

# **Critical Intimacy**



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**Critical Intimacy**

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## **CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL**

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.



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## **DECLARATION**

This thesis is a presentation of my original creative work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to all the daughters out there who have difficult mothers. Sometimes we grow up with a strong toxicity that we do not know we are exposed to. At times, it is hard to deal with it and grow up, but it is imperative to always believe in that silver lining and keep growing, leaving that hereditary malignant element behind.

## Acknowledgements

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I take pride and joy in acknowledging my husband's support, who made me pursue my passion and help me to enjoy it against all odds. I cannot thank him enough for the support he has extended me every time I needed it badly. I would also like to shortly acknowledge my 19-month-old daughter's presence in my life, which has always given me a fresher and mature perspective while I think or write. In addition to that, I would like to thank my friends who helped me with input while they read the first draft and gave useful feedback. My parents of course, who have always been listening to me whine about my studies and all they did was patiently hear and encourage to focus.

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**Abstract**

The dissertation titled *Critical Intimacy* is a novelette, a fictionalized memoir that deals with a complex mother-daughter relationship which has been entitled to both strong abuse and powerful love. The novelette is structured in a way to smoothen the stream of consciousness technique and the shift in narration to blur the line between fictional aspects and the real aspects of the narrative. The dissertation is written with a thought that a very close blood relationship can have its own dynamics and perceptions. Sometimes love takes different forms and they change to a point where a mother and a daughter, one of the closest bonds in the Universe, drifts away, although, when a daughter becomes the mother, she gets why her mother changed the way she did. The dissertation, even though a work of fiction, is inspired by a true story.

## Critical Introduction

The novelette, *Critical Intimacy* is a fictionalized memoir which deals with the complexity of the relationship between mothers and daughters. The narrative focuses on a nuclear family and the way the behaviour of parents, past experiences shape our own thoughts and actions, affecting us unconsciously. This novelette is a fictionalized memoir for three reasons. Firstly, as a writer, I wanted to write something from a memory that I owned. Years after living through the memories, I realized that remembrances follow a pattern of their own. They shift and evolve to a point where I could reflect on and understand them with a better perspective. Secondly, fictionalizing those memories helped me to consider my thoughts objectively. I think it is safe for me to say that I was not biased with my thoughts. They found their own individual voice. The events were not subjective due to the dual voices of the protagonist Safi and the pivotal character, Zaira. Safi's voice is heard from the bits and pieces of her personal diary, whereas Safi's daughter Zaira drives the story forward. And, thirdly, it was a great way to lay out the real matters through words anonymously, leaving less scope for judgement, yet being relevant and universal. The tales are real, so are the emotions but the elements are fiction.

This novelette focuses on the dynamic forces of motherhood, which is a glorified relation for a reason. It is a gift which is natural but can be perilous. Only for that reason alone, motherhood is unpredictable involving the mother and her child/children. Every single motherhood is unique. There is no room for doubt that human relationships are complicated. The dynamics and the way a relation is defined tends to change over time. The older we get, the curve shifts from maturity to childishness. The child outgrows her/his dependency and over time the phenomenon drives in a reversed motion, making the parents vulnerable and dependent on their children. Therefore, the cycle is complete, and both the children and the parents go through the same emotional turmoil at

different stages of life. I wanted this concept to resonate in the narrative. Even though there are two distinct voices, the narrative jumps across three generations, outlining two definitions of motherhood.

I was ecstatic when I randomly came across a book titled, *My Daughters' Mum* by an Indian author and journalist, Natasha Badhwar. The book is a compilation of several non-fiction essays about a working mother, her challenges, and thoughts she has gathered as a result of the many hats she wore. The more fascinating element of the book was her take on marriage. Motherhood and marriage are two of the most important identities in the society and will be till the end of time. Motherhood necessarily does not need to hold hands with marriage, but it is pertinent to acknowledge that motherhood changes the underlying forces of a marriage. It changes the relationship between a husband and wife in unpredictable ways. It can make or break a marriage; the only difference being/ some decide to speak about it, and some do not. In my writing, even though the plot denotes the complexity of mother-daughter relationships, it also discusses the protagonist's married life. Sometimes, to reflect on something, it is imperative to sit back and look at things impartially. Even though the story explores the bond between the mother and the daughter across generations, the character, Rizwan, the protagonist's husband, plays a pivotal role. His patience helped the protagonist, Saffiyah, to understand life through a simpler lens, helping her to not be the same person as a daughter's mother, compared to her own.

As this is a fictionalized memoir, I prefer to leave the readers guessing as to where nonfiction ended and fiction started, but this is also where I would like to mention that marriage has helped me perceive my relationship with my mother objectively. I have dwelled on the trauma and toxicity for years but once I was able to remove myself from my maiden life, only then did some of the matters philosophically reveal themselves. And when I tasted motherhood, I have realized that I

am en route to becoming my own mother; the mother I criticized for her insecurities and restrictions is now the solution to the problems I encounter almost every day while dealing with my toddler. Then again, on a conscious level, this also offers an opportunity to not repeat the same mistakes in the same role i.e., the role of a mother.

The daughter, Zaira is a character designed to show the changing dynamics between the protagonist's relationship with her mother. We humans tend to inherit our parents' fortune (i.e. wealth, ambitions, and misfortune which includes insecurities, unfulfilled dreams, and bad temper). This makes us hate our parents and ridicule them, but we are blind to the fact that we tend to follow the same path as well.

While writing *Critical Intimacy*, the technique I used extensively was the stream of consciousness. The technique was the perfect cover to travel through memories without having to depend on the chronology of events, allowing free flow of thoughts and be able to reflect on them from a more matured viewpoint. David Lodge, in his book *The Art of Fiction*, discusses the free indirect (narrative) style that provides an impression to the readers that they have access to the characters' naked and intimate thoughts, keeping in mind that the authorial participation in discourse is not being totally surrendered. To quote Lodge, "This abrupt plunging of the reader into the middle of an ongoing life typifies the presentation of consciousness as a 'stream'" (Lodge 44). Consciously, I adopted a free indirect style in my writing by devising a subtle shift which takes place from the storyline towards the main characters' psyche. The characters in the novelette are sometimes addressed with their names or the way the other characters call them. For instance, Amma is referred to as Safi's mother, whereas Safi herself is addressed as either "Safi" or "Ma". Similarly, Rizwan is referred to as "Rizwan" or "Baba". Even though the story progresses with a third person narrative voice, the references to Baba and Ma puts Zaira on a pivotal position. This also helps the

narrative to segregate the same relationship across two timelines. Abbu and Amma are Safi's parents; Baba and Ma are Zaira's.

One of the key aspects of the story was Zaira accidentally finding and reading her mother's diary. Reading the excerpts from the journal offered a glimpse of autobiographical reminiscences, changing the voice of narration and embracing the art of interior monologue. The story is composed from Zaira's point of view – it is not told in her voice. David Lodge mentioned about an “omniscient” narrative method which allows to think and write from a God-like perspective but favouring one or two characters or narrative voices (26). Therefore, *Critical Intimacy* is Safi's story and is told from Zaira and Safi's points of view and the narrative concentrates on the trail of events that affect them and bring them together. These dual voices were made profound using the time-shift phenomenon, which Lodge explains thus:

Through time-shift, narrative avoids presenting life as just one damn thing after another and allows us to make connections of causality and irony between widely separated events. A shift of narrative focus back in time may change our interpretation of something which happened much later in the chronology of the story, but which we have already experienced as readers of the text. (75)

The authorial third-person narrative combined with frequent time-shift (commonly referred to as flashbacks) is considered to be a postmodern strategy which makes it more dramatic and provides breathing space between the characters and the author. The diary was not the only device that helped in plot progression, the intimate dialogues of the characters also elevated the fictional discourse. Instead of the consequences of the events, it is the intensity of the moments that makes the memories unforgettable, the events are in the past and become linguistic in nature. Oakley Hall

in *How Fiction Works*, “Since Sir Walter Scott, dialogue has been of vital importance to fiction. It is a primary method of revealing character. It is an integral part of scene. It is action. Dialogue should express character, advance the plot and record pertinent information, and it must do these while appearing totally realistic” (57).

Structurally, the novelette is divided into nine chapters with the sole intention that the readers could take time for a pause before the transition takes place in the narrative. It is important that the author and the reader take pause at the same place because the authorial pace and the reader’s pace are relative.

Ronald Barthes in his essay, *The Death of the Author*, articulates that a literary piece is a compilation of multiple imperceptible voices, and this collective voice becomes one, giving birth to “literature” where all thoughts escape, losing their identities in the process. The voice becomes the new identity, beginning a unique journey:

No doubt it has always been that way. As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (142)

Significantly, the author needs to be absent, giving the reader the scope to feel and become submerged in the written text, opening it up to interpretation. Barthes pointed out how a text becomes an author’s past and the readers’ present. Even though a narrative is an authorial creation, nurtured with great care by the author, she/he loses all authority as both (narrative and author) move in different timelines.

Barthes concludes his essay with an insight into what he meant by the death of the author as the title of his essay suggests, “We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148).

Writing a fictionalized memoir was challenging as an author. I tried to keep myself separate so as not to give away my identity in the process of writing this dissertation, even though this is a memoir as well, some things are bound to not allow me to die as the author. Referring to Barthes, I think in my case, I am more of a comatose author for this discourse.

Writing has always been known as one of the best means to release oneself of the trauma and stress across everywhere, and I imagined taking up this project would reward me with an emotional cathartic experience. But it turned out to be just the opposite. I endured uncountable panic attacks, and emotional breakdowns, particularly during writing the last chapter and to a greater intensity during proofreading the dissertation. My anticipated cathartic experience turned out to be traumatic instead of being therapeutic. It was then I realized that I was not ready to embrace my past yet. Writing *Critical Intimacy* proved to be a distressful journey which triggered my mental health causing depression to reach the darkest corners. It was through writing that I relived those memories. The epiphany dawned on me when I was proofreading the narrative for the second time, when the panic attacks became more insufferable. In some way, I am still glad that I have managed to write this dissertation, because that was my learning that writing is not always therapeutic as claimed in general. Reliving those past experiences have made me feel weaker, although I also feel it is going to make me stronger in the long run.

Lastly, I would like to shed light on the title of the dissertation, *Critical Intimacy*, which, according to Lodge, is the first part of the text that readers first feast their eyes on. The title of the narrative has substantial power to take hold of the reader's attention. For that sole reason, I have spent days looking for the perfect title. Stephen King in *On Writing* stated that "The real importance of reading is that it creates an ease and intimacy with the process of writing; one that comes to the country of the writer with one's papers and identification pretty much in order" (112).

I have felt these words when I came across Badhwar's *My Daughters' Mum*. In one of her essays titled "Finding a Cure in Love," she discusses how it is plausible that even if there is immense love in a relationship, it is not necessary that the involved parties ought to understand everything about each other. A clear communication does not guarantee an intimate bonding even in a mother-daughter relationship. Motherhood is divine but this comes with limitations due to several factors. In Badhwar's essay, I came across Steve Paulson's interview of Indian literary critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak where she says that love can be deconstructed because this involves deep intimacy. It is from her words that I have taken the title:

"That's what de-construction is about, right? It's not just destruction. It's also construction. It's critical intimacy, not critical distance. So you actually speak from inside. That's deconstruction. My teacher Paul de Man once said to another very great critic, Fredric Jameson, "Fred, you can only deconstruct what you love." Because you are doing it from the inside, with real intimacy. You're kind of turning it around. It's that kind of critique."

She also remarked,

"That part of deconstruction which said the best way to proceed is a very robust self-critique. And that part of deconstruction which said that you do not accuse what you are

deconstructing. You enter it. Remember that critical intimacy? And you locate a moment where the text teaches you how to turn it around and use it.”

The relationship of Safi and her mother, the subject of the novelette, can be deconstructed in ways only because of the presence of critical intimacy. I believe this title justifies the bonding between mothers and daughters who share a complicated bond of love, tyranny, and divinity.

## Critical Intimacy

### 1.

Zaira blew and wiped her nose for what felt like the thirtieth time today. She was exhausted and all she could think of was how she needed to get her hands on another tissue box as she had already used up one within half a day. Ma was going to be crazy; she hated this excessive use of tissues and rather preferred Zaira to blow her nose in the washroom than hear her daughter grumble every time about how sensitive her nose was. Her mother would say every time-

“Your nose isn’t special, beta. If anyone blows their nose with that much tissue, it is going to be like this. Be thankful your nose didn’t fall off!” Zaira’s nose was pink, brittle, and flaky already. Blowing her nose every once in a minute wasn’t really working out for her. The mucus was getting thicker and yellower. She was sure her head would explode without warning due to lack of sleep for two nights in a row. She could feel her nerves getting fatter and throbbing harder than ever. She was imagining if this is how she would die. Did anyone ever die of the flu before? She would need to Google that. The headache won’t allow it though. In fact, looking at her phone would just make it worse.

Ma tiptoed into her room when she thought her daughter was sleeping. She was shocked when Zaira suddenly opened her eyes. She wished she could just doze off for a bit, enough to remain sane. She was feeling feverish, but her body temperature wasn’t soaring, but that’s how she felt inside.

“Feeling any better, beta?”

“No Ma. I can’t sleep. The headache is just killing me!”

“Any food cravings?”

“Maybe some fries?”

“Normal or cheese fries?”

Zaira thought for a while. It was typical of her mother to ask these questions. She was a foodie and could spend hours just looking at burgers and all sorts of junk food items. Ma was also responsible for ordering food most of the time. She would complain but still do it every time. Zaira took after her father. Not that they weren’t picky eaters themselves, but not foodie enough like her mother, Safi Ahmed.

“Cheese fries,” answered Zaira.

She could sense her mother salivating at the thought of cheese. Ma left with a victorious smile plastered on her face. Zaira knew she would also order her favorite chocolate milkshake as well - that was Ma.

Zaira’s phone started vibrating, interrupting her trail of thoughts. Her best friend, Abeer, was texting her. He was thinking of asking out another friend and he needed ideas. Although Zaira and Abeer were friends for two years only, they had developed a friendship envied by everyone else in their batch. For Zaira, it was a “love at first sight” thing with Abeer, but slowly that disintegrated and settled more into a feeling of fondness, and that was something Zaira continued to work on. They were so close that the whole university mocked them, “C’mon! They’re just good friends!”

Zaira ignored them. She had never been asked out by a guy before, and she was glad about it. Not that she wasn't beautiful or anything. When Zaira smiled, a dimple would appear on her left cheek. She was tall, slender, and had her father's dreamy eyes. One of Abeer's most clichéd dialogues were, "You are beautiful but why do you always have that arrogant and murderous look going on? Guys are afraid to ask you out, do you know that?" Zaira used to be offended at the beginning, but she outgrew that irritation after about six months of friendship. She also learned of the power that came with mastering the art of ignorance. She had to give Abeer some credit for that.

Zaira closed her eyes, trying hard to sleep again. It wasn't the headache that was causing this level of discomfort. It was something else in addition to that pain which was bothering her. Zaira was a textbook introvert, and she enjoyed her own company the most. She was close to her parents, Safi and her father, Rizwan. But that didn't let her pour her heart out to them. It was deeply personal, in other words, she felt guilty of being an invader of her mother's privacy.

Ma was a bookworm. She loved books and bought them whenever she could and always complained how she didn't have enough money to buy more books and stationery. Her Nanu didn't really enjoy this. She was happier if Ma bought gold jewelry and sarees over books and notebooks. But Baba and Nana were proud of Ma's obsession. Growing up, she saw her mother reading at night after taking care of all the chores. During weekends, she saw her dedicating the whole day to reading. It was usually Baba, and occasionally ask Zaira to help, who would prepare breakfast those days and arrange meals so as not to disturb his beloved. Zaira had seen Ma read something from an old diary, but she always closed it whenever Zaira was around. Just like her father, Zaira never asked Safi to show her what it was all about, but one day some devil took over and she

stumbled upon the diary the way movie actresses fall into the arms of the actor, intentionally, with discomfort and curiosity in equal proportions.

The first page read something like this:

*It's been three weeks now. I wake up at midnight, looking for a dark shadow staring at me in the dark with bloodshot eyes. I am pretty sure my home is not haunted, but my mind and soul are. I hug my husband tightly as I fear losing what I already have been vested with, and I try to fall asleep. He holds my hands too. But I know he does that in his sleep unconsciously. And just when I think I am falling asleep, my fifteen-month-old daughter cries for her bottle of milk. I remember when insomnia engulfed me due to hours of breastfeeding and tending to her hunger cries, and my husband always kept saying, "When she will start drinking from the bottle, I will attend to her, and then you can sleep peacefully." It's been seven months since I last breastfed her, and my still-asleep daughter rolls towards her father in search of milk. My husband kept his promise, and now I am not sleep-deprived as I used to be. Well, life is not as smooth as my story here. In fact, I am still terrified of raising this little human.*

*I had turned 23 years old when my life took a different route. I had all my important decisions written down – my family and friends, my education, career, and everything my little universe offered me. But since no one took the effort to surprise me, life did.*

Zaira immediately closed the diary and put it back just where Ma kept it. It wasn't dated, or it didn't begin with "Dear Diary...." A confused Zaira came back to her room. She wanted to ask Safi what it was all about. Was it a true account or fiction? She knew Ma was into poetry and story writing. She also wanted to publish her novel. Yes! That could be it – a manuscript! But Zaira

couldn't get rid of the overpowering sense of guilt that this also could be her mother's personal thoughts. Being the daughter, she usually thought Ma was way more childish than she. She had always seen her Baba indulging Ma like the child in the family, which was cute but annoying at times. For instance, Ma would just be upset or angry about something that clearly no one in the family had any idea about. Later, they would know through an outburst that it was because small pieces of paper were stuck on her *satranji*. She was obsessed with these vintage and desi floor mats, and it would drive her nuts if she saw someone who didn't care for her several *satranji* laid out on the floors in different places the way she did.

Zaira shoved all these thoughts aside. It must have been a week or so, and she just read the first page. She was feeling a strong compulsion to read more, because she had seen that the diary was filled with her mother's beautiful, cursive handwriting. It wasn't very exclusive, but the cursive pattern was mesmerizing to the eyes and difficult to read. Luckily, that day her parents were out on a date, so she was left all alone for the reading rendezvous. She would need to wait again before something like that came up. None of them were usually home during the day; Ma and Baba at office and Zaira at the university. They all came home in the evening, and usually Safi arrived home the earliest. Zaira knew she would have to grab the next opportunity, because she wouldn't be able to create one all by herself. She needed fate to do the trick.

## 2.

*I was house arrested a few years ago, just after my graduation. It was a bizarre experience, but I am sure that is not how my parents would describe it. It was short-lived. Hah! Short-lived! Now I*

*have the audacity to think like this. Back then it felt like four centuries! My life took a different course right after those “short-lived heart-wrenching moments” I survived through, changing the story of my life mode from mundane to dramatic just like that.*

*When I was in my final year of school, I met the love of my life (or so I thought). It was a whirlwind kind of romance, somewhat crazy and passionate. But after almost three years of being together, passion took a back seat. We submerged ourselves in hourly quarrels on silly and grave matters, breaking up almost every other week. But we were able to drag that relationship on for approximately another three years. Amma didn’t approve at first, but after being together for almost six years, my dear mother thought we were different and were actually mature enough to grow in love. Guessing she saw something through us – but we ended our relationship, almost eleven days before our sixth anniversary. Technically, he broke up and didn’t want to continue it. I was so hurt, but at least I got rid of a lying, flirty cheat. My friends were convinced he was involved with someone. Because, in their eyes, I could never be held responsible for this. Long story short, my friends were right; he moved on. Therefore, I was on the loser front.*

*After the breakup, I saw a different side of Amma. She is a helicopter mom. I was never allowed to go to school picnics, stayovers or even attend study sessions with my friends after school or in their homes. I considered myself growing up in jail under the watchful eye of the warden. I cried for days, or maybe weeks, I stopped eating, and started losing weight abnormally.*

*On the fifth day (of the breakup), Amma asked,*

*“Did anyone die?”*

*“No?!” I cried, between my silent sobs.*

*“Why are you crying so much?”*

*I was taken aback. I grew up in the midst of taunts and sarcasm, so compassion, coming from Amma, was a new thing for me. And I know she grew up in extreme restriction and taunts too, so the reflection was obvious. Suddenly, things took a drastic turn. Amma became my best friend. She became the friend I wanted her to be.*

*I recall going out with my friends and enjoying life for the first time. I tasted freedom for the first time in the twenty-one years I had lived (apart from my toddler days). I enjoyed how I became the only crush of several guys. It was fun at the time because I felt wanted and important. Almost every day, I regretted not breaking up sooner. I didn't run after attention, rather “attention” kept crawling to me like a beast from the “Temple Run” game. Within a short period of time the feeling of restlessness overtook me. I didn't want to be anyone's silly crush or even the other way around. I wanted a serious, concrete relationship that was meant to last. Like my ex-lover had with his then current girlfriend. Before I could understand, I was jumping from one relationship to another. I remember having an affair that lasted fifteen days! At one point in my life, I felt like a slut. My best friend would mockingly say, “Hey slut!” and I enjoyed that for some days, but then I pondered that maybe I actually was one. I told Abbu all these -- well, not in details but a gist. Abbu, being my moral compass, pointed out, “Talking to guys over the phone doesn't make you a characterless girl. It is okay because you need to talk to someone to get to know him, isn't it?”*

*He made sense and I knew I had to respect his trust and get to know people within my limits.*

Zaira stopped reading. Ma and Baba would be home anytime. It's late already! Zaira thanked Allah when she received a text saying her parents would be late. They both had meetings, at least Ma did, and she wouldn't be done till eight in the evening and Baba had a factory visit or something. The important thing was that Zaira would be home alone. A perfect opportunity after a month! Zaira couldn't stop thinking about that diary for a single day. Well, that's not true. When she was at the university, she overlooked all these completely. Abeer's new girlfriend, who was also a member of their gang was so irritating! Why didn't she notice it before? Was it because she was the definition of a terrible girlfriend or was she enormously envious? It was like the attraction she felt towards Abeer was torturing her to unspeakable lengths.

"Zaira, you don't love Abeer. Look at how he laughs like a donkey and thinks like a hippo! Did you see he gained weight? That's because of all the dates, dumb! You are no longer the special one. Oh wait, you never were! You were just a sidekick. Samira is the love of his life!" thought Zaira every single time when she was in the company of her friends. She was good at pretending, so she was super confident that she wouldn't do anything stupid. But the jealousy needed to stop for her own sake. It needed to vanish just like when Thanos snapped his thick, violet fingers, wearing his Infinity gauntlet.

"Hey! What are you watching?" asked Safi.

Zaira turned to see her tired parents unlocking the door. It was a close escape. She had just sat in the living room and switched on the television when her parents entered their cozy living area. Ma was a friend, but then again, she was a very strict and angry mother, always on the edge. It's like she was always on the lookout for a reason to burst into flames. So, both Zaira and Rizwan were always on the alert.

“Nothing much. I was browsing channels. It’s so boring.”

“Let’s do a movie marathon night!” an excited Rizwan proposed.

“Movie marathon? Ma scoffed. “You are likely going to snore in like three seconds!”

“That’s rude, jaan! That was one time!” protested Baba.

“That’s not rude, that’s the truth!” exclaimed Ma.

Zaira was smiling the entire time. She loved her parents and the way they were with each other. They were like the best friends who lived under the same roof and had a daughter who was already twenty years old. Baba was an extreme introvert. Zaira was also equally bad at expressing her emotions. Safi usually criticized Rizwan saying that for a person to always stay in control, regardless of the intensity of a situation was not the same as expressing and talking about one’s emotions. On the contrary, she also loved him for that. Safi knew Rizwan loved her with all his heart, unconditionally, and that was evident in the changes that were reflected in his attributes over the course of time.

Safi met Rizwan when she first started her professional career. He was her teammate and mentor. They were in the same department. They dated only for nine months before legally linking their fate. She didn’t know he was a romantic. All Safi thought was that she could rely on and trust the guy she was to marry. Rizwan was her axis, the turning point in her life. She met him when she had stopped believing people, particularly those who showered her with kindness. Rizwan shared almost nothing when they were together before marriage, whereas Safi was just the opposite. Safi hardly knew about Rizwan – even a person’s resume has more information, but she had a good gut

feeling. Safi was the talkative and expressive one in the relationship. She loved listening too, but between the two of them, Rizwan loved listening more. He was extremely slow in expressing himself and his wife always compared him with a large red onion – filled with layers and more layers. The twenty-three years of marriage had the spark of a twenty-three-week-old connection. Their only daughter, Zaira, sometimes wondered if she was the Baba and Abeer was the Ma in their friendship.

### **3.**

Weeks passed by and Zaira all but forgot about Ma's diary. The semester was nearing its end. All the students in her class including Zaira were carrying the heavy weight of group presentations, individual assignments, quizzes, exams. This also came with rivalry and unhealthy competition from her other mates who didn't think twice before badmouthing her to get a half mark more. She knew her classmates got a kick out of secretly competing with her. Then she had these other co-curricular activities which she couldn't bypass in any way. Amid all these pressures, something unforeseen happened. Zaira dreaded the consequences of the occurrence, she regretted what she did, and now she was counting the days or maybe hours before Baba would reveal everything to Ma about what happened today. Ma was away on an office tour. She left for Rangamati the day before yesterday and was scheduled to come home tomorrow. She was looking for a fresh notebook among the stack Ma kept in her study room, and as she raided the drawers in search of one, she stumbled once again on Ma's diary which she had managed to shove out of her head long ago.

Zaira started reading where she had left off. She was just into the first few pages earlier, so it wasn't really difficult to rummage through and pick up from there.

*I was inflicted with chickenpox when I was in my second year of my bachelor's. I had angry painful reddish bumps almost everywhere, the bumps didn't even spare my tongue and throat. Somewhere during that time (while I was serious about my childhood fling, as I tend to call it now), Amma asked me about my life plans. I told her my well-rehearsed plan, or maybe I could say a well-scripted plan. It was simple. Mahir would finish his MBBS, which also meant he would pass a year after I graduated – that leaves one option, I could finish my master's degree by then. If everything goes right, we could get married after three years. My mother smirked.*

*"You mean to say you are going to wait for that boy for a year?"*

*"Yes, Amma."*

*"Do you have any idea how many proposals are coming for you? The other day, Rehman bhai saw your photo and both his sons liked you."*

*I already disliked this Rehman bhai – Baba's overachieving university friend settled in Australia.*

*I was unsure and apprehensive about where Amma was heading with the conversation. Strangely, I was also flying high with that mention; all I could think was – after being stuck in a long-term relationship, my profile was still on top of the chart. I was thoroughly enjoying the tale of those strangers' attention!*

*"Oh okay," I murmured, trying to hide my blushed and ashamed expression.*

*“What okay?” shouted Amma, unable to control herself. “Stop waiting for that boy. If you marry the elder son, you can get settled in Australia and be happy. They are very rich.”*

*I recognized the emphasis on the “very”. Mahir was rich too.*

*“No, Amma, I will wait for Mahir. We have been together for five years now,” I said quietly and tried to sound confident. I thought the conversation would turn into one of our usual nasty fights, but Amma decided to end that conversation then and there.*

*A year later we broke up. Amma was smart. She didn't once intervene until the time was right. I started sharing my crush and proposal stories which I got from the boys at the university. My dear mother even encouraged me at times. But now I know they were my rebounds. Stupid rebounds which were the results of my instability. I regret it and am truly ashamed of my foolish choices and their consequences. If I had to do it all over again, I would not have made those mistakes. To be honest with myself, I still consider it as the golden year” of my life. I was free and trusting – no more lies or panic or excuses. It was awesome, I had my friends and family by my side. I could stay over at my friends’. Most importantly, I was becoming Amma’s favorite - that itself gave me a sense of invincibility. I wasn’t afraid of her anymore. Amma didn’t scold as much as she used to. Everything was so halal. I even told her I would opt for an arranged marriage no matter what. But like all other forms of happiness, this was short-lived too. Things started changing a year later when I finished my undergrad studies and was about to step into the realm of adulthood.*

*“What are you doing?”*

*Ma’s diary fell from Zaira’s hands the moment she heard Baba’s loud and curious voice.*

“Uummm...um...Baba....erm....I wa...was looking for a diary...erm a notebook,” stammered Zaira.

“This looks like your Ma’s diary, Zaira,” replied Rizwan sternly.

“You know about this?” Zaira was shocked at how shrill her voice sounded. She was astonished to her core. She regretted not being able to stay more guarded.

“Why do you have this in your hand?”

“Baba, I am sorry. You know I am not a big fan of invading anyone’s privacy. I just couldn’t help it. I don’t even know what this is – are these Ma’s feelings or a manuscript? I know she loves writing but I don’t know what this is. Trust me, Baba!” Zaira babbled.

“Why were you reading it then?”

“I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I did not read much.”

“Take what you came for and leave. Did you eat your dinner?” Rizwan asked, without giving away his expression.

“No, was waiting for you.”

“Give me half an hour to freshen up.”

Later, they dined quietly. Zaira didn’t dare try any small talk to ease the tension between them. She was missing Ma. She was really good at this. Being the initiator of all sorts of conversations, narrating things someone told her, or she said something to someone. She would continue to say

things and Baba would just nod or mumble to keep the smooth flow of the conversation. Ma would talk, looking at Baba mostly, so Zaira's expression wasn't necessary. She would just enjoy her food amidst the ambience created by her parents' chitchat. Mobile phones weren't allowed during dining time. It was a strict dining table rule. However, today was an exception. Rizwan and Zaira were glued to their phones, carefully avoiding looking each other in the eye.

## 4.

Rizwan called Safi a while ago, asking her about her trip, at what time she would be home. Safi answered cheerfully but with extreme exhaustion. Safi wasn't prepared for what Rizwan told her next. She was dealing with a lot of undefinable emotions all at once. Her very mature and composed Zaira has peeped into her very personal, naked memories. She couldn't guess how far along she had read. She remembered writing things down during the darkest period of her life. She couldn't let go of things like she usually did. It was breaking Rizwan bit by bit. The nasty quarrels projected in front of her. They both shared loud, regretful nasty conversations which they couldn't time travel and take back. Not that they didn't quarrel anymore. They actually fought like Tom and Jerry now, irritating each other to the highest limit but the conversation she just had with Rizwan took her to a place when Zaira was about a year old. It was then when Safi started writing in her journal.

Rizwan had been unemployed for a year, and that affected Safi in ways she couldn't imagine. She felt tired and thought she was the one who was putting an effort into every aspect of their lives.

Rizwan always helped Safi in every way possible, but there was always so much to do, so many things to take care of. They were both distinctly exhausted. Over time, she had realized how wrong she was. Her husband had been making more of an effort in the relationship than she had ever done.

Even after such so many years into the marriage, there were times Safi caught herself staring at Rizwan as if she couldn't figure out who he really was. He was not perfect, not even for her, but he knew how to be perfect in his grandeur. It took time for Safi to realize what the secret was. It was pretty simple. Rizwan knew precisely how to embrace his flaws. He never tried to run away from or deny them. He was not thankful for those imperfections either. Rizwan graduated from a lesser reputed public university with a relatively poor score, which was the only reason her parents didn't want him to be a part of Safi's life. Safi, on the other hand, had everything in reverse. Rizwan always felt he was definitely not a perfect match and Safi should have been with a man who had better academic and professional achievements, but he was helpless. He loved his wife way too much to let go. It was selfish for him to pursue her, although over the years they had been together, he proved to be truly selfless in nature. But he knew he could never love someone else. He had a major crush on his best friend, and when she got married, he decided to not fall into those traps anymore. Safi came into his life, offering a dream he had never thought possible again – a family of his own, like his friends had.

She let out a heavy sad sigh. There were moments in her life which she couldn't just wipe away and erase forever. Things changed, people changed and moved on, but somewhere she was stuck in the past. For instance, when her brother and his wife were planning to move to Australia, and she had chickenpox many years ago, her Amma came up to her that day and “scolded” her to get

better. How could someone get better just like that? Amma did that just because the family was to attend an event in the evening and Safi was completely bedridden. A while ago, her father had declared that if Safi couldn't go, he wouldn't either. The event was a reunion of Abbu's friends after ages. They were meeting after two decades or so. One of them was his well-established friend Rehman, an Australian resident, and Safi's mother wanted all the support she needed for her son and daughter-in-law to ensure that both of them settled there without any setbacks. Safi had tried to put herself in her Amma's shoes and that's what she had done for a long time until she was tired. She was too young to feel those things then, particularly when she was glued to the bed, and her mother came in fuming, threatening her to stop acting and get ready for the evening. Otherwise, Abbu wouldn't go. She wasn't devastated to hear that. Not even shocked. She accepted Amma's unstable and inconsistent nature to show sympathy when she was sick (which wasn't very often). Sometimes she cared so much, at times it felt like she was being punished for being sick. Instead, this made Safi sad. She wished for a different mother who would love her unconditionally. In fact, she wouldn't mind if Abbu had an extramarital affair. She shoved that thought away every time it popped in and wondered if all mothers were like hers. She didn't hear these things from her cousins or friends. Was she so unlovable? Why wouldn't Amma love her just like that? She read in books and heard everyone say that mothers were different, that children are always special in their mothers' eyes, a mother-daughter relationship is a friendship, and so on. Were they just a manifestation of fairy tales or were they all lies? Safi had no way of knowing then.

That evening Safi dressed up beautifully in a stunning dress with full sleeves (since it was her fault she had chickenpox, it was her duty to cover the red bumps), ironed her hair straight, wore flashy earrings and bracelets, put on her favorite black eyeliner, mascara, and a bright red-hot shade lipstick. She had to wear extra makeup that day to hide her sickness. After she got dressed, she

stared at herself and was sad to see that she looked gorgeous. Usually, if she wore a little makeup, her mother would comment sarcastically that she looked like a ghost or a wannabe actress. But that day, a miracle happened. Amma smiled – yes, SMILED! at her when Safi was looking at the mirror, and she couldn't remember a time that had ever happened. She then quickly picked up her purse and went out with her family to that dinner. She was happy that her mother approved of her, content with the way Safi adorned herself and lied to her father that she was better. Safi was sick, yet she was glad that her mother was not upset with her. She just wanted to do anything to please Amma and be her favorite. She enjoyed those moments when Amma would be kind to her or show a bit of compassion. Going to the event was therefore the only thing Safi had to do to make her mother love her for a while.

All Safi thought in circles was, “Did Zaira read all these?” Safi never wanted her daughter to meet the unpleasant side of her most favorite person in the universe, Nanu.

## 5.

Safi came home with a bad migraine several hours ago. Zaira opened the door, hugged Ma and went to her room. She didn't dare face Ma without knowing if Baba had divulged the events of last night or not. She was a bit shocked to hear the bell ring and see Ma through the peep hole. Wondering in that split second why she was pressing the bell and not using her key. Zaira thought to herself, “Was the hug warm?” Yes, it was! She felt her mother's ribs. Still, it was hard to read Ma. Sometimes she was an open book, sometimes Ma was the most unpredictable being on Earth, wearing an incognito mask flawlessly with an aura of mystery. Maybe she would hear something

when Baba came home. Zaira hoped Baba would keep a secret for once. Funnily enough, Baba never kept any secrets from Ma, but the ones Ma quarreled with him for not telling her were those which Baba conveniently forgot or filtered out as redundant. On the other hand, for Ma, those trivial packets of knowledge were valuable. They fought for the silliest reasons and held each other's hands during major crises. Was this how all couples make their relations work? Zaira had no way of knowing. It was hard to get over Abeer with him by her side for most of the day, but she managed to successfully do that. She always knew her boundaries and respected them. As a result, the strong guilt she felt for reading Ma's diary became paramount when Baba caught her reading it.

After an hour of Ma's arrival, Baba came home. His eyes sparkled as if he was to be reunited with his long-lost love. They never cared about what people would say – if Baba wanted to hold Ma's hand, he would do that in front of anyone, and so did Ma. Zaira was usually red with embarrassment but mostly beamed with pride when her friends asked if Zaira's parents always flirted the way they did in front of them. Growing up, Zaira witnessed changes in her friends and lost them along the way for which messy divorces or unanticipated separation of their parents were to blame.

Baba threw a smile at his daughter as he entered the house, startling Zaira at first, but in that very instant she noticed the warmth of his smile didn't reach his eyes. She realized her father smiled because she was standing very close to the shoe rack where he needed to put his shoes. Zaira reciprocated Baba's expression and slowly went to her room. She heard Baba's hurried footsteps and understood why she thought she saw sparkling eyes and a contradictory stiff smile playing simultaneously.

At dinner that night, Ma seemed to be at ease around Zaira. Zaira became sure for the first time that Baba had decided against exposing his daughter to his wife. He could also be taking his time because approaching Ma with such a sensitive matter which could be followed with an outcome that held no boundaries. She could be a disaster, even though she was unexpectedly cooperative at times. While they were having a normal dinner, Ma spoke as if she was already in the middle of a conversation with Baba.

“Amma undoubtedly loves Dada the most.”

“Nafiz Mama?” Zaira found herself asking, stealing glances at her father, as if trying to dig a grave to dump all the guilt she was experiencing; she felt like participating in that conversation was the only viable option she could think of.

“Yup, your Nafiz Mama. He was born a year after your Nana-Nanu’s marriage and is eleven years older than me.”

“Why do you always explain this? I mean you always talk about him like he is a movie or something!”

“What? Movie? What do you mean?” asked Ma with a hint of annoyance.

“What I meant was, you always say Dada, born a year after Abbu-Amma’s marriage and is eleven years older than me,” mimicked Zaira with her mouth stuffed with veggies.

Safi burst into laughter at hearing her daughter’s mockery. She indeed did that. It could be out of envy or something a little less negative but there was no denying that she could not help herself. Everything was so grand about Dada. She heard Dada’s birth story so many times, she thought if

people could take memories to the grave, this one story would stay with her instead of her own bag of memories. All her relatives emphasized in their every breath how Nafiz was eleven years older to her which meant her brother was to be respected beyond limits and he was born a year after their parents' marriage which (Safi thought) implied he was a symbol of love, because conceiving Safi was a conscious choice from both Abbu and Amma's end. Safi was extremely pampered and loved while she was a child, but it still felt less compared to her only sibling, Nafiz. Zaira always asked why she addressed him as "Dada," because Zaira addressed Rizwan's father, her grandfather as "Dada" too, and the relation dynamics didn't mirror each other exactly. Ma explained to Zaira that, for years, that's how titles and relationships worked. Safi's paternal uncles were addressed as Bor-da, Shej-da, Mej-da and so on, which were shortcuts for addressing Abbu's brothers in a chronological manner respectively.

"Zaira, even though I love my brother more than anything in the world, I still am envious of him. Sometimes I feel that Amma loves your, Namira Mami, more than me. And when we heard that they got the Australian visa, I was sure that Amma would throw tantrums and stop them from going. On the contrary, she was over the moon. Two weeks later, Abbu and I discovered that she secretly wanted to visit Australia and boast about it to our relatives. I'm sure, she didn't know that herself then. I thought that now I could have my mother all to myself. But I was so wrong!"

"Ma, is everything okay?"

"Yes?" asked Ma with a puzzled expression.

"I meant suddenly you are talking about Mama and Mami and Nanu, so...." Zaira couldn't think of a better way to finish her sentence.

“Your Baba told me you were going through my personal notes while I was away. So, I was reminiscing some of my old memories. I just realized I have aged a lot. I always thought of myself as a messy teenager which I absolutely am not anymore!

I remember the first Eid after Dada left. Amma sat in front of the laptop almost all night. It was always a tradition for us to have dinner and breakfast together as a family, but slowly that was fading away. She used to eat her meals cold. She would serve them to us and rush off to the computer table, waiting for Dada and Bhabi to wake up and talk about the most menial and mundane things. Irritation showed on Abbu’s face as Amma gradually dived into this unhealthy habit. But Abbu chose to remain silent, staying true to his nature. He believed that was his superpower: to remain silent when the world would choose to speak up.”

Ma stopped with a lament that was hard to ignore.

Zaira was wriggling in horror. She just looked at Baba, who was having dinner with no expression. He was eating his rice with the fish curry and veggies with a pleased look. How could he do this to her? Some heads up would have helped. And Ma? She so plainly and casually accused her of going through her things, speaking about herself, skipping the interrogation part where a “normal” person would have started with “How dare you look through my things in my absence?” Instead, this was thrown at her as a statement. Just when she thought she understood her parents, all her assumptions backfired.

## **6.**

“Zaira, do you have something to say?” asked Ma the next evening.

Since Ma came home, Zaira had peeked into the room several times which was very unusual. Rizwan and Zaira both loved keeping to themselves – a trait despised by Ma.

“Umm yes,” replied Zara timidly.

“Do I need to print out an invitation card for you? Or do you fancy an appointment, madam?” mocked Safi.

Zaira entered and sat on the corner of the bed with her head hung low. Within seconds, her mother’s moisturized feet adorned with toe rings and anklets appeared in her line of vision. The silver ornaments were no more sparkling but had taken on a blackish hue due to their age.

“What’s going on, beta?” asked Safi, distress reflected on each word, and even the pauses resonated concern.

“Are you angry, Ma?” Zaira decided to cut to the chase.

“For reading my diary?” asked Ma with a strange smile.

“I didn’t know it was your diary. I thought it was just something you were writing, a novel maybe?” finished Zaira in one breath.

“I don’t know how far you have read, or how you came across it. And I really don’t want to know.” Safi paused. She knew at some point in her life she would be telling things to her daughter; experiences that weren’t very pleasant like she wanted them to be. Scars that were imprinted so deeply that it was hard to forget them.

“I started writing this as to practice my writing, thinking of developing it as a book or something. I had no idea when this turned out to be a journal. I knew I had been fixated on all the negative things about your Nanu. Let me tell you one of my favorite stories. NO! WAIT! Let me show you.” Safi jumped up, leaving a jolted Zaira. She paced and stood in front of her study table looking for something. Moments later, she extracted an old, maroon diary with black vintage borders from her drawer which Zaira recognized within seconds.

“Here. Take this. How much have you read? Show me,” said Ma casually, urging Zaira to take the diary from her hand. Zaira took it as if her mother’s words made her spellbound, pulling her into an unknown trance.

“I stopped here.” Zaira pointed to a page.

“Go ahead. Read.”

The unmistakable commanding tone was hard to miss. Safi too wasn’t prepared for this. She had planned a thousand scenarios where she would tell some unpleasant tales from her childhood and youth. She wanted her daughter to be formally introduced with the young and stupid Saffiyah, who was far from carrying an ideal expected personality from parents, especially her mother. The transition from being parents to role models is what makes the whole relationship more difficult than it should ever be. Safi wanted Zaira to know that. The relationship between her Ma and Nanu wasn’t golden like it was now. Safi wasn’t as difficult as her mother, but she had to be the illogical, irrational, and impossible mother at times. On a conscious level, Safi did one thing which she regretted not getting from her own mother – expressing love towards her own daughter whenever they both needed it.

Zaira started reading.

*I was born in Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia. One June night, breaking Amma's water, I came to this world. At the hospital, when Amma was conscious, she came to the door and was looking for the nurse. She hadn't seen her daughter yet. Thanks to technology, she knew that she was going to give birth to a baby girl. She saw babies around her being carried by several nurses. During that time, there was this beautiful baby, with her eyes open, searching for something. According to Amma's account of that day, she wanted that baby to be hers. But she knew that baby belonged to a beautiful Egyptian woman, because she believed Egyptian, Pakistani, and Persian women were the most beautiful women on Earth. To her surprise, the nurse carried that gorgeous, innocent newborn in her arms, and that was when she noticed that the newborn was wearing a bracelet that had her name written on it. Amma said she couldn't believe she had delivered this beautiful baby. She also couldn't believe how ugly I turned out to be (this she never failed to mention if anyone said, "Safi is looking very pretty").*

*For years I doubted if I was her real daughter or not. The way she always used her sarcastic tone for everything I said or did. Well, I do not doubt that now. Now I know she immensely loves my daughter and me of course. But unfortunately, her anger towards me is paramount as well. Love and hate (in this case anger) are after all two sides of the same coin.*

*Having said that, Amma has always been a superhuman. She is the cook, plumber, accountant, and plays so many other roles simultaneously. She pays the bills of the house, cooks thrice a day, maintains everything. When we were young, she looked after Dada and me – our schools, regarded and disregarded our demands along with scolding and thrashing us for our mischiefs. She was like the Hindu goddess, Durga, with multiple hands.*

*My brother, luckily for Amma is the perfect child – the most obedient one. I somehow turned out to be the rebellious one. Like most South Asian families, the birth of a male child decides whether the woman, I mean the daughter-in-law (aka the mother) should be respected or abused. Amma was showered with respect and love when Dada was born although my grandparents nor any of her in-laws weren't those old-fashioned, typical types. They expected a healthy child and treated all babies with the same amount of love but still she was extremely respected for giving birth to the third heir of the family. She was married to my grandmother's second son out of five. Today, we all know how the chromosomes decide the gender of the baby – but to this day, the birth of a male child is honorable and celebrated, particularly firstborns. Some things will never change, huh?*

Zaira looked up, half expecting her Ma to be on the verge of tears. Instead, she looked at her blank eyes which gave away nothing. Ma gave a sad smile and was unusually quiet as if searching for words which were hidden somewhere. After maybe what felt like ages, Ma said,

“I don't exactly remember when I started writing this. You were maybe two years old. I mean pouring my thoughts into this journal. I didn't write for long,” she paused. She looked at her grown up daughter, trying to decide what to say, how to say it. She needed to choose her words very carefully. Her next words including punctuations could wreak havoc on the beautiful girl sitting in front of her. Zaira, in her pajamas and torn t-shirt, reminded her of how Safi would dress at home, but resembling all features of her father, the love of her life. Childhood flings are exaggerated in movies and books, but they have a certain attachment that couldn't be forgotten. She was trying to figure out how much Zaira had read, and the way she was playing with the pages was enough to realize she did read quite a bit. Love didn't come to her once, it came a couple of times, but stayed

for a long time this once and Zaira was the breathing statement of their love. There were things no one knew, except Mahir and Rizwan. Rizwan, of course, knew more.

Safi was first molested when she was seven years old, far far away from where she was now. For a significant amount of time, she didn't know how to feel or define her experiences. It wasn't just an isolated incident, nor was she abused by one single person. She could count the number of times and still could see their faces with her eyes shut tight. While she was living in Saudi Arabia, three men who presented themselves as her parents' acquaintances and well-wishers scarred their daughter for life. Her old, frail parents still did not know their daughter was a victim of this hushed crime. Safi remembered the frequent shifting of apartments either to minimize living costs or for ease of transportation. This continued until Abbu and Amma permanently returned to their home country when Safi turned ten. Zaira, holding the old journal in front of Ma, had no way of knowing her mother had already travelled to her past. All she saw was her Ma's silence.

Safi was recalling the apartment where they last resided. Each floor had four apartments. One of the neighbors was an Egyptian family, whom they seldom saw. There were two Indian families – one, a family of four whose two sons were Safi's playmates. They were from Hyderabad. Amma and Aunty quickly became friends too, cooking and sharing recipes and hanging out at the beach. They did almost everything together like two long lost sisters. Safi was too young to remember the first time it happened. One day, when no one was around, the uncle would just grab her from behind and kiss her on the lips. She was too young to know what that meant. She didn't know whether it was an expression of affection or something inappropriate. Something didn't feel right. But she was old enough to know that bad things would happen to her if she mentioned this to Amma. She would definitely blame her like she always did, and she would lose her only friends

in the building. Safi chuckled in her head thinking how a seven-year-old didn't know the difference between affectionate or inappropriate touch but knew Amma would say it was her fault. When it came to her raw, unfiltered thoughts, of all people in her life, she felt the most unsafe with Amma.

Amma regularly went to one big grocery store almost every other week. There was this Tamilian man who was very friendly and helped Amma choose groceries, recommending the perfect cooking ingredients. Sometimes that man with a sweet smile would request Amma to send little Safi over to the other aisle, so that he could give her the packet of flour. In that gross moment he touched her breasts. In a feeble attempt to get away and secure herself, the groceries fell from her hand and there was Amma, standing there like a policeman seen in movies – arriving after all hell broke loose. She scolded Safi for her clumsiness in front of the man who just groped her. He had the audacity to politely request Amma to not blame her for the silly accident. How naïve was Safi, and how ignorant was Amma?

“Have you ever thought why I always refused to let you sit in anyone's lap when you were very young?” Ma suddenly asked as if Zaira wasn't included in a conversation but was expected to answer anyway.

“You were being protective?” offered Zaira.

“Have you ever been molested by anyone?”

Zaira was dumbfounded. This was a question which was highly out of context and was in no way related to what she just finished reading. It took her a few minutes to find her voice and when she answered she was startled by her own cracked tone.

“Why are you asking this, Ma?”

“It’s a simple question, beta.”

“Alhamdulillah, Ma. Never.” Zaira paused, and then asked tentatively, “Were you?”

“Yes.”

“Do Nana and Nanu know?”

“What do you think?”

Zaira fell silent. She didn’t know what to answer. She always saw how she hugged Nana and shared things which she never did with Baba. Ma and Nanu had a very fun relationship, pulling each other’s leg all the time. However, she also knew Nanu was an anxious woman, always panicking. All Zaira did was nod in reply to her whimsical question.

“You are right. They don’t know. A Bangladeshi uncle, I can’t remember now how I knew him. Did he live in the same building, or was he my father’s colleague? I can’t remember. He used to come and make me sit on his lap and touch me in ways I am sorry I cannot describe. He would be engaged in a very animated conversation with Amma. She would not notice where his hands were. I haven’t forgiven anyone, including myself for that.”

Safi ignored Zaira’s expression. Her mouth was slightly open as if she forgot how to breathe. The low gasp was loud in her ears. She continued in the same pace she started. Safi intentionally spared her daughter the other horrifying events. She decided Zaira needed to know only one incident to understand the choices she made over the years to ensure her safety.

“He was always able to conceal his dirty doings in some way. Usually, it was like he was trying to balance me on his lap at the right position. Later I didn’t want to sit or go near him, but in an unknown land, our countrymen were no lesser than angels. He was no exception either. After maybe two or three years, my mother stopped insisting that I put up with his requests. The last time I saw him was at the Shahjalal Airport in Dhaka when we migrated back to Bangladesh. I was relieved and afraid at the same time. Thanks to Almighty Allah, my parents never kept ties with that man although they meant to.

One night I couldn’t stop thinking about my childhood trauma and blurted everything to your Baba. I couldn’t spare him the details like I could with you,” said Ma with a sad smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

After what felt like an era passed, Zaira managed to ask the question she was dreading, “Did Baba ever taunt you for this? The way you opened up about this. I mean during fights?”

“Not once did he mention about all these, because deep down I know he wants to forget them too. That night I decided I will always be on high alert if I have a daughter because of my past. Over the years, I consoled myself with the idea that maybe Amma wouldn’t have been so naïve if she was a victim too. I am glad she wasn’t. I know for a fact she wasn’t. Your Nanu cannot see things the way I do. It’s not her fault. She was brought up in an environment that wasn’t very similar to mine.”

At night when Rizwan came home, Safi told him what happened: her conversation with Zaira and the things she said and the things she hid. Rizwan silently gulped everything his wife narrated. He remembered what Safi was like when she embraced motherhood – afraid and anxious all the time. She was afraid if she were a mother, she would turn out to be exactly like her own. When Zaira was only one and a half years old, Safi started to realize, she was turning out to be her mother, the younger version of Amma. Who knows what she might be like when she would be older? She knew she couldn't be the superhuman her mother was, cooking four items in an hour, or sewing or crocheting flawlessly. Amma was always so strict, always hating her. Her married life didn't differ much. Amma was always taunting, finding faults, reminding her what a worthless match Rizwan was because he wasn't as rich as she wanted him to be. Safi's mother didn't even attend her only daughter's marriage. She was stuck in her dreams to get Safi married to that Rehman bhai's elder son, who was rich because his father was.

Amma was never comfortable expressing her feelings like other parents, especially the way mothers addressed their children. She never called Safi "Ma" lovingly like her grandmother used to call her mother and aunts. She wondered for years whether Amma loved her or not. She was always sure Nafiz Dada was the preferred child between the two of them. But as Safi grew and Dada got married to a girl of his family's choosing and immigrated to Australia two years later, she was left alone with her parents. She very gradually realized that her mother loved her – in fact, immensely loved her still. Things started to look up after Safi herself became a mother. She even recently asked her Amma if she chose to be a strict parent or was incapable of expressing love? The direct question threw Amma off guard. As soon as she found her balance, she gravely replied that she had to be strict so that her children grew up to be obedient and good individuals. The answer made Safi feel better – because that was when her mother acknowledged her love for her

children through words. Safi's mother did and still expressed her love for her two children in two distinct ways: cooking their favorite meals and taking all sorts of trouble in making them and buying or presenting them with clothes with or without occasion.

Safi had seen the way Amma was close to her three sisters and four brothers, and their children. She called them lovingly, exhibited affection, making Safi wonder as if she was just simply a different person as a mother. Even though Dada was the apple of her eye, there was an invisible limit, an unspoken boundary. On the other hand, Abbu genuinely was never a very expressive man. He was way more awkward, yet more lovable. Abbu was happier when his wife was pregnant the second time, because a girl was born. He loved her baby girl so much that he even changed her nappies a couple of times (very unlike him!) and was also the core reason of Dada's jealousy. He was an academic person. He always kept a small notebook with him where he wrote down words he heard or read throughout the day and in the evenings, he sat down with the dictionary on his knee to look for their meanings and increase his vocabulary in both English and Bangla. For him, age for knowledge was just a number.

By profession he was a pharmacist, retired a decade ago, an avid newspaper reader who loved watching the same news repeatedly and the late-night talk shows. As a person diagnosed with OCD, he cleaned his bathroom every morning. Safi had always hated this trait of his. A book could be written solely on his hygiene regime. But as more days passed, Safi could see that she had absorbed all the weird qualities of both her parents. She was half her mother and half her father. The way he washed his hands for twenty-five minutes (Rizwan timed it after dinner once), rinses his mouth with mouthwash was a mesmerizing and tedious thing to watch. He shaved every morning and applying deodorant after a shower was a must. Safi fell into the same pattern as well.

She almost did the same things she hated seeing Abbu doing. Well, she still was not old enough as her father, so washing hands for an eternity and cleaning toilets every morning had not been part of Safi's daily activities as of yet. He taught Safi to be ambitious and inspired her to be the voracious reader she was and molded her habit of writing on a regular basis. His favorite inspirational story was that of J. K. Rowling's, and he wouldn't spare a chance to remind her of the author's journey from struggle to fame, only because of diligence, patience, and caliber. He still emphasized on how Safi should be calmer and more resilient and ignore stuff that could only lead to damage or ruining things or relations. He was the reason Safi was quiet at times even though she would like to kick the world but instead hid her extremely talkative side, remained tranquil throughout the chaos.

Rizwan knew Safi was a hybrid of her parents, so was he and Zaira. Their only daughter inherited not only their looks but also their characteristics which was evident in every possible way. Safi confided in Rizwan multiple times how she noticed herself doing things, developing behaviors that only explained more why her parents did the things she despised growing up. They believed Zaira had this same clutter of thoughts too, the only difference being she was the quietest in the family. It didn't matter how much they tried; she was beyond their understanding but within reach of her emotions. She was most difficult during her teen years. Sometimes it's the gene who wins the game. She inherited the genes for her quiet and wise nature all thanks to Baba and Nana for that.

## 8.

*I was just sipping my cup of morning black coffee like every other day, and I realized I was lost while travelling through my old memories as I kept staring at those huge, tall buildings and the greenery which always seemed to stand amidst all odds, peering through those constructions. Suddenly my trance broke when my daughter pushed me from behind. It hadn't been that long since I was thrown into the sudden universal phenomenon of motherhood.*

*My daughter, Zaira was not conceived after meticulous planning, but she wasn't any accident either! I have always had problems with my menstruation. I got my first period in 2004. I was only 11 years old. As I was a 90s kid, born in a conservative family, I had little chance of knowing some common terms like "getting my period," and believing "kissing leads to pregnancy" to name a few of those silly misconceptions. I was terrified when I first saw blood on my knee-length shorts. I was too ashamed to ask for appropriate undergarments. I didn't ask for panties either because I was overly comfortable in those loose, ill-fitting undergarments. The same equation applied to my bras as well, but then again, I wasn't comfortable asking my mother for a "bra" because all my friends at school did and made it a point, I should have at least some proper bras. It took me three years to ask for one (by then I was already an adolescent).*

*I didn't tell my mother of the blood, or anyone. I was extremely sure I did something wrong, and this was a form of punishment I didn't know. I just couldn't remember or even imagine what it was. I thought it was just something that would happen once. To my horror, I cleaned my undergarments, cleaned myself, but the blood returned after an hour. I was sure I was going crazy. I kept on cleaning and did multiple things like finding a bag of really old and discarded clothes*

*and slipped them inside so that my blood wouldn't spread, and I would throw the cloth as soon as I woke up, and maybe miraculously the way it started, it would stop too. This continued for two consecutive days. I prayed to Allah until I slept. I feel extremely silly writing about it now, but the dismay was so vivid and uncanny back then.*

*The Almighty answered my prayers in a rather different way the next day. My youngest aunt, Ammu's sister, Maisha khala, came early the next morning to stay with us. We usually shared my bedroom when she came over, and she always stayed with us during her university semester breaks. She noticed the blood on the bedsheet and woke me up. The cheery greetings soon turned into a low, solemn question, "Safi! Safi! Wake up!" I opened my eyes, struggling to keep them open. I managed to sound jovial and lively the way I always welcomed her, "Khala! You are here!"*

*"Does Boro Apa know you got your period?" asked Maisha Khala, ignoring my enthusiasm.*

*"Period? What is that?" I asked, trying to sit up.*

*"Don't sit! You already ruined the bedsheet. There's blood already! Don't you know what a period is? For how long this has been going on?" exclaimed Khala.*

*Suddenly I realized I had no reply. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs. I wanted to tell her this was happening from the day before yesterday and how it's not my fault like Amma always points out. I guess my deafening silence was not something she expected but it revealed the fact that I hadn't told Amma anything about it.*

*She immediately pulled out something from her bag and handed it over to me, directing me to go to the washroom and stick it on top of my panty. She was horrified and I am pretty sure her eyeballs couldn't get any bigger when I told her I didn't have one.*

*In a very surrendering and upsetting tone she asked, "Do you have any undergarments?"*

*I nodded.*

*"Where do you keep them?"*

*"First drawer, left corner in the wardrobe."*

*Maisha Khala found my stack of undergarments. I was embarrassed to a point I couldn't feel anything anymore. She took out that packet, which looked like a straight diaper and stuck it to the shortest brief she could find.*

*"Go to the bathroom, clean yourself, you are soaked in blood. Wash your clothes properly, wear this and come out. Meanwhile I am going to talk to Boro Apa."*

*It was my shrill pleading tone that threw her off guard when I told her that Amma shouldn't know about this. I was preparing myself to get hysterical, when Khala, a shaky but calm voice, said, "Don't worry. This happens to everyone. Well, every girl on Earth. Congratulations. You are officially a woman." She left the room the moment those words left her lips.*

*I did as Khala told me to. And was too ashamed to face Amma. After ten minutes that felt like a decade had passed, Amma called me for breakfast. I had no school that day as it was a weekend.*

*Perfect timing, right? Everything was so ordinary – the food, the small talk, and everything else. So why did I feel so filthy from the inside and my waist down?*

*When I retired to my bedroom as soon as my mortifying breakfast moment was over, Khala came to me to announce she was going shopping for my undergarments and that Amma wanted to talk to me. “More and more shame” – that’s all I could think of. I took my time. I saw Khala leave, went to the restroom to check if I was still bleeding like a cow for unknown reasons (I was). I sat on my bed and thought I haven’t done anything insane, or was I being punished spiritually, why was I bleeding from there? With so many questions hovering inside my brain, I got up slowly and, in exactly twenty-seven steps, reached Amma’s bed where she was sewing something.*

*“Amma? You called?”*

*“Sit.”*

*I sat lightly, praying Khala had said nothing to her but of course I cannot pray for a unicorn and have one.*

*“Maisha told me you got your period. Why didn’t you tell me?”*

*I sat there. For a moment I felt I had forgotten the ability to make any sound. Amma patiently waited– very unlike her. I retorted in a scared voice that I didn’t know what to do.*

*Amma didn’t lift her head while she talked to me. She kept on sewing. I knew she was regretting having to do this conversation more than I did.*

*“Listen, this happens to every girl once a month. It will stay for 7 days, so when you need the sanitary pads, let me know. And don’t tell your Abbu about this.” She finished in one breath.*

*I was already good at pretending by this age. I hid my horror and nodded, leaving the room without her permission. It dawned on me that it was indeed a shameful thing. Later when I was in college, I realized that menstruation is not taboo but a biological phenomenon. And when Zaira was only 3 days old, she got her first period, a “mini-period,” something I had never heard of, and something not widely talked about. But I made sure Zaira didn’t struggle the way I did during her teen years. She could have an open discussion with either of us. It was hard to talk Rizwan out of his comfort zone, but, at the end, I am glad he did.*

Safi closed her journal. She stopped writing in it a long time ago, but when she was low, she read excerpts from the journal to remind herself that she now had everything she fought for – peace, freedom, and love. It was safe for her to feel that now, since she had been speculating life over four decades. Suddenly she felt that old age was hitting her, and she would turn fifty in a couple of years.

## 9.

It's been a couple of weeks since Zaira and Safi had that awkward conversation. What was more embarrassing than having to talk about those things were the way they had to pretend that they never had that conversation. Ma seemed more at ease, but Zaira had to embrace her hobbies a bit tighter to avoid asking Ma a zillion questions which could put them both at discomfort.

Zaira came home tired today. She didn't know what a terrible or surprising day it would turn out to be. She sat for dinner with Baba and Ma at eight in the evening as always. It was hard to ignore that her parents were not on talking terms for two days in a row now. Zaira exactly didn't know what happened, but it surely was bound to be something very serious. Over time, she realized and internalized the fact that sometimes the most supportive system snaps. Everyone has a threshold, no matter how much that person loves you or supports you. These small snaps, fights, disagreements eventually bring out the truest form of oneself.

But the silence at their home was penetrating and uncomfortable. Zaira could hear her phone vibrate. It was on her bedside table. She hated the messaging app ringtones and always kept her phone on vibration mood, and the silence was so profound that every sound within a mile's radius was loud enough to be heard.

Zaira, returning to her room after the quick, hushed dinner, found Abeer was still calling her. She quickly picked it up. Phone calls were rare between them, and even urgent matters were taken care of through texts.

"Wassup bro! Why calling?" Zaira asked coolly but with a slight hint of disturbance. She was planning to watch an old series until she felt sleepy. Before Abeer could reply, she heard loud angry voices. It must be her parents. What was more astonishing was she could almost hear her Baba scream.

"Abeer, can this wait? Can I call you in a minute?" Zaira asked hurriedly.

"All okay?" Abeer asked worriedly.

“I think my parents are having a serious fight.”

“So? My parents quarreled twelve minutes ago ... maybe its fourteen now. Been talking to you for two dumb minutes,” replied Abeer sarcastically.

“Shut up, Abeer! I am not joking around!” Zaira disconnected the call and decided to intervene in her parents’ affairs for the first time in her life.

When she opened her door, the voices grew louder and angrier. Zaira wondered if getting in the middle of this would be wise. She quickly decided against it and withdrew into her room. She turned out her lights and lay down. She felt like doing nothing.

She closed her eyes for a while. When the phone vibrated with new texts, Zaira opened her eyes and squinted. She didn’t expect to see light pouring into her room, and that too sunlight! She was an insomniac adult and never slept before two in the morning. Everything felt so unnatural. She felt she was still dreaming but the moment she retrieved her phone from the bedside table, the black mirror came to life with the push of a button.

**5:51 AM**, and below another notification glared:

**53 unread messages**

What on Earth went wrong?!

Zaira sat bolt upright in bed. Eight of them were from Abeer to ask about her parents’ update and others were from a group chat where her friends basically had a conversation with emojis and stickers. Zaira freshened up and remembered it was Friday. She felt angry for waking up so early,

not that she had anything in her control. She stepped out of her room to get a glass of water. She felt parched and remembered that she had forgotten to drink water after dinner. While pouring water into the glass, her eyes went to the double seater sofa in the living room where Ma was reading her novel. The whole scene seemed unreal. Ma was not a morning person at all. She slept till eleven in the morning during weekends. Zaira decided to talk to her. Ma, despite her extrovert nature, was lonely. Zaira stood beside her, where the curtains swished in the morning breeze. The occasional chirping of a bird or a whisper from a falling leaf could be heard from a distance. Ma was submerged deeply in her reading. A sliver of suspicion was forming inside Zaira – was Ma so into her book or was she avoiding her? Zaira cleared her throat and casually threw a question at Safi.

“Ma, woke up so early?”

“Ah! The book is interesting! Just 10 more pages to go! Why are you up so early?”

“I dozed off right after dinner and now I am wide awake.”

“Okay. If you are planning to make breakfast, can you make me an egg sandwich, please?”

“Sure.”

Zaira returned to the living room with their breakfast and found Ma sitting quietly. This was how she mourned after she finished reading a book.

“Here, Ma. Your sandwich. Finished already? That was fast!”

Safi smiled at her with teary eyes. She looked so sad. “Ma, are you okay?” Zaira couldn’t help asking Ma. Safi appeared to expect that question, though she made a feeble attempt to look surprised. She needed to gather her thoughts before she spoke. She wanted to rehearse all her words and pauses in a split second.

“I had a fight with your dad, you know.”

“I can tell. What happened?” Zaira replied

“He forgot to buy groceries.”

Zaira was in a confused state. She was a little shocked and it wasn’t the first time Baba and Ma had a fight over groceries, but it was definitely the first time she heard Baba losing his temper over this.

“Is that all?”

“Unbelievable, isn’t it? Ma sighed. “I know I am a difficult person to live with and I tend to take things really far at times. Your father is only a human after all. He had his reasons. He is extremely stressed at work, and me stressing over onions and black peppers was the last thing he needed. I know its my fault, but I am not going to say sorry!” Safi winked and smiled. “Well, it just occurred to me that I never told you how we got married.” Ma paused as if she was contemplating her next words. “When you were a child, you always asked us why we didn’t have a lot of wedding photos.”

“You always told everyone that you didn’t like taking too many pictures. Hang on! Did you elope, Ma?” intervened Zaira impatiently.

Safi chuckled, “No, beta. We didn’t. How about I tell you a story? Could you promise to be patient?”

“Are you guys getting a divorce, Ma?”

“Why would you say that Zaira?” Safi snapped.

“I am sorry, Ma. I never heard Baba shout before, or I don’t remember hearing Baba shout ever. You seem so upset and lost. I thought maybe you were considering separation.” Safi’s daughter finished apologetically.

“I can’t stay away from your Baba while I breathe. As for your Baba, wait till you see him in the morning. Your baba can sleep off his anger. He never learned to hold on to grudges like me. I am the nutcase. He shouted because I was being irrationally difficult. Wanna hear the story?”

“Do I get to ask what it is going to be about?”

Safi considered the question for a while, making thoughtful faces as if she was having a conversation on her own. After ten seconds – for Zaira it felt like ten minutes - Safi replied, “It’s a story about a woman and her complicated relationship with her mother.”

“Is she someone famous?”

“Nope.”

“Oh.”

“But you know her!”

“Ma, whose story is it?” pleaded Zaira.

“Mine.”

“You got my undivided attention, please start!” Zaira knew a lot of stories of her parents’ childhood, but something was different about the way her mother was acting. She had no idea what Ma would talk about, but it certainly was something she was sure she never heard before.

Ma closed her eyes slowly, as if it was the first step towards time travel.

“I just finished my undergraduate studies, waiting for the results, Amma used to taunt me that I would never find a job. You will graduate in a year or two and you will know how that feels. I was already ambitious and nervous. We didn’t have any financial strain that could be solved by me landing a job. I still couldn’t figure out what her actual problem was, or what she expected of me. If that was her way of pushing me or inspiring me, I am not sure how that worked.

I did get a job two weeks after my results were published. I hated it, but the golden part was it was contractual. It was an advertising agency and within the first twenty days I realized that was not my place. It was a three-month contract. Things changed when I was very close to finishing my contract. My Abbu’s friend, remember the Rehman Bhai from my journal? He and his family were visiting then. They wanted me to marry his eldest son. Although I was totally against it, I agreed to meet him. The plan was to stand by my decision and rub that on my family.

Time-out alert! Can you make tea for me, Zaira?”

Zaira was a bit irritated to hear the request all of a sudden. She stood reluctantly. The sooner she made that tea, the quicker she would get to hear the story.

Emotions engulfed Safi in a foreign way. Although this happened almost twenty years ago, the horror was imprinted on her nerves as if tattooed for life. She was glad her parents got past that after Zaira was born, but the person Safi was, and the person Amma was – no one forgot what happened. No one could. Pretending has only gotten easier, but it was a debate if they had forgiven each other.

Zaira came back in three minutes, Safi was awed at the speed and made a mental note it was Zaira who was going to make the tea from now on.

“Nice work, beta! So where were we? Ah! So, they came to our house to meet me ... I remember! I met with the guy. Amma invited the family to our home. I won’t lie. I was not impressed with his looks or personality or anything. A grown-up man had his socks tucked in his fist, asking his mother where he should keep them. That was a big no for me then and there. My parents, grandparents were super impressed. We were made to sit alone, and I requested him to tell his parents he didn’t like me and explained how I was not ready to get married.”

Safi paused for a while. All those overwhelming emotions were crushing her inside.

“He agreed. But when they got home, they called to inform my parents that their son was already in love with me. I was disgusted and considered it a red flag. I became more obstinate. But it wasn’t well received. It was followed by blackmail, me running out of the house and staying over at a distant friend’s apartment, Amma trying to track me down, what not! I came back after two days when Abbu’s friend messaged me that they were taking the proposal back and I should return home; my parents were worried sick. Well, I was greeted by two angry pairs of parents and an

agreement that said I had to get married in three months along with fifteen other clauses, which were all broken in due time.”

“What were the other clauses, Ma?”

“I don’t remember them. It happened a long time ago.” Safi lied. “I entered my prison life within the comfort of my bedroom. The mornings were usually the same, full of despair and desperation. But I still looked forward to the day, like I had been for the past four months. I got up, brushed my teeth, and sat at the dining table to devour my cold breakfast. That was my daily routine for what felt like an eternity.” Safi laughed and continued. “Four months into the house arrest, I came across a newspaper circular for a postgraduate diploma on “International Relations” at a good university. I felt like this could be my ticket to freedom.

Amma and I hadn’t spoken in those four months, apart from some sarcastic comments that would make me feel bad about myself or loathe myself. But at that point, I was beyond that. I waited for Abbu to come home in the evening and convince him to pay for the diploma, to which he agreed but Amma made a dramatic outburst. She threatened to leave home for good and she did, but Abbu stuck to his decision. I am glad he did. Amma came home two hours later and the next day I got myself admitted to a program I had no interest in but pretended to be full of enthusiasm.

I think that was when my curse broke, because just two weeks later, I received a call for an internship program I didn’t recall applying for. The man who called was patient enough to answer my series of questions. My university’s career service office had forwarded my resume to a corporate office. I agreed, without my parents’ consent, believing I could still keep up the badass

act I managed to pull off for so long. With a whole lot of drama, I interviewed and got selected. You know that story, remember?

Zaira nodded, unable to produce any kind of sound. Safi knew the things she shared were intense; she also knew her daughter was adult enough to realize that.

“After a week, Amma announced to Abbu that I wouldn’t be let out for any internship. We were still not on talking terms. I had no other option but to blurt my personal issues to my teammate and mentor who called me up in the first place for the interview. I told him how I did not marry my father’s best friend’s son and my mother was all evil witch over me. He seemed shocked too, but he understood that I gave up a well settled life to discover my own settled life. My colleague asked me to have patience and keep coming to the office. A whole year just flew by. A lot of things happened during this one year. You already know who that mentor was, don’t you?” winked Safi.

“Baba!”

“What?” A voice floated from the dining table that made Zaira jump. Baba was already standing there, leaning on the wall, listening to Ma.

Safi threw a flying kiss at Rizwan and continued, “I got married to your Baba, without Amma’s consent. I spent my whole life trying to get her validation in everything I did. All that started changing after I gave birth to my beautiful daughter.” Safi chuckled. “But after things started to be better between the two of us, I started being the pup again. Always going the extra mile to impress her. Now that we are old, fragile, and independent, nothing has changed. I still try so hard to impress Amma.”

“That explains why I never saw Nanu having a conversation with Baba like ever. I asked her several times, and she said she was shy. Also, your wedding photos! Mystery solved! On another note, Ma I can surely say Nanu loves you a lot.” Zaira commented briefly.

“Yes, beta, I can’t agree more, but growing up with scars is not a healthy way to be. When you were three, all those years of traumatic experiences resulted in me being diagnosed with clinical depression. Frequent breakdowns, unable to breathe for no reason – I loved hanging out with people, but it is not how it is anymore. After every family gathering, you find me glued to bed for weeks. Earlier, it used to be just two or three days.”

“Your and Nanu’s relation is so sweet. I never would have guessed, Ma.”

Safi didn’t answer that. There was nothing left to answer anyway. She got up. It was 10 AM and suddenly she felt sleepy. The magnetic force of the bed was pulling her towards it, and as she was obliging to the force, Baba placed a small kiss on Ma’s forehead. Zaira thought the kiss depicted some sort of an acknowledgement, a hidden sign language used by her Baba and Ma with which the duo communicated. All she knew was, Ma needed that kiss.

“Let’s go for lunch at the new restaurant I was telling you the other day about, shall we?” Safi turned and asked them. They happily nodded.

Zaira came back to her room and lay down. Abeer had texted again. She read and reread the short message until she memorized it. When she closed her eyes, she could see the words clearly. It took a while for her to absorb it.

*Hey Zaru, tried to tell you last night but something must have happened, and it was wrong timing. The thing is I like you, okay fine I love you! I realized it after I was in that dumb relationship. I have so much to tell you. Reject me if you like, but please don't stop being my best friend. Let's meet up. Call or text me when you can. Tc.*

Zaira finally smiled. She knew she could ask Ma for advice. Ma was the one person she knew who could help her understand this mixed feeling of anger, love, happiness, and fear. Safi had no idea she finally became the friend to her daughter she always wanted to have.

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