharika was to share a room with five other female students of the same age. These girls were all tiny and seemed to me like plain birds twittering away cosy together on a branch. They ignored my big, bright diva bird, Sharika. As I left her with them, a million thoughts flooded my mind and kept me worrying for weeks.

Samir was a different kettle of fish. He didn't share his new experience with me and wrote few letters. Being more sociable, he seemed to quickly adjust to his new life. I hoped the children would stabilise now they were away from our house, which had become a battlefield of contradictions between east and west, modern and traditional, but everywhere felt so quiet without them.

Subhead: Selvam

When we moved to the townhouse, we took along a young boy who had joined us when rioting was at its peak following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. His name was Selvam and the woman who used to clear our floors brought him to us. When I first laid eyes on him he had not eaten for two days. He had been working for a Sikh family who had fled the riots and locked him out of the house. It was cold and he looked so pitiful as he stood there shivering in his torn clothes. I hadn't had such a young person working for me before, but I was worried about what might happen to him if I didn't provide him with shelter. So this is how a boy of around 12, who didn't speak a work of Hindi, came to be living with us. He was a handsome lad, well-proportioned and very dark, with a thick head of black hair, aquiline features, big black eyes and very white teeth. We gave him the jobs of running around for Mommie, taking care of the dog and playing with the children. He often played Nintendo games with Samir and became so good he'd win against everyone he played with.

Selvam listened well to me and learned fast, but he became exasperated by Mommie's nagging and was often rude to her as a consequence, which I got the blame for.

> "You indulge and spoil him," Mommie complained. "That's why he's so obnoxious."

Subhead: Security

Being kidnapped became a real risk for us - several prominent people had been taken and released for ransom - and as a result we got protection from Delhi police. Each guard worked a four-hour shift and we constantly had six of them eating and sleeping in front of our house, blocking out the sunlight. Darkness now prevailed inside. Satish was doing sensitive work, as he was involved in negotiating with the Sikhs who wanted the independent nation of Khalistan. I refused protection. I felt it was more important for me to lead a normal life and I believed if my time had come so be it. Meanwhile, the new house was coming along nicely and a motorable road connecting the two villages on either side of the property was constructed, improving access to it. The villages and areas surrounding them got telephone lines fitted for the first time.

Building work had now been going on for more than a year and we carried on visiting every Sunday to check on progress, taking Napo with us. Only now the visits had become more of a parade. Two cars filled with gunmen accompanied our own and we were followed by a whole bunch of hangers on in their vehicles. Napo had a jeep all to himself! At one point, I counted 25 people coming along for the drive. These were made up of a variety of sycophants and 'yes men' who were a headache for me, as nothing I said to Satish was private and we regularly argued over the design

of our two houses.

"Satish, don't let them build the house so near the boundary wall," I'd protest, "it's only eight-feet away and we have so much space - just move the house more towards the inside of the plot."

"Capi, are you the architect?" Satish argued back. "Do you think you are smarter than him?"

Satish's booming voice was loud enough for a whole army to hear and the 'yes man' nodded their agreement over what he said. I was furious and dug my nails deep into my palms to help me refrain from punching them. I fought and fought to stop the farm from being turned into a jail, where every corner was crisscrossed by 9ft walls. Eventually, we bought more land so the wall so close to the house could be moved. In addition, all the walls except two were reduced in height so they wouldn't feel so imposing.

Back in the townhouse, things had been disappearing. One day it was a camera, the next a jacket, and so on. This went on for six months and with so many people coming in and out all the time, it was difficult to keep track of where things could be going. We had several domestic workers, including a cook and an ironing man, and other freelancers, such as electricians and plumbers, who regularly came back and forth.

One evening, one of the guards saw a shadow jump onto the first floor balcony. He cocked his gun and ran inside, while the other guards aimed their carbines towards the house. One of them found Selvam hiding in Samir's cupboard. After questioning him, it became clear he was the thief and he was lucky he hadn't been shot for it. This was a tricky situation, as although I didn't want to send him back to the streets I didn't feel I could trust him enough to let him stay in the house either. A friend helped find a boarding school we could send him to, but he only lasted two years and during this time he ran away twice. On the first occasion he made a bid for escape, we managed to find him at a railway station. The second time he came running directly to me. He begged me to put him in another boarding school and promised me he'd work very hard, as he wanted to become a pilot like Satish. I did manage to find another school for Selvam, but unfortunately his story didn't have a happy ending. Aged 24, he was co-piloting an air ambulance when the plane crashed into a Himalayan mountain, just five-metres from the summit. He'd been on his way to the city of Shimla, in the state of Himachal Pradesh, to rescue a patient. Tragically, following the disaster, a road ambulance was sent for the patient and this also crashed, killing two doctors, the driver and a nurse. Due to the delay in treatment, the patient also lost his life.

Chapter 19

Subhead: Exhibition

By now I was 34, and I threw myself into my work, producing a collection of paintings as well as designing for Balloons. The shop was doing very well and we began exporting orders and added a store in a top location in the neighbourhood of South Extension.

I'd wanted to be a serious artist from the age of seven and felt it was high time to take a step into this direction by holding an exhibition. I made an appointment to show my portfolio of paintings to one of the best galleries in the city, called Triveni. The paintings varied in theme from a world of possessions with no human life left, to dancing astral bodies, floating cities and animals running to nowhere. After handing over my portfolio, I stood outside on the street for a moment feeling trepidation over what the gallery manager thought of my work. I was just about to get into my car when he came rushing out of the building and stopped me.

"Come inside and have a cup of tea with me," he said. "Let's talk."

This is how I met my friend Naresh. When I arrived home, I broke the news to Satish that a date for my exhibition had already been fixed.

"You will make a fool of me," he said. "Cancel this adventure immediately."

Satish had not been brought up in an artistic environment and had no clue about it. He wasn't impressed by my paintings hanging on the walls, and he got especially cross when I hung them on any newly painted ones.

"You're making the walls dirty!" he'd complain.

I went ahead with my plans as usual, and, as usual, Satish carried on feeling angry which manifested itself in whisky drinking and loud lectures concerning my weaknesses. Three days before the exhibition, he still hadn't invited anyone.

"Invite some of your friends," I urged him. "Believe me, nobody will say my work is bad."

Eventually, Satish gave in and handed one of his secretaries the job of inviting some people. He was given free reign over who to call.

When I arrived at the venue on the night of the exhibition, I didn't know what to expect and was shocked to see the most important people in the country had turned up for it! However, there was no Satish in sight.

"Where is your husband?" people repeatedly asked me.

I tried not to reveal the stress this was causing me as I replied, “He’s on his way, I’m sure you will see him soon.”

In actual fact, I had absolutely no idea whether he would turn up or not. Finally, 10 minutes before closing, my man arrived and invited all still present to dinner. Relief flooded through my tense muscles, as an embarrassment had been avoided. Satish had no reason to be worried as the exhibition had gone very well and many paintings were sold. All the proceeds were donated to a local charity running schools for the children of construction labourers. When I called the people who ran it to tell them how much money had been raised they were shocked into silence, causing me to think the line had been cut. My paintings were taken away to be displayed in the homes of newspaper magnets, hotel tycoons, the owners of cloth and food empires and various industrialists.

A well-known weekly newspaper interviewed the great artist Satish Gujral about my work and the feature ran across the centre pages. As I looked at a large photo of me I got a strange feeling in my stomach as I wondered, *“Is this really me?”*

Subhead: Family Troubles

Girish called out of the blue one day to announce Sarita was pregnant.

Mommie was ecstatic and immediately made preparations to travel to the US for the birth - wild horses couldn’t have stopped her! A few months later, Sarita gave birth to a little boy named Shiv.

When he was just three months old, Mommie informed me she was going to bring her grandson to India. My heart sank as I reflected how the nightmare of baby snatching had reached a new level, and I felt powerless to stop it. Sarita, who was studying and planned to become a psychiatrist, argued her maid could help her take care of Shiv, but Mommie protested, “I have brought up so many children, who can do this job better than me?”

There were no more arguments and the baby was taken away from his mother.

Back in India, every surface of Mommie’s bedroom was covered with baby necessities: jars of cream, folded diapers, pins, milk powder tins, baby bottles, soft hairbrushes, little clothes, towels, face cloths, blue blankets and numerous toys. The room constantly smelt of Johnson’s baby powder, as both baby and Mommie were covered from top to bottom with it. Their faces often glowed with an eerie white around contrasting dark eye sockets. Shiv became Mommie’s everything and all of us could be guilty of molly-coddling him from time to time.

The moment Sarita’s finished her studies a year later she came straight to New Delhi to claim back her little son, but Mommie was in no mood to let him go.

“Let him get older and then we can talk about it,” she said.

I couldn’t stand by and see history repeating itself. I put my foot down and told Satish, “A mother has a right to have her child and Mommie has no business insisting Shiv should stay with us until he is five.”

Satish failed to reply and nothing on his face gave away what he was thinking. The silence prevailed until the day before Sarita was due to leave. She was subdued and obviously afraid to speak openly. Meanwhile, Mommie clutched the child to her chest. “He doesn’t even know his mother,” she argued. “It’s not fair to make him leave all he knows.”

Satish chose this moment to speak. “Shiv is going back to America to live with his parents,” he roared. “End of discussion.”

This came as such a shock that everyone ran around helter-skelter to pack and make the necessary arrangements for Shiv’s departure. In the ensuing chaos, there was no time for emotions to run amok. Then the moment arrived and Sarita took Shiv from Mommie’s arms and left the room. Mommie sunk onto the bed, her hands hovering in the air, her fingers spread wide and her palms facing the door; it was a gesture, which acknowledged the finality.

Another really hard time was around the corner, although I did not know it. The first problem to occur was with my own family over in the US. On a day out at the beach, Father had gone for a swim in the sea, leaving my mother sunning herself on the sand. He was cutting through the waves when he felt a terrible pain in his chest. With great difficulty, he managed to swim to shore, where he promptly collapsed. Mother had been looking out over the waves and was surprised on second glance to see he’d disappeared. Her eyes scanned the beach and she finally spotted him inert on the shore, half of his body still in the water. A medic on the beach heard her screaming and gave my father CPR. He was taken by ambulance to the hospital but insisted he felt fine and refused to have any further treatment. When he had another similar episode he was diagnosed with rheumatic heart disease. At the age of 64, he was told he needed a pig’s heart valve to replace his faulty one.

We rushed to Switzerland, where they were, to see what the course of action should be. I went out for a cup of tea with Mother, Mei and Engelien, thinking we were going to have a discussion about Father’s wellbeing, but Mother had an alternative agenda. She had a long list of complaints about father’s behaviour.

“He drinks and smokes too much,” she said. “He is an alcoholic and is noisy. He doesn’t listen and has too many tantrums. I cannot stand him anymore and I want a divorce!”

Mother was only repeating loudly what she had been muttering under her breath for years, but until this point her complaints had always ended with, “but I guess I’ll keep him anyway”.

I had no time to be stunned at Mother’s timing. I looked straight into her big, blue eyes and said, “This is not the time for this; you have to give Father your support. If you go ahead with your plan, he might not have the willpower to survive the operation, and I will blame you personally for that.”

My sisters were in agreement and Mother promptly stood up and left the café, leaving us stranded. The following day, the dark glasses made their appearance again and Mother refused to look at me. Father, oblivious to the conversation that had taken place, kept asking what was wrong. Mother decided to stay and the operation took

place in Washington. Although it was a success, both Mother and Engelien had a tough time looking after Father during his recovery and complained he was a horrible patient.

A few months after the operation, Mother and Father came to New York to join us for a brief holiday. Mother mentioned again how she was fed up following 38 years of marriage. I tried to encourage her to discuss it with Father, as this wasn't something I felt comfortable bringing up with him.

I had many responsibilities waiting for me when I left New York, as the next leg of the holiday involved Samir, Sharika and Priyanka joining me in Orlando to see Disney World. While there, plain-clothed FBI detectives accompanied us at all times. It was funny seeing these burly guys, whom we knew were armed to the hilt, joining us on water slides and on ghost rides.

On the third day, I received an unexpected phone call from the hotel lobby and was informed someone was waiting for me there. I rushed downstairs and was surprised to see Girish standing there with baby Shiv in his arms. I immediately organised a room for him and inquired about his luggage. When I discovered all he had with him was four grocery bags containing clothes for the two of them, I knew something was wrong and waited until we were alone together in private before demanding an explanation.

"I'm very unhappy and want to leave Sarita," Girish explained. "I've left the house but Sarita doesn't know I'm in Orlando. I want to scare her."

When I pressed Girish for his reasoning behind this, he replied, "Sarita cannot get along with Mommie!"

"But you live with your wife in America and not with your mother," I said. "I'm the one living with *your* mother in India! You are creating a problem where there isn't one. What will Mommie and Satish say when they hear this? I certainly don't think your mother wants you to break up your marriage because of her." After a few days, Girish returned home, but not before taking a poor, frightened Shiv on all the rides.

Then a call came through from Mother to the room I shared with Sharika. I hid in the bathroom to talk to her.

"I am going to leave your dad for sure this time," she announced. "He's in Holland at the moment and I'll do it as soon as he comes back."

"Mama, speak to him when he returns and at least discuss how you feel," I said. "Promise me."

Mother remained silent. I hoped for the best and not wanting to burden the kids, hid all this from them. They were able to continue to enjoy their week in Disney World free of worry about their warring grandparents.

Subhead: The Disappearing Jewellery

When we returned from holiday we had an exciting event to attend as a family

– a wedding in Hyderabad. Mommie's brother had found a Brahmin bride for Satish's cousin, Sohum.

This plunged Sunita into her usual state of indecision about what to wear and she was constantly asking me, "Shall I wear this or that?"

We went shopping for matching glass bangles, hairclips and nail polish. In addition, we were now the proud owners of a couple of gold jewellery sets consisting of earrings, bangles and chokers, and these were duly withdrawn from the bank, put in cotton wool and wrapped in silk pouches to be flown to Hyderabad with our other necessities. We didn't know it then but it was the last time we would ever be together in that city as a family. During the celebrations, we danced to the beat of loud drums, with a band adding a discordant note, as they weren't quite playing in sync. The groom arrived dressed as a king on a white horse, but this didn't look as good as it sounds as he sat in the saddle like a sack of potatoes and had to be helped down by three people. Samir clowned around as he watched, his hair standing up straight like the top of a pineapple. Sharika, dressed in long creamy silks, looked like the queen she is in her heart. The family hugged and gossiped while eating with their fingers from plates loaded with rice topped with very hot spicy vegetarian fare, accompanied by slick, red brick-coloured pickles. The smoky hot smell of curry leaves, red chilli and coconut clung to the air. Following the memorable occasion we returned, exhausted, to Delhi.

A few days later, Sunita announced the jewellery she had worn for the wedding had gone missing from her locked cupboard. She searched everywhere to make sure she had not misplaced it and then became convinced it had been stolen. The pieces had been a gift from Satish and I was relieved I hadn't lost anything. Mommie decided the driver I was using was the thief, even though she had no proof. Every morning and evening she told me I should have him fired. She made statements at the drop of a hat when she saw me, declaring things like, "My blood boils when I see him."

I felt the accusation was baseless and didn't feel I should fire my driver just became Mommie had illogically ordered it. I stood my ground, despite her constant declarations regarding how I was being disloyal for not taking into account her or Sunita's feelings.

Several weeks had gone by when Mommie shared with me her plan to prove to me my driver was a criminal. Sick of the nagging, I made the mistake of agreeing to it. This took me from the frying pan straight into the fire once again!

"I will count the money in your purse every day when you return from work," Mommie told me. "I will inform you if anything is missing."

Sometimes when I went into one of our stores and wanted to keep my hands free I left my purse in the car. Mommie duly searched my purse every day and made my driver bring all the bills detailing what I had spent straight to her.

Mommie relished this job, but even when it became clear nothing was going missing she was reluctant to give up going through my bag and obsessing over what I had spent. When I tried to get her to stop counting my money, she started making

loud comments to all and sundry about my carelessness and disloyalty. People's general reaction was to assume Mommie was right. After all, she was Satish's mother and was considered to have powered his success. I devised a plan of my own to catch the real thief, as I knew from experience how old habits die hard.

Soon afterwards, my sister Mei came for a brief visit and lost her gold chain. She searched high and low for it to no avail. I also asked our sweeper, who had been out of the house all day, to have a look in Mei's bedroom, but he couldn't find it either. I put my plan into action after securely locking the bedroom door. I told our staff if anything disappeared they were responsible for locating it within 24-hours – otherwise they would all be fired.

On the second day when the sweeper was cleaning the room, the cook came in and started searching. He miraculously found the chain in the dustbin, which I knew had been searched several times before. We had our thief!

I thought my days of being nagged were over, but I was sorely mistaken. When I told Mommie we had caught the real thief red-handed, she replied, "The cook and your driver are friends, therefore they are both guilty. I also think you only made the effort to find the thief when your sister lost her chain. You didn't do the same for Sunita."

"Mommie, Sunita didn't discover her loss immediately and wasn't even sure when her jewellery disappeared," I argued. "This gave the thief time to sell it, meaning it was difficult to do anything."

"I don't care what you say," Mommie shot back. "I do not believe you!" She repeated this over and over again. It was almost as if she was accusing me of the crime.

A long time passed and Mommie continued to check my bag. My poor driver became fanatical himself about my purse and bills. I felt trapped. All in all, this drama played out for a total of two years, leaving me feeling exhausted.

Subhead: The Daggers Come Out

The farmhouse was nearing completion, but the development still looked very barren with a trio of three-bedroom cottages crisscrossed by brick walls and only four trees.

At first, Satish and I started staying at the farm at the weekends. As the area was so underdeveloped it was easy to see the rocky Araveli Range in the distance several kilometres away.

I was very excited because there was a pool. Its blue colour stood out so bright against the dull cream background and it was a sight I'd dreamt about back in the hand pump house. However, it wasn't long before a dust storm turned the clear water brown.

As we began to settle into our new home, political enemies were waiting in the sidelines to attack us. Articles appeared in newspapers and political magazines about how the pool was lined with Italian marble. The truth of the matter was there were no

marble tiles in the pool or anywhere else in the house – this was the political machine at work. Kicking off a libel case was useless since the courts could take up to 20 years to reach a settlement. This was the beginning of a nightmare with the press, as more accusations followed.

Rajiv was also attacked from all sides and each day something negative was said about him, which slowly chipped away at his credibility and undermined his good intentions. Concerning the Bofors scandal, which occurred between India and Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s, Rajiv was blamed for taking kickbacks in return for Bofors AB winning a bid to supply artillery. In the Bombay Dyeing controversy (Bombay Dyeing is a textile firm), Rajiv was blamed for taking sides between two business moguls. The fact the Prime Minister wore Gucci shoes while there was so much poverty made front page news, to name just a few of the times his name was tarnished…

We had landed in the court of the press and were considered guilty until proven innocent. Judgment was passed without any investigation and repeated in thousands of forums. Silence was our reply to the hundreds of questioning mouths.

One Sunday night, Satish and I decided we didn't want to go back to the city and would continue to live at the farm permanently, even if the rest of the clan hesitated to join us. However, it wasn't long before the family – at this point Mommie and Sunita plus servants – came to live with us. And I mean this quite literally – they ignored the two empty cottages and moved into ours. I foolishly took this to be a temporary arrangement so they could get used to living at the farm

Meanwhile, I received news from Washington that Mother had left Father. She'd told me so many times she was going to leave I'd stopped taking her seriously after a while. Then, out of the blue, she disappeared, leaving behind a letter for Father declaring her intentions never to return. He was heartbroken and clueless as to what to do with the rest of his life. Poor Engelien was the only one still living in Washington and was driven to her wits' end. Father was filled with grief and Mother called only from payphones, determined she wouldn't be traced. Suddenly, we children were plunged into the parental role. It was difficult for Mei or I to do anything, as we were both so far away; Mei was now in Africa.

I invited Father to come and join me in India and he ended up becoming a resident. It was six months before Mother resurfaced. She had gone to stay with a new friend whom we'd never met.

The first year of having Dad with us at the farm was especially hard, as he was feeling suicidal. Despite my free time being in short supply and Father being even more difficult and irritable than usual, I made sure I sat and talked with him often. He became inordinately bossy to the staff around the farm, who were humble and polite at heart. When this happened a few times, I turned the tables on him and repeated something he used to say to us children, which went, "This is my house and I decide things. You will do what I say."

To my surprise, this actually worked! In general, Father had never listened to anyone in his life, but now, at least sometimes, he listened to me. Perhaps the reason for this was because even as a child I used to raise my voice in response to his

tantrums.

Father was very scared of dogs and as well as Napo we now had three other Great Danes, which belonged to Sunita. One of them, a bitch, barked loudly whenever Father entered the house. Eventually, he announced, “It’s either me or the dogs – you choose.”

Well, I could hardly tell my sister-in-law to get rid of her pets, but poor Father did suffer. One day he was attacked by all four of them for no discernible reason. While none of them bit him, it was a miracle he didn’t die of a heart attack. In the spirit of compromise, I got a kennel made where the dogs could be locked whenever we had guests. It was impossible for me to keep a constant eye on everything so it was mutually decided Father would rent his own home somewhere on the way to the farm. This arrangement worked out very well and an assistant was found for him through an advertisement in the newspaper. She had mixed Japanese and South Indian heritage and was employed to look after Father’s house, organise things in general and be a companion for him. Father really enjoyed setting up his own home and loved living in India. When he shopped for food, the coolies and shopkeepers in the market recognised him from a distance and gave him a warm welcome; he was a good client who did not haggle and paid a good price. As a result, the coolies crowded around him to compete to be the person who carried his groceries – he was also renowned for being a big tipper! After several months, Father started to feel right at home in India. When we socialised we took him along and he was the life and soul of every party. This was no surprise as he was extremely well read, had a diabolically good memory and could make conversation on many subjects with just about anyone. He entertained everyone with his political acumen and life stories.

Chapter 20

Subhead: The Kalakar Trust

Two years on from my first painting exhibition, I planned a second one in Bombay (now Mumbai). This time I decided the money raised would go to my own charity to support needy Indian artists. The exhibition was held in the gallery of the Taj Mahal Hotel and the fancy people of the country were in attendance. Father was very happy to witness all the excitement surrounding the event and even opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate.

I recall the Ambanis (super rich business people) inviting me to have dinner with them. They sent a car to pick me up and take me to their apartment building. I travelled by lift to one of the lower floors, where their luxury and large abode was situated. It had a big balcony and a small swimming pool, with luscious green grass growing all around it. In this tranquil setting, I sat on a small white swing enjoying a beautiful glass of champagne and all the little snacks that were served along with it. The only problem was no money in the world could prevent the really putrid smell of the Bombay air from entering everybody's nostrils.

I passed comment on the fact the balcony wasn't very private and was surprised when a family member replied, "Actually, all the flats belong to us and each family member has their own floor – there are a total of 24 flats! The family matriarch mentioned she gave each daughter-in-law one full floor to do whatever she wanted with.

Subhead: At Home

At home things were not going well. Over the previous few years, several attempts had been made to find a husband for Sunita, who was now 32 and had gained her medical degree. She had been introduced to several eligible bachelors but hadn't shown an ounce of interest in any of them, always coming up with some excuse over why the relationship wouldn't work; for instance, the introduction had led to her having terrible nightmares.

One Sunday, Mommie and Sarla DiDi conspired to invite a widower for lunch, with the plan to introduce him to Sunita. I was busy painting in my small studio room upstairs but had heard rumours about what was about to happen.

Suddenly, Sunita stormed into my room overwrought. She accused me of wanting to get rid of her, destroying my peace of mind for what turned out to be a long time.

I decided to broach with her the subject of exactly what she wanted to do with her life.

"Do you ever want to get married?" I enquired.

When Sunita replied in the negative, I asked her about children.

"I want to have kids," she announced.

"But who would be their father figure?" I asked. Sunita implied it would be Satish. This was certainly news to me! Sunita had decided this without any discussion with us. When pressured further, she said something that hit me so hard it was as if I had been clubbed in the head.

"You care only for your daughter and not for me."

I couldn't understand how she could think this. It had been very difficult for me to have one-on-one quality time with Sharika because of Sunita. Every opportunity I had given to my daughter I had also given to her.

I cannot describe in words how it made me feel to suddenly realise that all the effort I'd made over the years meant so little to Satish's sister. I realised I had a long future with her harbouring the same unsatisfactory expectations of me. She was going to force me to be a witness to her unhappy state no matter how hard I tried to help her. The load suddenly became so heavy I wanted to leave.

Sometime before this, Mommie had decided to move out of our cottage into her own house. One of her vegetarian relatives had asked how she could stand living with us with the smell of meat from my kitchen wafting into her nostrils every day. This remark caused her to move next to her own vegetarian kitchen, while Sunita stayed with us downstairs. Every night everyone spent the whole evening with us in the living room until we went to bed at around 1am. I was tired of listening to endless conversations at night centring around the concerns of my in-laws. Whenever I brought up something of interest, Mommie interrupted me and the subject was changed completely.

As Sunita slept next to us, it was difficult to have any kind of private conversation without her overhearing it. She also had a screaming fit and refused to let me use the hallway cupboard when I needed it. I think this was a matter of ego – she wanted to have her way and exercise control over me. Even though we were staying on such a big property it was a repetition of the hand pump house. Yet again, privacy was a thing we could only dream about.

Mommie lost her temper with me again for putting locks on the gates to stop workers disturbing me while I swam. No one in the family ever used them so they proved useless. It transpired Mommie had expected me to ask Sunita's permission to fit the locks. I couldn't help worrying about my future and my place in my own home. I stopped being able to sleep at night as I worried about this situation continuing for the rest of my life. At times I felt suffocated and gagged.

Subhead: Wild Life!

In our attempt to be alone, Satish and I went to the back lawn of the farm to sit together and enjoy the warm night air. Suddenly, in the light of the flood lamps, we spied a movement in the grass. On closer inspection, it turned out to be a cobra raising

its hood just 4ft away from us. We froze as it paused and looked at us for a couple of minutes before moving away. We took this as a special blessing and it transpired we were going to need it.

When we moved to the farm we not only took our extended family with us, but also our dogs and our Persian cat, Pasha, who slept with us in our bedroom. Pasha, a pure breed, had been a gift from one of our dear friends. He had long copper hair and walked around the house with a sophisticated, regal air, as if he owned it. One night, I was reading a book when I heard Pasha hiss at something outside the window. I got up several times to look at what he was making a noise at, but couldn't see anything outside. Finally, after 20 minutes, I decided I better take a closer look. To my shock, I realised Pasha was hissing at something *inside* the room rather than outside it – the king cobra! Terrified, I jumped back on the bed while at the same time grabbing Pasha to get him out of the way. When I regained the power of speech, I tried several times to warn Satish, who was in the bathroom, about our visitor, but he assumed I was laughing at my book as usual and didn't open the door. Eventually, he opened it just a crack.

"Don't come in the room," I told him

After some time, the snake put its head down and moved towards the window, allowing us to flee the room and call for help. Tragically, the snake became wedged between two windowpanes and a staff member killed it while trying to get it out. Despite the danger we'd been in, I was sad the snake died in fear, as I love all animals, including reptiles. Indian superstition also dictates that it's very bad luck to take the life of a snake as the animal is close to the Indian god, Shiva. In my anger I warned the staff I would fire them all if a snake were ever killed again on my property.

This wasn't the end of our encounters with snakes. One rainy night during the monsoon season, one of our guards decided to have a lie down on a bench covered by newspapers the other men had been reading. The pitter-patter of rain soon lulled him to sleep and when the next guard turned up for his shift, he saw something that frightened him so much he wet himself. His sleeping colleague had a cobra leaning over his head with his hood flared. Perhaps it was warming itself on the man's warm breath. The animal had probably come inside for the warmth and better still, found a warm body to cosy up with.

For the next two hours the man slept peacefully while the other guard stood still as a statue, scared to move a muscle. Finally, the snake decided it would be more comfortable if it moved in between the pages of a newspaper and it snuggled down under the man's neck. The other guard decided it was time to act and grabbed his colleague's arm, pulling him off the bench and most probably saving his life.

Over the years we found a snake hiding in our sofa (which we had to carry outside until it emerged) and one stuck under the bathtub. On this occasion we called in a snake charmer who somehow managed to get the animal out alive. With the king cobra still at large we brought in several snake charmers, who left potions at various locations around the property. All sorts of harmless snakes came out of hiding but not the one we most feared. When one of our gardeners was bitten we were at a loss regarding what to do. Treatment needed to begin within 40 minutes and the hospital

was too far away to get him there in time. We had no choice but to take the man, who was by now unconscious, to one of the snake charmers. He put a potion on his tongue, turning it blue, while chanting secret mantras. Soon the gardener opened his eyes and within 24 hours he was back at work!

By this point, the community of snake charmers was slowly disappearing due to laws having been put in place to protect snakes. One charmer resorted to an interesting tactic to make a living. Since snakes are also considered holy he showed one to someone living a stone's throw away from the farm. He asked this person to make a wish and give him 100 rupees, which he then put into his snake's mouth. Then the snake charmer told the client that to make the wish complete, he'd have to retrieve the rupees himself. The client refused to do this so the snake charmer was able to make off with the money. The same snake charmer got one of our staff to make the same wish. He didn't have any money so offered his watch instead, which was placed in the snake's basket. Upon hearing this story, we sent our man Friday to the snake charmer encampment nearby, where the entire scam was denied. As the snake charmers were gesticulating wildly, the man Friday noticed the culprit wearing the very same watch he'd stolen from our staff member. After that everything was resolved in a jiffy and the watch was restored to its rightful owner.

Subhead: Time For A Change

The garden on the farm was very large and needed to be constantly maintained, but instead of installing a fancy sprinkler system we decided to provide jobs by employing a few men to tend it. Every day I spent two hours going round the garden and checking individual plants to see whether the watering and the other gardening activities were being done correctly. I bought books on gardening and learned which plants to grow for maximum results. There was just one problem – Mommie! She sat in her bedroom issuing opposite instructions to mine, such as ordering for certain plants to be removed or randomly firing workers.

The guard at the gate reported back to her the name of every person, be they workers, friends or family members, who arrived at the property, as well as the exact time they entered the gates. But despite her unflinching curiosity she never left her room to take even one glance at the garden and the only walk she took was the one between her room and our living room. From the day we moved in until the day she died she never once saw the back of the farm. She left the house in the car only to go to the temple or the doctor's. But despite this she didn't miss a trick. One day, she said to me, "You have planted useless orange trees – they have not produced any fruit in two years. I know of a sapling which will provide fully-grown oranges within six months of plantation."

Mommie nagged me about this for months on end, but I never did discover this magical breed of orange trees!

After 17 years of marriage, I felt the need for more freedom in my home. I needed to lead a more balanced life and required more emotional space. The children and I faced many difficulties while they were growing up and one of the problems stemmed from the fact I always had to put up a struggle in order to spend any kind of quality time with them on my own. Everything always had to be done inclusive of anyone who happened to be around. This was mainly orchestrated by Mommie,

whose main focus was to exert control over everything I did. Any little plan put forward was immediately scrutinised to see if I was lacking in generosity by not including those she felt deserved to be part of the programme.

"*The children criticise me because they never see me in an environment where I am comfortable with myself,"* I decided.

I vowed to make a determined effort to give some one-on-one time to Sharika, who by nature was more introspective than the extrovert Samir, who found it easy to gain attention.

My first attempt at having more quality time with my daughter, who was now 14, was to go shoe shopping with her, just the two of us. This turned into a tug of war with Mommie. My heart was thumping on the evening I asserted myself in front of the family by saying, "I want to take Sharika out on my own, without Sunita, to buy a pair of shoes."

Mommie was seated on the sofa, her hips spread out around her. "Why don't you want to take Sunita?" she asked. "What has she done wrong?"

"Mommie, I am not saying she has done something wrong, I just want to do something on my own with my daughter."

Mommie stuck to her guns, insisting I should take 'poor' Sunita.

Meanwhile, Satish knitted his brows, his expression conveying annoyance, shadows hanging over his face. He didn't appreciate my efforts to change the status quo.

Later in our room, he said, "You will ruin whatever relationship you still have with this family."

Sunita, in the bedroom next door, probably overheard this, as she did most of our conversations.

Sharika and I did manage to buy some shoes on our own, but my girl felt so guilty about it the entire outing was spoiled for both of us.

In another bid to improve the mother and daughter relationship, I took Sharika for a short holiday in Dubai, but even there it was as if Sunita had come along with us. Sharika constantly found gifts she wanted to take home for her auntie and on this occasion I decided the best approach was to hold my tongue.

Father, who was still in Delhi, had observed my struggles and said, "Sterre, you should do more things on your own, let's consult a psychiatrist to see what you really need to do – you cannot go on like this."

With Father next to me, I was told by the doctor that Mommie and Satish needed to understand where I was coming from, and I needed to take some steps to help them understand.

"Get some breathing space," he said. "How many evenings do you want

company?"

"Weekends only," I replied.

"Ok, well ask Satish to tell the family to spend only Friday, Saturday and Sunday with you in your living room, and not until 1am on each of these nights. Sunita also needs to be told to move out of the room directly next to your bedroom."

It wasn't as if Sunita was short of options regarding where else to stay. She could go and live with her mother or in the cottage specifically built for her. However, when I first raised this with Satish, he screamed, "You want to throw Sunita out on the street! I will not allow it!"

"Satish, that's not what I am saying," I protested. "She can stay anywhere on the farm, for God's sake. If you care more about her than me then I will be the one who leaves!"

The crest of the wave had crashed onto the shore, foam flooding in all directions. The twig floating on it developed a large crack and was about to break into two pieces!

But my efforts were to no avail. I wrote a letter to the family explaining it wasn't personal – I didn't dislike anyone – but even so I couldn't go on living like I was. I then made a plan and carefully executed it, packing my bags and leaving without informing anyone where I was going. I checked into a tatty old guesthouse in the centre of town and went to bed feeling incredibly lonely and sad. It felt as if my efforts over the years had come to nothing.

Back at home, it later transpired, nobody but Satish was actually bothered by me not being there. The social routine of drinks and dinner was maintained and the following day, Samir, Sharika, Sunita, Mommie and Satish went out for lunch in a nice restaurant.

Meanwhile, I walked the city streets listlessly before entering a cathedral where a Sunday mass was in progress. I sunk down onto my knees and asked God, "Was it all a waste? I love my husband and do not want to leave him, but is he going to make me leave because of his family?"

"Be strong and wait, it has not happened yet!" came the mystical reply.

Time ticked slowly by, but whenever I looked at my watch I realised only a couple of minutes had passed.

I found out later Satish went to work looking so worried Rajiv asked him what the matter was.

After two days, I called home.

"You come back this minute," Satish demanded.

"Did you do what I requested?" I asked, trembling to the core.

"Yes, I did. Sunita has moved out."

In the taxi home I was flooded with doubt. Was Satish telling me the truth? I opened the big black front door to find Father and Satish in the living room with the kids. Satish had a glass of whisky in his hand and none of them got up to welcome me.

I picked up my bag, went downstairs to our bedroom, threw myself on the bed and cried. It was October and the weather was perfect. The windows were open and the beautiful scent of our alstonia and sita flower trees wafted in through them. This momentary peace was shattered by a voice yelling, "Throw her out of the house!" I could hear other voices expressing their agreement.

Father came and knocked on my door. In my bedroom, he sat on a chair opposite me and started talking in a bid to drown out the voices from upstairs. I stayed put. Having Father with me made me vow not to flee the house again. Satish didn't say much when he came down to my room, but later in the week he admitted those two days without me were the worst of his life. Sunita moved into her own cottage, but my drastic action didn't change anything overnight.

Chapter 21

Subhead: Mommie Takes A Stand

With Mommie it was all or nothing. She wanted to come and sit with us whenever she wished (which was every night) otherwise she made it clear she would never enter our house again. Her decision had to incorporate everyone else in the family and she set about achieving her goal with the diligence of someone trying to accomplish a lifetime's ambition.

Via the servants she checked who talked to me and for how long. When guests came to spend the evening with us she kept them busy in her room for a significant amount of time before allowing them to leave to see us. Several times our guests left without even managing to bid us hello! Mommie also made faces and complained if she didn't like what our visitors had to say to her. All of this, as usual, was my fault.

She used the intercom incessantly, ringing up to 10 times at a time without saying anything and often failing to hang up so she could hear what was going on in our rooms. It was as if she had declared an all-out attack on 'the enemy', but I also realised the war had been going on ever since I married her son. For the first 17 years it had been fought in the form of daily skirmishes disguised as cultural misunderstandings, and my politeness had been a veneer to cover a losing battle.

Mommie roped in one particular servant as her official spy. He was a short and sturdy Nepali boy of about 17, and adept at climbing trees. I often sensed him listening from the corners of our big picture windows, turning around to see him running away.

We were out of the country when the farm manager phoned to tell us this servant had been bitten and was in the hospital with a fever.

"Which of the dogs was responsible?" I asked.

"It wasn't the dogs," came the reply. "It was your cleaner!"

The farm manager told me how the two had got into a fight over a duster. The servant had to be hospitalised, as the wound became infected. He recovered but there was more commotion to come.

One night, Sunita rang Mommie from her cottage, screaming so much Mommie nearly had a heart attack. When she stopped screeching long enough to be able to articulate words, she told Mommie how she'd sensed someone looking at her while taking a bath. When she looked up she saw our agile servant hanging from the rafters and peering at her through the bathroom window.

However, instead of sacking her favourite servant, Mommie ordered the security guards to catch the person working for me instead. She could not accept her faithful Nepali boy was responsible for spying on her daughter's naked body. Meanwhile, the servant ran away and hid in a tree on a neighbour's plot, where he remained for two days. When he thought the coast was clear he tried to sneak back into the farm to get his clothes, but he was caught by the guards and brought in front of Sunita, who beat him up with her slippers before he was allowed to go. Six months later a thief broke into Sunita's bedroom and took her jewellery. He was never caught but I suspected our Peeping Tom servant, as nothing else in the house was taken.

Subhead: A Study In Contrasts

Knowing how Sunita was going to react to me was difficult. Sometimes she was furtive, other times she behaved as if everything between us was fine. I didn't ever really know where I stood and decided it was up to me to make an extra special effort to put her at ease. I gave her my time and the occasional gift as a peace offering. Despite living in separate cottages now, we still got together at mealtimes, so I continued to see her on a daily basis. Her special interest had always been weight loss and she constantly read up on the subject, visiting weight-loss centres in America to brush up on her knowledge. As a result, she decided to start the very first weight loss clinic in India. Situated in a top location, she soon attracted many wealthy clients.

While Sunita was busy saving lives by helping people eat less, my mind turned to the people who had the opposite problem. I thought about starting a trust for the needy so they could put more food on the table.

When I returned to New Delhi following the exhibition in Bombay, I began to think about what I wanted to do with my life. I was no longer catering so much for the family so I had lots of spare time, which I decided to dedicate to setting up a charitable institution for Indian artists. I had no set plan on how to go about doing this so I drafted in my friends to bounce ideas off and get advice from.

My friend Naresh suggested a name for the NGO - the Kalakar Trust. In Hindi, the word kala means 'art' and kar means 'to do'.

Another friend suggested we should begin our trust work in a slum called Kathputli Colony. This is how I encountered a man I called 'Impresario'. His imposing figure was shrouded in white, toga-like garments, which gave the impression he floated while walking. His balding head was crowned with a wreath of curly salt and pepper hair and the smell of sandalwood enveloped him. We made an appointment to go and see the slum together.

Kathputli Colony had been founded 30 years earlier by a small band of nomadic performers. It had grown into a large community where puppeteers, magicians, animal trainers, drummers, dancers and acrobats lived side by side. New government laws had put street performers and beggars in the same category, making it impossible for these people to earn a decent living, as they traditionally had done, and many of them were destitute.

At this point, Mei's husband was relocated to Delhi for work so she arrived in India on the day of my slum visit.

Mei is small and frail, with soft blond hair that frames her delicate face, where one eye occasionally dances. She is a little dynamo – stubborn to the core – and has a doctorate in organisation development and development economics. The timing couldn't have been more perfect as she had the necessary skills to maximize the help the trust could give to improve the lives of needy artists. Just six hours after arriving for her new life in India, she was visiting the slum with me – a place where we encountered the first of many miserable situations.

Impresario introduced us to a handful of men, whom I concluded were 'cronies'. They were mostly dressed in torn clothes and one of them wailed loudly, touched everyone's feet and declared, "I want a fistful of money for treating my tuberculosis. I am going to die if you do not give it to me."

He waved his hand under our noses and I was informed his name was Sager. Although he was ill, he didn't listen to the doctors and was using his disease to earn money.

I decided to wait and work out the situation for myself before parting with any cash. During this ongoing drama, Sager grabbed Mei's ankles. She couldn't understand a word he said and things were moving too fast for me to translate and help her to grasp what was going on.

Next Impresario pointed his finger randomly in the thick air. "You need to start a clinic immediately," he said. "I will organise the doctor."

The cronies from the slum took us to a corner a few steps away from where we'd been sitting and pointed to a pigsty, indicating the clinic should be built there. I peered inside to see five big, black, mud-covered pigs and their piglets lolling in refuse mixed with dung. It's impossible to describe in words the stench of garbage and poop (human and otherwise) which invaded my nostrils. It cut into my nose like a razor blade. This wasn't exactly what I'd imagined when I thought about starting the trust – my intention had been to further the arts. Now, it appeared, I'd have to start saving lives first.

As we left the meeting, the doorway framed the figure of a plump, dark woman. She was dressed in grey and was gesticulating wildly, an agitated manner radiating from her round eyes. Deep furrows covered her forehead and she was obviously angry with Impresario and the cronies accompanying us. I found it strange this was the first woman from the slum I'd seen.

In Impresario's car, I enquired who the woman was.

"Oh, that's Patassi," he replied with a dismissive gesture of the hand. "She's a loose woman. Women in the slum are of no importance!"

At this point I got a bad feeling Impresario and I were going to have many disagreements. I could only hope these could be overcome by our mutual wish to help. As soon as we got out of the car, Mei and I sat down to sketch out what we wanted to focus on in the slum. We decided our first priority was to help women and children.

The people who inhabited Kathputli Colony had traditionally roamed from village to village performing puppet shows, as well as passing on news. From time to time they produced shows for the local landlords and Rajas (kings) in the countryside. It was said at times they were paid by local leaders to sing their praises and tell stories of greatness about them. However, if they weren't paid properly their former benefactors were maligned and stories of their wickedness were spread far and wide. In short, Kathputli Colony residents were highly political, but as we made our plans we had no idea about their special talent.

Subhead: Work Begins

When I went to see how work on building the clinic was coming along, I was surprised to see both black and white soil in the foundations. I realised the black soil was actually three feet of pig manure. The clinic was to have fertile material in its foundations, and I hoped this meant our efforts were to come to fruition.

However, over the next few months, we made the shocking discovery that nine other NGOs had tried to work in the colony and left because of libellous whispering campaigns. Rotary International, a global NGO, had organised funds of $150,000 from the US to upgrade facilities in the colony, where there was no running water. These good people departed because of arguments about the organisation putting its name on the project in return for their contribution. A baseless whisper campaign started by the cronies claimed Rotary International wanted to steal Kathputli Colony land. Disheartened, they abandoned the project and sent all the money back to the US.

The second shock came when I realised rumours had begun to circulate about Mei and me too. People were saying, "Those two woman are not what they seem and have ulterior motives."[1]

When we heard this, Mei and I looked into each other's identical grey/blue eyes and decided to wait and see and hope for the best.

By this time the clinic was up and running. Ragged, tired mothers required treatment because their husbands refused to spend money on them, preferring to spend their earnings elsewhere, mainly on alcohol and family functions such as weddings and death ceremonies. Some men seemed more than ready to pay private doctors for their own medication, but refused to do so for their wives.

The doctor promised by Impresario never materialised so we found our own. We hired a social worker and three health workers to help the women and children, who we trained up ourselves. I recall the doctor calling me into her consulting room, where a dejected, scrawny mother was seated on the round swivel chair in the corner. Meanwhile, the doctor was holding up a tiny baby. "How old do you think this baby is?" she asked.

"Six weeks," I replied.

"No, it's more like one and a half!" came the sobering reply.

In most cases, it was a matter of education rather than medication. Kathputli

families were superstitious and believed babies shouldn't be given anything white to eat, besides breast milk, until the age of two. That meant no rice, eggs or bananas. Some mothers had no milk and gave their babies whole-wheat roti you need teeth to chew. It took a while to convince mothers to change. They were afraid that if they listened to us about making dietary changes something terrible would happen to their children. We asked mothers to bring their babies to be fed in the clinic, meaning the right food could be provided to them under the supervision of the doctor. This reassured them nothing untoward was taking place. Each day a ragged line of women sat in a row on the floor feeding the new, healthy diet to their tiny babies, who were cradled on their crossed legs. In this way, a new awareness about food slowly dawned on them.

Subhead: Tuberculosis

The third shock we received was when a very ill young man of around 19 years old entered the clinic and was diagnosed with the final stages of TB. The social worker immediately set about getting him admitted to a specialist hospital. When I asked her the following day if she had had any success in admitting him she replied in the negative. "The boy doesn't know his father's name," she explained. "Because of this I can't get him admitted into any hospitals."

"Why didn't you just give a fake name?"

"I didn't want to do this because lying is a sin."

I told her to find the boy immediately and make up a fake name for the father. "I will take responsibility for the lie," I promised.

She duly went off to Kathputli Colony, but didn't find the boy with the family he had been staying with. They'd become scared about catching his TB and banned him from entering the hut again. Upon further questioning, a strange story came to light…

The boy had come from a rural village and when he was around seven he had been herding cows in a field through which a railway track ran. A train stopped in the field and two passengers sat on the steps of one of the carriages to eat their lunch. One of them caught the boy staring at their food and invited him to join them. But as he sat with them on the steps the train started to move extremely fast and he wasn't able to get down. That is how he arrived at New Delhi railway station. The two men abandoned him so he walked about tired and hungry before stumbling across a family of performers entertaining some bystanders. When the show was over everyone left except the crying boy. Feeling sorry for him, the performers took him home to Kathputli in spite of the fact they were extremely poor and didn't relish another mouth to feed…

When the social worker went to search for the boy again on the following day she discovered he had died alone. Horrified, I promised his spirit that in future our clinic would do the utmost to save the lives of TB patients. After that we stopped counting the number of shocks…there were just too many.

Chapter 22

Subhead: Patients At The Clinic

Patients visiting the clinic were required to pay a nominal amount for their medication to encourage them to take their treatment seriously. Initially, it was hard to convince the patients why everything couldn't be free. Several lost their tempers and threatened the doctor, raising their hands and attempting to rain blows on her head. As a result, we created a sign detailing the rules of the clinic in Hindi. Though most of the patients were illiterate, the health workers read out what was written on the sign and this seemed to help.

The doctor approached me to come and see a patient she felt required expensive treatment. The young man had fallen from a bus several years before and dislocated his hip. The hip hadn't been put back in the right place and was now beyond repair – he therefore required a hip replacement. The poor boy walked with a severe limp and wasn't able to keep up with the band he played the drums with at weddings.

His destitute family came to meet me, his thin wife looking at me with pleading eyes. This was the first dilemma we encountered concerning spending a large amount of money on a single patient. We were concerned about the impact this would have on the rest of the people we were trying to help.

I approached the Rotary International for assistance, which was prompt in coming. The doctors explained how the young man would not be able to sit on the floor following the operation; he'd have to be seated on a chair at all times. I counselled the boy in the run up to the operation, repeating the doctors' instructions many times in order for it to fully sink in.

Following the op, the young man, dressed in tight black pants, which emphasised his scrawny legs, came to see me. "The operation hasn't been a success because I can't sit on the floor!" he complained, leaving me with no choice but to explain everything to him again!

A couple of months later he told me he wasn't happy, as his bad leg had become longer. This I found funny, as now both his legs *were* the same length and he walked normally – he just wasn't used to it.

Subhead: Disagreements With Kalakar

A handful of performers from the colony travelled to America to take part in the Festival of India in Washington DC. While there they met President Ronald Reagan. Upon their return they continued to live as before, managing to make puppets, traditional toys and beautiful wood carvings while crammed into a tiny space and surrounded by a constant blue haze, which was caused by food being cooked over open fires, dust in the air, exhaust fumes from the main road and garbage on the brink of combusting. Alongside them lived pigs, cows and miserable dogs, along with an underground kingdom of rodents, some of which were the size of cats and could steal

full tiffin boxes if they happened to be left out of sight. Plenty of cats roamed the area, too, ignoring the rats and bothering sleeping residents with their yowling fights or by finding a warm spot to sleep on their chests.

The land on which the slum had been built belonged to the government and the settlers had no legal right to occupy it. In view of this, the residents had no right to demand any amenities. Early on in my partnership with Impresario, he'd indicated he expected me to take steps to solve the ownership problem. I organised a meeting with the governor of Delhi, but, like the previous meetings of this nature held before my involvement, it later ended in fiasco. Alternative land was put forward for the artists near the historical monument, Qutb Minar, but the cronies went to the authorities and, pretending to represent the whole colony, refused the offer.

Before the cronies got involved, the Kalakar Trust was asked to do a housing survey to identify the number of families eligible to be moved out of the slum. However, this caused us big problems. Each family needed to be photographed and partake in a lengthy registration process.

It was difficult to get relatives together at the same time, which was stressful considering we needed to photograph around 660 families. We were also under pressure from the cronies to sort everyone out with identity cards, which would help them keep the police off their backs. Officers often harassed them for loitering when they returned home late at night from a performance. However, whenever we tried to discuss these problems with Impresario he kept changing his mind regarding the solutions. He expected us to seek his permission before taking action on anything and this situation was made more difficult by the fact he was often abroad, meaning decisions were delayed and pressures mounted. It got to the point where the staff at the clinic were struggling to function.

Meanwhile, the cronies started behaving like slumlords, acting as if everything we put into the clinic was automatically their property – and this included the staff. Whenever we managed to contact Impresario, he'd promise to do something before disappearing again, leaving us high and dry.

Mei and I decided to make a few decisions on our own. The first one was to go ahead and have identity cards made up for all the residents of the colony. All hell broke loose when Impresario discovered this and suddenly he had plenty of time to visit. He organised large public meetings to denounce our work and advised everyone not to trust us. His speeches began with a reference to me as the "mantri ki bibi" (leader's wife), thus bringing politics into our work with the intention of maligning Satish as well. The harassment from the slumlords increased and they'd surround my car making threatening noises. They also entered the clinic when drunk, harassing the staff, snatching the keys and ordering everyone to get out. It is to the staff's credit they didn't allow themselves to be intimidated and comply. I think the men's ulterior motive was to drive us out of the clinic so they could use it themselves.

Troubles reached a head one day when one of the cronies lifted a large log meant for carving and held it over one of the social worker's heads. Fortunately, he was restrained before taking aim and following an official complaint the threats reduced. But this failed to stop other forms of harassment taking place. Cooperation and participation in ongoing activities reduced, health workers were cursed and

unreasonable demands were made of them. Many patients started making a scene and insisting on treatment in private hospitals, which the trust simply couldn't afford.

Subhead: Discovering Reality

I decided to take some time away from the drama to speak to my patients. I asked them what they had eaten the day before. Many replied it was mostly roti and potatoes, with the occasional cup of tea. I was shocked they'd eaten no vegetables, fruit, milk or eggs. This wasn't only related to poverty; they had never been informed about healthy food habits.

With the help of funding from the World Bank, Mei began research on the lifestyles of Delhi-based artists. One of the many things that cropped up during her study was how the children of these artists were usually only given a cup of tea with a rusk for breakfast. Many seemed to think that milk could not be drunk on its own without tea. In addition, the children ran wild. They didn't wear any clothes and their parents barely knew where they were most of the time.

Mei and I decided to do something about this and started a small school in the clinic, but the project wasn't big enough to make a substantial difference. Next door to the clinic stood an abandoned community centre. The plot around it was a large dust bowl the children used as a makeshift toilet. Three government teachers turned up at the centre every day, but finding it impossible to do any teaching they left in the afternoon having done nothing. I decided the building could be our school, so Mei and I approached the teachers and suggested a joint effort to kick-start a new education project.

"You are crazy to think you can do anything," the teachers retorted. "The children in this colony are wild, uncontrollable animals. All they can do is throw sand and stones at teachers like us. You will never ever be able to run a school here, but if you want you can contact the authorities and see if they will give you some space."

After haggling with the powers that be, we were loaned two large rooms in which to start classes. The Kalakar Vikas school was born.

The struggle began to persuade the children to turn up and, if they did, stay in the room for more than half an hour at a time. As most of them were naked they focused on teasing each other and pinching each other's body parts. They mostly had uncombed hair filled with lice and scruffy faces, from which bright, sparkling eyes twinkled and hinted at their potential. My first purchase was not pencils and books but underwear. I called in the parents and encouraged them to make their children more presentable by combing their hair and scrubbing their faces. And I told them they had to make their rascals wear undies – clean ones! The children had no idea how to follow instructions so the first lesson was about teaching them to sit down, stand up and form lines instead of just grabbing everything with their grimy fingers.

Mei managed to find a donor agency to fund the provision of milk and a doctor prescribed healthy snacks to complete the children's diet.

Unsurprisingly, Impresario was not happy about this. He barged into the community centre several times and screamed at Mei to get out, his finger pointing

towards the road. On one of these occasions she was meeting with women to form what was to become the Women's Kalakar Saving and Thrift Society. She called me immediately, her shaking voice revealing her concern.

"Carry on as if nothing has happened!" I told her, keeping my own worries about the situation to myself.

Impresario often disappeared for months on end but always returned to the school with the slumlords for a repeat performance. He wanted us to close it so he could use the building himself. I knew he wasn't just going to disappear for good; he was planning more trouble for us.

Subhead: It Rains

The first monsoon following the clinic's opening brought with it long lines of sick, wet patients. This was hardly surprising, as many families lived in shanties made from sticks, rags, mud and items found in the garbage and deemed useful. The roofs provided shade but no protection from the rain. Often the only dry thing in any given shanty was the plastic bag in which wheat was kept for making roti. I organised a truckload of special roofing plastic to ease the situation, but distribution was difficult, as everyone was so keen to get their hands on their share. We'd surmised there would be less shoving and pushing if we asked the women to take it in turns to collect their section of plastic, but we were wrong. The adults, like the kids, had no concept of standing in line and it was a daily struggle to hand out the material. The man in charge of giving out the sheets left the colony with the buttons ripped from his shirt every day. But we persevered, eventually distributing one and a half big truckloads.

It was also a matter of 'all or nothing' when it came to the water. At that time, there must have been about 10,000 people living in the colony and there were only two official water taps. If a family needed more water they had to pay to get a bucket of it from special carriers who procured it from surrounding colonies.

Mei approached an organisation called Simavi, which specialises in providing financial assistance to bring water to people in need, for help. It approved one borewell, two big water tanks and fifty-five water taps. We announced our intention to the colony's residents and as a first step asked families to form into groups of 20 and decide between themselves where to put their water tap. That proved to be a major hurdle as no one wanted to give up the eight square feet needed for the tap and its platform.

Meanwhile, when the borewell was dug and the first water started to spray out from the ground like a fountain, hundreds of children played naked in the water for two days nonstop. At this point, the local politician called the police, preventing us from finishing the job. It transpired he felt threatened by my involvement, so we arranged a meeting in person.

"I have no intention of entering politics and standing for the elections," I assured him. "Besides that, we have spent half of the money from Simavi, how can we stop now?"

Luckily, the politician understood I wasn't about to challenge him politically

and we were able to continue with the project.

After all the taps were installed and everybody started using the water the whole slum turned into a muddy mire. Ooops – we hadn't thought about drainage! People slipped and slid all over the place and old people were in danger of breaking something. Something had to be done immediately to fix the problem. We tried to build drains using bricks, but the children didn't understand about waiting for the cement to dry and jumped on the work, destroying it.

In desperation, I called the Chief Minister of Delhi, Madan Lal Khurana, and arranged to meet him in his office. I entered to find him seated behind a huge wooden desk, which had curling files piled up on each end of it. His portly figure took on a friendly pose as he listened to me complain about the drainage problems we had created in our enthusiasm to help with providing water.

When I had finished speaking, the Chief Minister picked up the plastic receiver of his ragged, much-used intercom and ordered, "I want the Municipal Corporation to drop four hundred, precast drains to the Kathputli Colony Community Centre within 24-hours."

He was true to his word and the following morning our yard was full up with drains. Members of the youth club we had formed helped install them under the supervision of a trained plumber and engineer.

A week later, I was visiting the clinic when my new, stress free state was shattered by a group of distraught women complaining water had been entering their shacks from the new drains. I immediately sent a plumber to establish what the problem was. It turned out some of the families had deliberately broken the drain, failing to realise the water would then flow into their homes. Under the hot sun, the plumber gave them classes on how to maintain the drains and taps, but this gave a few of them the idea to make their own taps. Soon, up to 200 had sprung up around the colony. As a result, the water pressure dropped meaning no water was able to reach the higher areas. But, in spite of all these problems, there was a reversal in the position of the Kalakar, as now the residents were able to sell buckets of water to people from the surrounding areas rather than buying it in.

Meanwhile, at the farm, Mommie constantly complained about my work with the Kalakar. "Charity starts at home," she told me one day. I looked at the old lady sitting regally in her throne-like chair, which now had wheels to help her get around. She was supported by comfortable pillows and behind her hung pictures of Indian gods festooned with roses. Her arthritis had worsened and a servant had to help her stand.

"I am already doing everything I can for you," I thought to myself. I'd given Sunita half the farm. What more charity could Mommie want from me?

Subhead: Further Harassment

The slumlords continued with their harassment campaign, with no one raising a voice against them. They carried on with their threats to physically throw staff out of the clinic and moaned that the police were still threatening to arrest artists when

they came back late after performing at weddings. Unfortunately, the identity cards weren't effective, as the artists became over confident and sometimes behaved arrogantly towards the police, which wound them up.

We were expected to listen to everyone and solve all their problems, but in return we were getting no support in dealing with the harassment we were receiving. At my wits' end, I couldn't think of any other solution but to close the entire project down and wait to see what happened.

Poor Mei had worked so hard to set the project up and now had to resign herself to everything coming to a halt. She quite rightly told me I was being unprofessional, but even though I was aware of the gamble I was taking, my instinct told me this was the only thing that might help. At first, nothing happened. This didn't totally surprise me as so many other NGOs had left the colony and its people before us. Two months on, Mei bumped into a small group of artists during a festival and they asked her to start everything up again. Mei made it clear we wouldn't do any more work for them until we were sure we'd be safe.

With a new sense of determination, the group went back to the colony and persuaded everyone who wanted us back to spend 10 rupees each to hire a truck, come to my office and persuade me the silent majority had found a voice. For three days, trucks arrived in front of my office, which was an hour's drive away from the colony. This was enough to convince me to return. A few days later, the Kalakar Trust was up and running again as if nothing had happened. We never had to deal with that particular harassment problem again.

Moments of calm, however, were few and far between. About 10 days after we began work again, there was a big fire at my office building, which also housed our factory. Every day large bales filled with thousands of meters of fabric were brought to the factory to be counted and distributed to different manufacturers, which used them to create all sorts of garments.

On the night of the fire, several people, with their faces covered, overpowered the guards and tied them up. They then sprayed kerosene over the bales in front of the factory's entrance and set them alight, before making a getaway in a car parked on the other side of the building. The guards were unable to move and couldn't raise the alarm.

We lost a lot of material in the fire but thankfully no one was harmed – it was certainly a close call. It was a cold winter's night and one of our employees had been sleeping at the other side of the building wrapped up in fabric. If the arsonists had targeted that side of the building he would have almost certainly lost his life. In the wake of the blaze it crossed my mind that maybe the arsonists had been sent by the slumlords as an act of revenge. The police were never able to trace the culprits.

Chapter 23

Subhead: Destiny In Wait To Destroy A Beautiful Person

Rajiv was an integral part of our life and we talked to him on a personal level every day. He was so caring and always there for us when we had a problem. For instance, when our stereo broke down he got straight in there and tried to fix it himself. His favourite pastime was messing around with all the mechanical stuff in his house. He experimented with computers, satellite phones and, of course, ham radio. To relax he'd sit in his lazy boy chair and listen to contemporary or classical music. He had the most peaceful, bow-shaped lips and the smile of an angel. Satish saw him every day in the office and he often spoke with him again on the phone in the evening. Rajiv regularly worked until 3am trying to solve one crisis after another.

Politically things hadn't been going well. Rajiv had lost the elections and was on the campaign trail. Sonia was afraid for him every time he left the house and avoided going out herself. The children lived the same life and were tutored at home, unable to go out like other teenagers. Fear prevailed in every nook and cranny of their home; the atmosphere was heavy, quiet and waiting. Satish was constantly concerned that his friend didn't have enough security and warned him to stay away from crowds.

To escape this dreadful atmosphere, while Satish was busy campaigning on behalf of Rajiv and his constituency, I decided to go to Amsterdam for three weeks to study airbrush painting. I went to my classes and met up with friends and family, but the time away wasn't relaxing as thoughts of home dominated my mind. A feeling of powerlessness enveloped me as I ruminated on my frustrations with Mommie and my life in general.

While I was struggling to mentally escape my home country, Rajiv was flying his plane all over it, hopping from town to town to give campaign speeches. In South India the plane developed a snag. His last speech was on the verge of being cancelled when the engineer was able to make a last-minute repair. It was May 21 1991 when the plane arrived in the town of Sriperumbudur in Tamil Nadu. Flashing his angelic smile, Rajiv waded through the crowd as people reached out to touch him. By then his hands were covered in scratches and red patches from all the hands he had shaken during the campaign. As he carried on with the greetings, a woman, Dhanu, reached down to touch his feet before triggering an explosive belt. Our dear friend was dead in an instant, along with the female assassin and 14 other people.

I was eating dinner with friends, close to the canal where Anne Frank used to live, when I found out that my dear friend had been assassinated. One of my companions was told the news over the phone. At first I simply couldn't believe it. I began to tremble all over and the breath was knocked out of me. A friend grabbed hold of me to stop me from falling. I was due to stay in Amsterdam for a few extra days but all I wanted to do was go home. I arranged an earlier flight and was on my

way back to India in no time.

As soon as I arrived home, Satish and I went to see Sonia, who was as pale as a white China doll. Her worst nightmare had become a reality. Priyanka refused to leave her room and poured over every piece of news and watched every video featuring her father that she could lay her hands on. Rahul also remained confined to his room. The whole house was so quiet, but there was simply nothing to say. The man we loved was gone at the age of only 46. Even so, when the door swung open I still thought it would be Rajiv coming in with his sweet, sweet smile. Then it came back to me that he would never walk through the door again.

Everything passed in a blur. Soon fire was once again consuming the body of a Gandhi, the acrid smoke suffocated us all with its sharp, merciless smell. History was repeating itself.

Sonia was supported by the actor Amitab Bachchan during the ceremony and did not want the heartbroken Satish there. As I sat next to my man, I prayed this would be the last Gandhi funeral I'd attend.

With the smoke from the funeral still hanging in the air, the whirlpools of politics began to churn once again. The politicians were aware that Rajiv's death would push up the chances of his Congress party winning the elections. Sonia was approached to become its new leader, but she refused. A struggle began over whom was going to be the new party leader, as that person stood a good chance of becoming the next prime minister.

The two most powerful politicians in the party made a beeline for our house and suddenly we found ourselves in the middle of a political storm. One night, I heard Satish screaming at each contender in turn and couldn't help but wonder what was going on. Sonia was set to make the final decision over who would become the new leader and she picked the one Satish thought was the most capable: Narasimha Rao. Soon after that, he became India's new leader.

Now everybody was interested to know who was going to become the country's new finance minister. When Satish asked, Narasimha Rao told him, "I have selected someone who isn't actually a politician. He needs to get his wife's go-ahead before he accepts the position."

His wife said yes and the great economist Manmohan Singh entered parliament. Yet again, our life was about to change dramatically.

Subhead: Satish Is Minister

The country now had a new leader, a cabinet had been selected and sworn in and politicians were maneuvering left, right and centre to become ministers in the berths that were still available. Each night, Satish was on the phone to the PM pitching for this one or that one, as well as for himself. I felt like I was just a footnote in his life, but I also had other things to worry about. Sharika had reached college age but had failed to apply to anywhere. When I realised this with just one week to go before the deadline for admissions, I decided to take action and booked a ticket for us to travel to California so she could apply directly to four colleges. She was accepted into two of them and on our second-to-last night I received a phone call from home – Satish was going to be made Petroleum Minister! This was a bittersweet success for me. While I was very happy my darling's wish had come true, I was sad because I wouldn't get to witness him being sworn in. Sunita drove with him to parliament and was by his side as he celebrated his momentous achievement.

When I arrived home, I could immediately see the changes. There was a white Ambassador car in the middle of our parking area and several gunmen with carbines were waiting for the minister to leave the house!

Satish, in his crispy white kurta, confidently strode to his car and it was obvious he was in his element. Bursting with pride, I just knew he was going to do a great job.

The phone rang even more than before, but at least we now had an operator to answer it. In fact, I'd installed one months earlier after tiring of Mommie cutting me off when I called home long distance.

Subhead: A Full Circle

When Satish and I had met on that fateful flight 32,000 feet above Greece back when I was 19, I had been on my way to Taiwan to study Chinese language and painting. I had decided to become an artist when I was a little girl. Father always said, "In my experience, artists never make much money and quite a few remain destitute."

I'd thought a lot about this, so I had planned to add Chinese to the three languages I already spoke. I wanted to become a part-time interpreter until I was able to support myself through my art. I had been studying Mandarin for two years prior to the planned trip to Taiwan and already spoke enough to get by.

My mother had opposed the whole plan, and she blamed my father for the rest of her life for losing me, her logic being that if I hadn't been travelling I wouldn't have met Satish and settled down in India so far away from her.

Now my husband was Petroleum Minister and as a consequence he was invited to different countries. One of them happened to be China. I was so excited

when he came home and told me and insisted on accompanying him. The Chinese were delighted to host me too and so began a tour that would have been beyond my wildest dreams when I was 19. The incredible experience began at the airport, where we were welcomed into the country with a grand ceremony before being driven to our hotel in a motorcade. The guide car with sirens ensured all the traffic, including thousands of cyclists, parted like a shoal of fish before us so we could easily drive through. When we arrived at the hotel, a singer, dressed in a long black gown, was performing opera next to a grand piano in the lobby – this unexpected performance was just for us.

While Satish was in daily meetings with senior officials to discuss future cooperation, I was taken to see places like the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven. I was bowled over by the beautiful round lines and blue-peaked roof of the building. On another occasion, when Satish and I were taken to see the Great Wall of China, young guards with loudspeakers asked the public to make room for us, which they obediently did. While standing on the Great Wall, I was overcome by the events that had shaped my life and for a moment remembered my village, the church and the hand pump house.

"How did we get here?" I thought to myself.

We went to see oil fields and drove through neat villages where healthy babies were being taken out like little kings and queens. As I looked from the window of our limousine I couldn't help but think about the babies I was trying to help back in the Kalakar Colony.

Every meal consisted of at least 11 courses and all the food was washed down with copious glasses of strong Mai-Tai. Everyone was tipsy at the end of the evening and I could have eaten that great food for the rest of my life. However, all those late nights didn't mean the next day could begin at a reasonable hour. At six-thirty the Chinese stood in a neat, sober line outside the bedroom doors of the groggy Indians, signifying they were ready to start serious discussions!

We lunched with all the senior Chinese managers, including the labour union leader representing oil field workers. One of the Indian CEOs asked what problems the union handled on the workers' behalf.

"Everything is perfect," she replied. "No one has any complaints and everyone is very happy!"

I loved seeing the looks on the Indians' faces when they heard this - all eyebrows were raised in unison.

On the last leg of the trip we went to Shanghai, where it took me 40 minutes to cross the road because there was 12-deep bicycle traffic in each direction and it was impossible to stop the relentless flow of turning wheels. In India, I had gotten used to dodging traffic and holding up my hand to stop bicycles, scooters, horses, cars, trucks, buses and three-wheeler put-puts that often came from different directions. I was accustomed to jumping out of the way of anything with wheels, be they bicycles, rickshaws, cars or trolleys laden with vegetables or other saleable items. I knew an orange light was considered by many to be the same as green and how it was

necessary to watch out for sudden unexpected turns or people driving backwards. My ears were habituated to the sound of an orchestra of different horns. It often scared the living daylights out of me, but all this experience had no impact on my traffic-negotiating skills in China. The hordes of bikes ignored me, all faces staring resolutely forward. Finally, when I did cross the road, I decided it hadn't been worth the trouble and spent another hour crossing back again. I missed having a guard with a loud speaker to ask the crowds to make way for me.

Subhead: Rashtrapati Bhavan And Hyderabad House

With Prime minister P.V. Narasima Rao

Back on home turf, we were invited to dine in the grand, red sandstone, colonial-style presidential palace, Rashtrapati Bhavan, with its black, wrought iron gates, stone elephants and spectacular domes. Eating with us was Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation and the entire cabinet, including the Indian President and Prime Minister. We drove there in our white Ambassador, the red lights flashing, a gunman in the front seat with his carbine sticking out of the front window and a jeep in tow filled with armed guards. Satish was called 'His Excellency' now, and for formal occasions such as this one I dressed in bright but conservative Punjabi suits that covered my arms and reached below my knees. I accessorised these with scarves and wore loose, comfortable cotton trousers underneath.

Upon arrival, we entered a big, ornate hall with columns and thick carpets, and stood in the long receiving line to meet and greet the visitors. As refreshments were served the hall filled with light chatter in several languages. Then the signal came it was time for us to move to the dining room, where a long white table had been laid. There was a card for each person indicating where to sit, and someone was on hand to show me to my seat, which wasn't far from the Russian leader. A series of long speeches followed and it felt as if the speakers were in competition over who could say the most. I zoned out until the fragrant, deep fried food arrived, stimulating my senses. Before we could get started, Boris Yeltsin indicated he wanted to raise a toast. I picked up a glass of what looked like orange juice and with my pinkie in the air, followed the leader's example by drinking it down in one gulp. It quickly hit me this mysterious drink was made up of several canned juices mixed with fresh ginger and a hint of green chillies – it was the worst drink I had ever tasted, but Boris was not deterred and when a different juice with masala was placed in front of him he offered up another toast. More juices arrived and for the sake of Indo-Russian relations, I swallowed just a small drop each time. I felt sorry for Boris who had to make do with

vile tasting juices when he was probably used to sipping neat vodka every night. As soon as we got home, Satish got out his whisky to raise a proper toast, and I'm sure Boris did the same.

On another occasion at Rashtrapati Bhavan, we attended an alcohol-free reception for the American president's wife, Hillary Clinton, who was accompanied by the Indian politician Najma Heptulla. We stood in line again to meet and greet Hillary, who asked Satish and I how long we had been married. Later, Najma Heptulla told us how Hillary had asked her, "Who is the minister with the good looking foreign wife?"

At Hyderabad House, the former home of the last Nizam of Hyderabad State, Osman Ali Khan, I had dinner with the Dutch Prime Minister, Ruud Lubbers. The beautiful colonial building with its big, winding staircases and chandeliers was the best of its kind. During the dinner I spoke the three languages I know all at the same time. Seated next to me was a man from the Dutch PM's office. "Where in the Netherlands do you come from?" he asked.

Now, this question always puts me on the spot, as I have never lived in the Netherlands (Belgium became independent in 1830), so I replied, "My father comes from Budel, but he would be mortified to hear me telling you, as he is very embarrassed by it." **(**Dad felt it was a lower class area.**)**

"Don't worry about it," the man replied. "I come from the next village."

The world is most certainly a small place!

Subhead: Difficult Times

After Mother left Father, his health deteriorated and he slowly wasted away in front of my eyes. It was as if each month another layer of him peeled away. He always enjoyed good food and drink, but while the will was there to enjoy it the way proved difficult. He spent every winter with us in India but come the summer the heat, flies and other insects overwhelmed him and he'd leave for Amsterdam, a city he loved. On one such visit he was admitted to hospital after he began vomiting blood. Against everyone's wishes he discharged himself, but the effort to even walk now took all his strength and it was as if his movements were in slow motion.

When he returned to India in the October, I asked him, "Papa, how much blood did you vomit?"

"Don't make a fuss, Sterre," he replied. "It was just a small teacup full and they couldn't find out where it came from. I'm fine now, forget about it."

I believed him and bought him goodies to eat. But following one of his favourite meals, he announced he had vomited blood again and needed to go to hospital. I rushed to the bathroom to try and establish how much blood he had lost. What I found sent shivers down my spine; the sink was full to the top with black, congealed blood. I rushed to the hospital where the doctor immediately performed an endoscopy and discovered a weak artery in Father's stomach. He was given a blood transfusion followed by stomach bypass surgery.

Shortly afterwards, the ICU doctor called me and said, “Your father is uncontrollable and pulling tubes out from his mouth and arms. What do I do?”

“He will not listen to me or anyone else,” I replied. “This is his nature, just give him more sedatives.”

The doctor followed my instructions, but the following morning I found out Father had been sedated so much he could have died.

On another occasion, I walked in on Father as he was being helped by a nurse to go to the toilet. An IV was still attached to his hand and he suddenly raised his other one to hit her. “Don’t touch me,” he shouted. The nurse, a veritable angel, ignored his outburst and gradually his health began to improve. But the operation triggered a downward spiral that continued for the next two years. Father deteriorated to the point he could barely walk and he spent all his time in bed listening to the Dutch nursery rhymes Mother had once sung and recorded for him. I prayed to God to have mercy and end his suffering. He passed away one summer’s night while in Amsterdam, but although numb, I felt certain God was with me and had answered my prayers to let him slip away. As I rushed from Delhi to Amsterdam, there was an inexplicable peace in my heart. The Indian nurse who’d travelled with Father told me his last words were, “I am feeling sick and restless, do something!”

She took him to the hospital and that night, after going for a little walk in the hallway and enjoying a cigarette, he climbed back into bed and passed away. He was 71. We laid him to rest near Budel, where he was born, and upon his grave I placed a wreath sent by the Indian Prime Minister. I was soothed by the knowledge Father would have been proud and honoured to see this.

Chapter 24

Subhead: Trouble

At home problems were mounting, as the cauldron of politics was on the verge of reaching boiling point. A public litigation had been going on for some time challenging a minister's powers to distribute petrol pumps. Satish felt the only criteria necessary in order to be eligible for one was being poor. He was breaking the cartels by giving pumps to underprivileged applicants. Some cartels controlled more than 200 pumps and this simply wasn't fair. Just one pump could supply a family with financial stability for generations.

One of the people Satish distributed a pump to was an attendant who put petrol in his and Rajiv's cars for years. When Rajiv died, this man told Satish, "When you become Petroleum Minister, please give me a petrol pump".

The pump still functions to this day.

When Satish's Congress party next stood in the elections they lost, as people felt the government's policies were bringing about change too slowly.

Satish was accused of misusing his powers by allocating the petrol pumps at his discretion. The Supreme Court ruled against this and also deemed all petrol pumps distributed by Satish null and void unless they complied with new guidelines. The law was to apply retrospectively only for Satish and not for any of the previous ministers who had possessed and used the same powers.

In addition, Satish was made culpable for each pump distributed 'illegally' and ordered to pay a fine of 50-lakh, which was a huge amount for us. As the Supreme Court of India had made this decision, it was difficult to appeal it. Many families lost what Satish had provided them with and some threatened him as a result. On top of this he was at risk of being jailed. During this stressful time, sleep brought only nightmares.

Subhead: Coping With The Times

In 1994, Samir was in Florida studying political science and Sharika was in San Diego studying communication.

Without them I felt lonely and walked around the farm on my own every day consoling myself that at least I had a beautiful home to feel miserable in.

Then a police team arrived at our gate to warn us we'd lose our house if we didn't pay the fine we owed.

On his politician's wages, Satish didn't have the money to pay it. However, I did. I'd amassed some savings from my business and I'd also received an inheritance after Father passed away. I settled the fine only to read reports in the newspaper how the money I'd used couldn't have been gained via legitimate means, as the fine was so big. This really got me down as I'd used Father's money and the accusations would have really upset him.

"We are being hounded and it won't stop until we are in our graves," I thought sadly to myself.

In spite of all this tension, we tried to follow our daily routines as best we could. Each day I did transcendental meditation for 25 minutes to try and calm my troubled mind.

Meanwhile, at big family Sunday lunches with Mommie, Sunita, Mei and her husband and children, I tried to keep the conversation light and not provoke unwelcome remarks. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't lighten the atmosphere. One day, Sunita turned to me and said, "I had a dream in which you gave me a dog that bit me."

I decided it was hopeless. How could I reassure her I meant her only well when even her dreams told how I had it against her? The message was clear. No matter what I tried, nothing was going to change.

At least twice a week we received thick bundles from the court detailing yet more cases involving Satish and the unlawful petrol pumps. He filed a petition to have

the case against him reviewed but he didn't get his hopes up, as only one in a thousand of these appeals were accepted. But by this point all we had left to grasp hold of was the last straw. To our amazement, the review was accepted, giving us a glimmer of a possible light at the end of the tunnel.

Subhead: Thunder And Lightening

The ground under our feet rumbled further when trouble came at us from another direction. Satish and I were approaching our 25th wedding anniversary and I wanted to celebrate in a grand manner, in a way I hadn't been able to do for the wedding. When Mommie found out about my plans she was naturally staunchly against them and convinced Satish to back her up. I went ahead anyway and sent out invitations to all extended family members from both sides, asking them to attend a party at the farm. During the celebrations, we repeated our marriage vows in front of the sacrificial fire and this time I wore a beautiful sari. However, things didn't go completely to plan as right before the ceremony we received a message telling us Satish's assistant had been picked up by the Central Bureau of Investigation and was under interrogation. This gave me a terrible pain in my heart and throughout the day I couldn't help wondering whether the poor man was being tortured.

A reception was planned for the evening and it was far too late to cancel it. The interrogation continued until the next day and we feared our home would be searched. We were due to attend the international meeting of the FAI (the World Air sports Federation) in Bled, Slovenia, and we decided to go ahead with our plans. On the way we stopped off in London and spent a night at the Four Seasons Hotel. In the middle of the night we received a call to inform us 180 investigators were at the farm searching every nook and cranny. That wasn't all. Just an hour-and-a-half later, we were told to leave our rooms immediately, as there was a bomb scare. Ignoring instructions to leave personal possessions behind, I grabbed our passports and travellers cheques and we made a dash for the emergency exit still dressed in our nightclothes. Many of the guests were already outside when we got there. Some of them were barefoot and shivering under the cloudy sky.

"And we thought things couldn't get any worse," I joked to Satish.

After half an hour of standing in the parking lot surrounded by guests in their nighties and pyjamas, fire engines and countless police cars, we were allowed back inside; it had been a hoax.

Once back in our room, Mei called. There was trouble at the slum. The Kalakar Trust had been campaigning to build a theatre to help provide an income for the artists. After some hiccups, building work had begun and Impresario was furious we hadn't informed him. Communication had broken down between us years earlier but he'd been threatening to blacken my name in the press unless I gave him my ownership papers. I'd explained these weren't mine to give, but he wasn't having any of it. True to his word, he'd stirred up trouble by accusing Mei and I of stealing money meant for the slum's residents. To try and calm the situation down, we'd decided to organise a prayer meeting involving the artists. Engelien, who had attended my anniversary party, helped out in my absence.

Mei told me how as the Hindu priest started saying prayers in front of the holy

fire, Impresario arrived on the scene with his strong men and two busloads of rowdy supporters, who were screaming through loudspeakers.

The prayers could no longer be heard and following an angry exchange with the priest, Impresario kicked the sacred fire. Mei had a terrible time trying to control the prayer-goers and stop them fighting back. Luckily she managed to prevent a riot and no one was hurt, but the entire episode was filmed by at least six TV film crews called in by Impresario. All those miles away in London, I felt like a sitting duck struck by a bullet.

Following our phone conversation, I reflected on all the work I'd put into getting the theatre off the ground. Much of the money ploughed into it had come from the sale of my paintings and via donations from friends. Sadness overwhelmed me as I thought of how all my efforts were to go to waste.

Our stay abroad seemed endless and I was overwhelmed by listlessness. When Satish and I visited a little church in the middle of a fairytale lake in Bled, we discovered it was possible to ring a bell and make a wish. We joined forces and made the same wish for all our troubles to go away.

When we finally returned home it was strange to find all our private things in different places to where we'd left them. Unknown hands had touched everything, including underwear, toiletries, photographs and books. Every corner of the house had been searched.

I met with Mei and we decided the Kalakar Trust work had to go on in spite of the fact our name had been destroyed and all the theatre's activities had ground to a halt. We couldn't see a way of salvaging the project.

Subhead: Work Continues

In 1996, a festival promoter from Dubai approached the trust asking some of our artists to participate in the Dubai Shopping Festival. He wanted to add an Indian flavour to the event. We invited him to meet our best group, but seeing them standing in a line and dressed in dirty, torn clothes didn't impress him. I convinced him to book the group with the promise I'd get them into excellent shape for Dubai. I introduced the concept of rehearsals and we spent two hours practising each day. This helped build up stamina and discipline, which they needed for Dubai where performances could last for six hours with only short breaks in between.

We also sent other artists and crafts people to Dubai for the festival and the money they made helped improve their living conditions back home. Slowly their huts turned into solid rooms. Meanwhile, the Women's Kalakar Savings and Thrift Society continued to provide training and loans.

The reputation of the Kalakar performers grew and in total more than 700 artists, who could never have dreamed of sitting on an aeroplane, got the opportunity to perform abroad. As well as Dubai, groups visited such diverse countries as South Africa, Portugal, the Netherlands, France, Burkina Faso and Egypt. However, the moment one group was selected to perform in foreign climes, we'd be on the receiving end of bitter complaints from those who hadn't been selected. Even old

ladies with white hair, spindly legs and thick glasses came to ask me why they hadn't been selected to be dancers! I'd get so fed up I considered stopping sending anyone abroad, but the benefits to them were so great I had to put my own feelings aside.

On one occasion in Dubai, one of the magicians made the money of one of the audience members 'disappear' without returning it. He lied about the amount, saying it was a lot less than we'd been told. The group's chaperone eventually found the cash, but she was reluctant to give it back, as this could have resulted in the magician being arrested. Instead she distributed the money equally between the group of artists and made them all promise not to copy the magician's actions.

The following year, the sword swallower pushed his weapon down his throat too deep and had to be rushed to the nearest hospital. Luckily the injury wasn't too serious and he was back to normal within a few days.

Subhead: Meanwhile, Back In Delhi

A man called me from the slum with a problem, though at first he was reluctant to tell me what it was. Eventually, I gathered it concerned his wife.

"Is she pregnant?" I enquired.

"Yes!" came the reply.

It transpired not only was the man's wife in labour, she was also carrying twins.

I needed the name of the man's wife in order to inform the hospital of the impending arrival of a new patient. Again, the man was reluctant to open his mouth. He finally confessed he didn't know it.

"But what do you call her?" I asked.

"'Wife' or sometimes 'Mother of my child, '" came the reply.

The problem was solved after the man found out his partner's name from family members. The incident reminded me of when Mommie told me it was impolite of me to call Satish by his first name. Luckily, my husband didn't agree!

Subhead: Some Relief From Pressure

While we were being besieged with court cases, Satish started seeing astrologers at least once a week, which improved his mood. Instead of concentrating on our troubles, each night we discussed all their different predictions and their pros and cons.

"An astrologer a day keeps the doctor away," I joked.

We were still waiting for the Supreme Court to reach a decision. Months passed without any news until Satish came home one day and declared, "An astrologer has told me the judgment is to be passed in three months' time in my favour. This will take place on August seventh."

We counted down the months, weeks and days to see if the prediction would come true. Generally, a week's notice was given of the announcement of a decision, but the beginning of August brought no such news. When August sixth arrived, we didn't hear anything until 10.30pm. The judge's decision was to be announced the following morning. Following a sleepless night we found out the astrologer was right – the judge ruled in Satish's favour and even pronounced he'd been the victim of an injustice. The entire 50-lakh fine was to be returned! When I'd paid it out I'd never expected to see the money again but to my great delight it was returned to me within 10 days.

We were so relieved, but then other strange events began to occur, which I put down to all the superstitious goings-on in the house of late.

Subhead: Further Weirdness

I continued with the routine of washing everyone's clothing, the only change being that I was now cleaning white kurtas instead of the t-shirts and jeans Satish used to wear.

One day, I went into the washroom to discover Mommie's maid had accidentally put a red sock in with the whites. A big, red stain festooned all my husband's clothes. With the red sock in my hand, I walked into the room where Girish, Sarita, Mommie, Sunita and the maid were all listening spellbound to a short, round woman reading something from a booklet. This was to be my first encounter with Sunita's new friend Dimpy, a horoscope reader. A short black braid rested on her red Kurta and she smelt of incense. She was reading from an astrological text and her words stopped me in my tracks. "Satish will never deny his sister anything in this life," she said. "This is because he murdered her in a previous one."

I was astounded to witness my family lapping up this absurd information. I completely forgot about the red sock!

That evening, I told Satish what I heard, but he dismissed it as nothing to be concerned by. But I got a bad feeling more trouble would be coming from Dimpy's direction.

Sunita began to duck her head down when she passed me on the driveway in her car, even going to the length of reversing into a spot where she could no longer see me. Even stranger, the leaves of coconut trees began to appear all over the farm. I definitely hadn't planted them, as I knew they wouldn't thrive in the climate, so who had? It transpired Mommie had instructed the gardeners to bury 10 coconuts every month. I noticed how they mostly appeared close to the path where I walked and the area I used for my meditation. A servant informed me the coconuts were being used to ward off the evil eye. I couldn't help wondering if it was me they were trying to ward off.

Chapter 25

Subhead: Sharika Returns

Throughout all our difficulties, the children kept in touch and gave their support over the phone. They were living a completely different life in America: studying, making friends and working. Sharika had blossomed into a gorgeous young woman with light brown silky hair and the figure of a Roman sculpture. She was strong and tall and when she entered a room her tiger eyes grabbed everyone's attention.

Missing India, she decided to return home. Satish and I flew to the US so we could bring her and her two cats back. The cats had been given their own passports and during a stopover in France they had their identities tattooed on their ears, as per the law of the country. We stayed with a friend and one of the cats went missing for two days, before eventually being discovered trapped under the house.

Back home, Sharika soon reassimilated to life in India. It was election time and Satish's party had chosen him to represent Indira Gandhi's electoral seat. By this time, he had been in parliament for many years. I didn't involve myself in electioneering so Satish roped in Sharika to help him, and she accompanied him on his travels deep into the countryside of Uttar Pradesh to campaign.

She had gone from one extreme to another having left the insulated environment of America for the reality of Indian villages. This particular election was

quite awkward for Satish as his opponent, Arun Nehru, was an old acquaintance and one of the late Rajiv's cousins. He was the one who called Satish 'mail boy' when he first entered politics. He was representing the Hindu party and had also brought along his daughter to help him campaign. Sharika had played with her as a little girl.

When Sharika returned home she told me all about her experiences on the campaign trail. "Whenever we approached a village hundreds of children ran towards our vehicle," she said. "There wasn't an adult in sight. We had to knock on the door of the houses to find them."

Sharika's first language was Hindi and although she had studied it to the highest level at school and wrote it well, she hadn't spoken it for a while. This didn't deter her from making public speeches at community meetings asking the population to vote for her father. She was horrified by the poverty she witnessed and told me how during one meeting a mother came up to her, lifted her severely disabled baby and pleaded with her to make the child normal. She was confronted with the same dilemma as me, feeling powerless and overwhelmed by the enormous scale of the problems confronting India and its people.

Satish won the election and became a member of the lower house of parliament. We celebrated the family's success with food, drinks and loud conversation.

Subhead: A New Beginning

Sharika had studied communications and decided to start her own small production house with the idea of making movies and TV programmes. She had many ideas but decided to focus on creating a fantasy adventure for TV incorporating elements of South East Asian history. She researched and wrote the entire story before presenting it to a leading television channel. To her delight, the project was given the green light.

The channel provided her with a shortlist of men for the hero of the show. On the top of it was an actor called Rahul Bhatt. Sharika, then 29, duly wrote to him asking if he would be interested in appearing in the series. His father happened to open the letter and immediately noticed my daughter's signature at the bottom. The name held a very special meaning for him, as Sharika is the most important deity of the Kashmiri Pundits, a Saraswat Brahmin community from the Kashmir Valley. Indira Gandhi was also a member of this esteemed community.

Rahul had decided he didn't wanted to act in TV anymore, as he wished to concentrate on his movie career, but his father urged him to reconsider his decision for the sake of the name with the special meaning. The first shoot was scheduled to take place at the hill station of Mussoorie in Uttarakhand. Sharika was struggling with an erratic collection of actors and crew members when Rahul suddenly appeared dressed in a pair of bright yellow pants. She'd never seen his photograph or any of his performances, but the sight of him warmed her heart with happiness. His square face, large, heavy-lidded expressive eyes, thick dark hair and slim, muscular body fitted the image she had of her hero exactly. Meanwhile, Rahul was captivated by my confident, intelligent daughter with her queen-like poise, funky clothes and beautiful eyes. He was also impressed by her guts in taking on the huge challenge of producing

a TV series with no experience. He stepped in to help as soon as he realised the crew were taking advantage of this lack of experience by not responding to her. At this point, he'd been acting for five years and often played the romantic lead. While sitting amid props and equipment next to a waterfall high up in the Himalayas, the pair embarked on long conversations about the project and each other. As they got to know each other, green mountains loomed all around, seeming to touch the blue sky. A set had been built with tribal huts and a wooden bridge spanning the water. Actors in medieval Indian costumes mingled with a busy crew and none of them could fail to notice the subplot taking place! Love blossomed in front of them and on the third day of the shoot the hero proposed marriage.

"I was so frightened I said yes," Sharika later told me. "I don't know why."

It had all happened so fast and reminded me of my own love story.

Satish and I had been concerned, as the previous boyfriends Sharika had introduced us to hadn't been up to it. They tended to have low energy and were sad-looking types with the conversational skills of lap dogs. I had prayed for her to meet someone more worthy and Satish had consulted with his astrologers concerning her future. One predicted the exact month Sharika would meet her future husband and he even foretold how she would kick out her current 'steady' to make way for Rahul. She just walked up to the young man and told him point blank it was over. The poor boy couldn't believe it because it was so out of the blue.

Meanwhile, Satish and I had no clue there was a new man in our daughter's life until they'd been together for six months and she requested an official meeting. We all sat down in the living room and within a minute of the drinks being poured, Satish asked Rahul, "Do you want to marry my daughter? If you do, that's okay."

Lucky Rahul won his instant approval and I was so shocked by the turn of events I covered my face with my pink scarf and couldn't bring myself to look up for at least another five minutes. To his credit, Rahul told Satish he did want to marry our daughter without even batting an eye.

Rahul was part of the Kashmiri Pundit community and was born in Srinagar. His family had lived peacefully in Kashmir, occupying a beautiful traditional home – made of intricately carved wood – for generations. The beautiful Dal Lake, filled with fish and floating gardens, was just a stone's throw away and the still water reflected green mountains and colourful houseboats. Children raced on the water in homemade canoes – this was truly a paradise on earth! In the autumn, the air was filled with the earthy smell of fallen leaves soon to be covered by snow.

In the 1990s, when Rahul was 17, he and his family went out for the day. While they were absent, their neighbours received a message for them, which read, "Leave Kashmir today, your house will be ransacked tonight."

The family didn't want to take any chances and packed their bags, planning to return a week later. Their neighbours gave them money for flights and they left on the next plane out of Kashmir. That very night the entire house was turned over and everything that could be removed was taken, even the bathroom taps. The house was burned down and sadly the family never returned to Srinagar.

Subhead: Back In Time

On Satish's final flight for the airline, we took Sharika, then eight and Samir, then 10, to Srinagar. We visited the Sharika Temple, which was perched high on a hill in the middle of town, and told the priest how our daughter shared her name with it. He immediately offered to do a special puja (prayer) for her.

I was overwhelmed by the ceremony and wished from deep within my heart that Sharika would have a happy, healthy life and find a good husband. Little did I know that within a kilometre from the temple, a young boy running around in his shorts would grow up to become my daughter's husband.

Before Rahul was born, his grandfather had prayed fervently for a grandson, as there had been no male heirs in the family for generations. With a baby in the family on the way, he undertook a special pilgrimage that involved walking around the hillock of the Sharika Temple every day, the circles increasing to 11 times as the pregnancy progressed. He only stopped when his wish was fulfilled and Rahul, the future hero, was born.

After the family left Kashmir, Rahul completed his education before deciding to become an actor. He borrowed his father's last 100,000 rupees and, aged 19, went to Bombay. When he arrived he handed the money over to a broker who promptly ran off with it. Now penniless, Rahul struggled to earn a living and visited various studios trying to get work until his good looks attracted the attention of someone who advised him to take part in the Mr India competition. Rahul took this advice and went on to win the competition. Subsequently, he was offered roles in a succession of TV series and movies. By the time he met Sharika, he had established a name for himself.

Subhead: Sharika Gets Married

Following Sharika and Rahul's initial decision to get married, it took some time for Satish's astrologers to decide upon a lucky date. I was getting worried because Indian marriages are such incredible extravaganzas.

"How am I going to cope with about a thousand different customs and ceremonies?" I thought to myself. *"I don't want to offend anyone with an innocent mistake."*

I was overwhelmed by the idea it was my job to pull the wedding off. Ever the perfectionist, Sharika knew exactly what she wanted and I worried my efforts would disappoint her. I certainly couldn't turn to Mommie for advice because that would involve being caught between two fires, and my priority was to do exactly what my daughter wished without interference from extended family members.

Years earlier, I'd described a beautiful wedding dress to Sharika which I'd seen when I first arrived in India. She recalled that description and asked me to create something just as beautiful. My feet trembled in my shoes as I thought about the great responsibility awaiting me. *"What if the wedding dress does not live up to her expectations?"* I fretted.

Traditionally, Indian brides wore red so at least there wouldn't need to be a

big debate over the colour. The fashion at the time was for bridal dresses to be covered by so much glitter and bling the bride needed to be held up! I put my mind to work to create something very unique that incorporated artistic expression and traditional beauty. I imagined a deep red silk with a broad cream silk border covered with hand embroidery reflecting the story of the wedding. Sharika loved the idea so we went shopping and selected a beautiful, red silk brocade with delicate golden branches woven into it. Then I drew the entire border for embroidering. This represented real scenes, with the figures of actual family members participating in the wedding.

At the front of the long skirt was a depiction of the wedding ceremony with the priest, Sharika and Rahul next to the sacrificial fire. The effect of the smoke curling up was created using a light blue net, and the rest of the family were shown standing around and watching the proceedings. The wedding clothing of the guests was patched on by hand in rich fabrics with tiny pearls, emeralds and rubies. At the back of the skirt, Satish was embroidered with his astrologers to represent the first step in the marriage process – not that the astrologers had much of a role besides predicting Sharika's marriage. On the left side, the baraat was depicted, showing Rahul riding towards the wedding ceremony on a white horse accompanied by a large number of drummers. On the right side of the wedding scene, the doli was portrayed, showing the bride being taken away from her parental home. The actual marriage was displayed on the border of the wedding skirt.

With the help of a jewellery designer, Sharika and I designed a beautiful piece of jewellery to match the wedding outfit. The centrepiece was a one-and-a-half inch medallion, on which Sharika and Rahul's faces were painted on glass. In order to illustrate this tiny scene, I had to wear three pairs of glasses at the same time and use a brush with only one hair. I painted the couple beside each other in Mussoorie next to the waterfall where they met. The background was painted on a separate piece of glass and placed at the back of the portraits, giving a stunning, three-dimensional effect. The jeweller then surrounded the medallion with colourful, hand-painted enamelled flowers and leaves set with pearls.

Subhead: The Ceremony

The wedding was set for November 2004 and as we hadn't hired a wedding planner, I roped in my friends for advice and to help with the arrangements. My loyal artist friend Naresh was put in charge of transforming an open-air space at the back of the farm into the wedding venue.

We decided to invite family from across India and the world, and I hoped this joyous occasion would provide an opportunity for reconciliation between what Mommie called 'her side' and the 'enemy side' – in other words, my family and friends. I worried how Sunita was going to behave. At the previous weddings of her younger cousins she'd been argumentative and bossy.

I learned of an Indian tradition where all the female members of a family receive a sari when a son gets married. I decided it would be nice to do this, even though it was my daughter saying the marriage vows. Sharika and I went sari shopping in crowded Delhi and came home laden with bags. Sunita helped us decide who to give each sari to and the mood was pleasant. I crossed my fingers the

proceedings would continue in this manner, but when I gave the gifts out some of Mommie's family admonished me and even threatened to return the gifts. Either they felt I had operated outside of tradition or they told me they didn't like the design. Again I was reminded how you can't please all of the people all of the time.

Sharika designed her own white and gold wedding cards and we duly posted them out to friends and family. We gave Mommie some cards separately so she could invite whomever she wanted. Just a week before the wedding, we felt the first signs of the storm about to hit. Mommie wouldn't tell us who she'd invited – as the family's elder she would have taken it as a big insult if we'd asked – so we had no way of knowing who was coming. Unbeknown to us, she had given her invitations to Sunita who'd sent them to her own friends, including Dimpy. Sunita had been sick with cancer and Dimpy had been very helpful during her recovery. Strangely, both Sunita and Mommie hadn't even told Satish and I that she was seriously ill, so we hadn't been able to help. Dimpy had spent lots of time at Sunita's house since then, rearranging everything to suit her own taste and sometimes staying the night.

Sharika was extremely angry when she discovered Dimpy was due to come to the wedding and decided she didn't want her to attend. Besides the fact Dimpy generally behaved strangely, she'd been rude to my daughter, turning her nose up at her several times when she walked by. Sunita refused to accept her friend had been uninvited to the wedding and threatened to take her own life during the ceremony if she wasn't able to come.

"As Sharika walks around the sacrificial fire everybody will be watching my dead body being carried down the driveway," she announced.

I didn't know whether to take her threats seriously or not. All I could do was hope for the best and keep going – a bit like a soldier heading into battle! Around eighty family members descended on the farm for the celebrations and I had to provide them with clean bedding, towels and meals for five days. Realising I didn't have enough supplies I had to run to the market to buy blankets, pillows, sheets and towels.

My own mother wasn't going to be attending the wedding as she had developed a fear of flying and although Engelien and Mei were present with their families, they couldn't help with the Sunita situation. I turned to Mommie's relatives, some of whom I was close to, but with the first of the marriage ceremonies approaching, I had no idea how things were progressing. The relatives had gathered around Sunita at her house no more than 100 yards away, but I was scared to ask for an update in case it made things worse.

Subhead: Rolling Along

The first ceremony was the Mata ki Chowki, where the goddess of female power is worshiped. This goddess had a very special and deep meaning for Sharika, as she had studied the philosophy around female 'shakti' (power) for three years. As the ceremony got underway, the relatives did not look happy. They had just come from Sunita's house and there was a leaden atmosphere.

Unbeknown to us, Sunita had phoned Rahul and told him he would be making

the biggest mistake of his life if he married Sharika. Then she invited Sharika's best friend to her house, scaring her with her bitter, threatening talk and dishevelled appearance. This friend came to the ceremony but her knees were shaking so much she could barely walk. I felt I had no more space left in my head to deal with this additional tension.

With relief, I realised the family had succeeded in talking my sister-in-law around when she attended the next few rituals quite normally. She refused to look at Sharika or me but otherwise behaved well.

On the night before the wedding, Mommie decided to host a gift-giving gathering for relatives. She positioned herself in the middle of the room as family members of all ages took their seats around the matriarch. One by one everyone came forward to give their gift and then inspect each other's presents. Throughout all the ceremonies, including this one, Mommie's face was grim, the corners of her mouth firmly pointing downwards as she threw dark glances at Sharika and bestowed me short, baleful looks for extra measure. Her gift to Sharika was a beautiful Burmese ruby set, which I had given to her many years before when we lived in the house on the lane. Mommie had told me it was one of her dreams to own such a set, so when someone I knew went to Burma I asked them to bring one back for her. She loved it and wore it often. But when Sharika received the gift it was ruined for her. She couldn't bear to look in her grandmother's eyes, as she had supported Sunita in the whole Dimpy matter.

After the gifts had been handed out, speeches were made, but the subject of them was mainly Sunita and how wonderful and important she was. This was accompanied by loud clapping, completely drowning out any good wishes for the bride. I felt so deeply sad, as Sharika was seated in the corner being ignored. It was so unbelievable my mind shut down and I observed as a spectator watching play.

Satish was carried away by the occasion and failed to realise how strange the situation had become. He even declared, "Sunita is the most important person in my life!"

The wedding was now all about Sunita. Sharika didn't sleep that night, as she repeatedly went over the scene in her head.

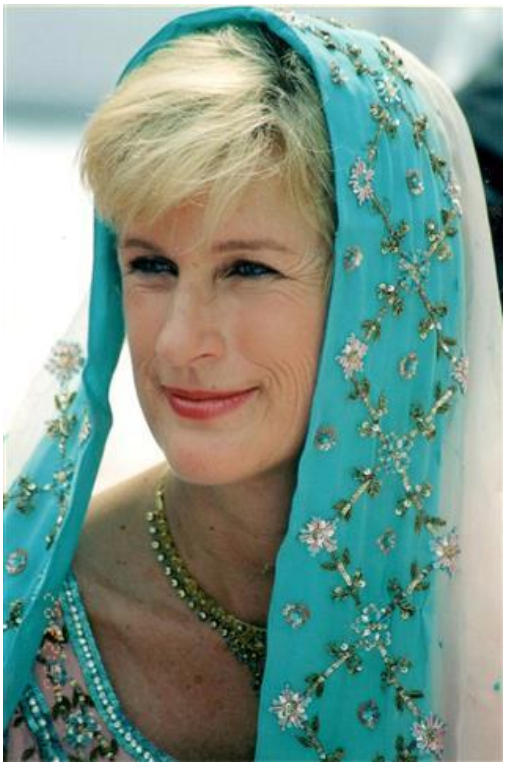
Of all the bad family experiences I have been through, the wedding was the worst and I felt glad I only had one daughter and would therefore never have to go through it again.

Subhead: The Big Day

On the morning of the wedding, I was running hither and thither tying up all the little loose ends when I noticed my black cat had been gravely injured. His right eye was rolling right out of its socket. It was a frightening sight and in the midst of all the arrangements I had to organise for the poor guy to be taken to the vets. Luckily, our veterinarian had not yet left for the wedding and managed to save the cat's eye. It was likely that one of the workers brought in to help on the farm in the run up to the wedding had thrown a stone at the cat, as in India black ones are deemed unlucky.

My tailors worked on Sharika's dress right up until the last minute, so I was in suspense until the moment came when she could try it on. Thankfully, it fitted beautifully and she looked gorgeous. As she stepped out of her room, we could hear the drummers in the distance signifying the imminent arrival of the groom on his white horse. As he approached, his family and friends danced in front of him and the entire scene resembled an Indian fairytale. Our beautiful green lawn was covered by a square stage surrounded by large steps – our very own Roman amphitheatre!

By midday a hazy blue sky hovered above and the sun was out. Everything was covered with strings of fragrant white jasmine flowers. On the edges of the lawn, large silver containers for food were placed on long tables covered in white cloth. A traditional musician played music on a series of small iron gongs producing a crisp tinkling sound. In our dining room was the huge wedding cake. The air conditioning had been turned up to the max in a bid to keep it cool. Each guest was dressed like royalty. Real jewels sparkled on the necks of the ladies, who wore beautiful silk saris in soft colours, their dark, glossy hair shining in the sunlight. The men, including the non-Indians, wore turbans and long traditional coats reaching below the knee and trimmed with a little embroidery or gold edging. Old and new friends were all present, including the entire Gandhi family. Thankfully, there was no sign of Dimpy.



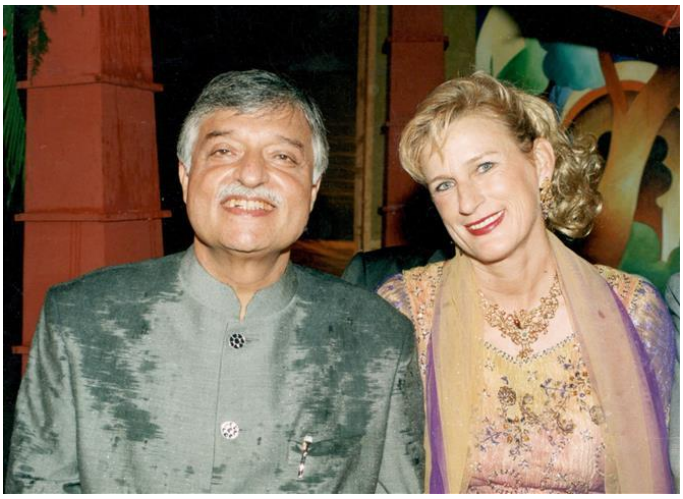
Life had come a full circle and as Sharika married in the Kashmiri Hindu tradition, a small religious fire burned as an ancient text was read out. We'd set up a mike so all the guests could hear it. As the ceremony entered the final stage, the bride sat on her father's lap as he recited ancient words, tears running down his face. Sharika then carefully walked on a small line of 1000 rupee notes towards her new family.

I felt so happy and relieved. I had succeeded in fulfilling my role as the mother of a Hindu bride. But there wasn't a moment to dwell on it, as I still had to take care of the guests and the rest of the day's arrangements. Photographers from the press took photographs alongside our own. I walked into a large group of family and friends being photographed around Mommie and asked if it was okay to join them. When I stood in the group, Mommie said in Hindi, "If there is a good daughter-in-law, it is…" pointing her hand towards Sonia. This wasn't the first time she had humiliated me in public by saying this, only there hadn't always been such a large crowd. I had promised myself not to react to anything Mommie said during Sharika's special day and ignored the insult. Being the mother of the bride, it was important for me to look after the comforts of the guests, specifically the family of the groom, and ensure everything went well.

Not all of my husband's family thought I was a failure and Mommie's sisters complimented me later on how well I had done.

Subhead: At Last

The following night there was a large reception. Many VIPs from the political and business world attended. The back lawn had been transformed into a wonderland. But as we received the first guests we heard thunder in the distance. I crossed my fingers and prayed for the storm to pass. On top of this, we heard the news that the Prime Minister was on his way and the police had blocked the road, creating a major traffic jam. The bus carrying the family of the groom got stuck and when they finally arrived at the farm their gloomy faces revealed the bad mood they were in.A stream of important guests arrived wearing luxurious clothing in deep reds, greens, blues and blacks. The ladies' black-lined eyes glittered and their jewels sparkled in the light of the night. Before long the storm arrived on our doorstep and thick sheets of rain came down, soaking all the guests and making their fancy hairdos hang limp. They crowded into Mommie's house for shelter, the delicate scent of their perfumes replaced by the smell of damp. The house was so full there was no elbow space and these otherwise confident movers and shakers were suddenly clueless about what to do next. Outside the unseasonal rain drenched everything and all the dishes holding the food for dinner quickly filled with water.



Satish, Rahul, Sharika, Samir and I huddled together under multicoloured umbrellas, laughing as the raindrops reflected the fluorescent beauty of a cannonade of loud fireworks. There was nothing more we could do. Finally, we moved into the house where we found the Chief Minister of Delhi, Sheila Dikshit, sitting in a white lounge chair.

The Prime Minister and his wife arrived and made polite conversation with us to the rumble of thunder and the staccato rhythm of the rain.

We had planned an occasion no one would forget and Mother Nature ensured we achieved our aim. To this day, guests who were present bring it up. We managed to salvage the situation by ordering food from caterers in a nearby village. By the time everyone left for home we were exhausted.

The following day, Sharika formally left the house (in the Doli) for her marital home and to her future as a wife. Not a tear rolled down her beautiful, smooth cheeks. Sunita stood at the side of the driveway, gesticulating next to Mommie, who had a wry smile on her lips. I sighed with relief; the ordeal was over and everyone had survived.

I turned around to look at the farm and noticed how big the trees had grown. Peacocks weighed down the upper branches, their tails cascading down. Birds twittered and our dogs ran around free and happy. The sun rode high across the sky, making time move like a river upon which I drifted towards my ultimate destiny.

Epilogue

This is only part of my story and I have shared only half of what really happened. As it is, I am sure even this much will ruffle many feathers. There is a lot more to be told, so maybe I will write another book one day.

What happened to everyone?

Well, I continue to paint, manage the farm and I am a grandmother of four. The Kalakar Trust still exists and the earning power of the artists has increased dramatically. They travel all over the world to perform. A jewellery museum run by the trust has opened. I have retired from Balloons and the shop is closed.

Satish remained in parliament for 29 years and continues his work as president of the Delhi Flying Club. His party is currently in opposition.

Mommie continued to make trouble until she died at the ripe old age of 86.

Sunita never married, as she always vowed she wouldn't.

Samir left the US after living there for many years. He married an Indian girl and has two adorable children – a boy and a girl. He lives on the farm.

Sharika lives in Mumbai with Rahul and has two fabulous boys. She is a writer and has completed her first fiction book. Rahul struggled as an actor for years but is finally getting recognition.

Mother lived quietly at home for many years, weaving to keep busy. She now resides in a nursing home in Washington.

Mei travels the world as a freelance researcher for international organisations, including ChildFund International. She is renowned in her field.

Engelien has twin boys and one daughter. She works as manager for Au Pair International. The organisation sends young people from all over the world to work in America for a year.

Girish died of lung cancer aged 65.

Sarla DiDi is over 90 and is spending her final days at the farm.

Impresario has done major work for public places, such as Mumbai Airport, as an interior designer. At present, he has little to do with Kathputli Colony.