

## One Story

My mother lies on her bed in front of me in the dark room. She is asleep on her right side at the moment. In a couple of hours I will turn her over to her left side. I will be careful to pull out her left arm so that it does not get stuck under her weight. I will check her feeding tube to make sure it has not opened, got caught in her hair or under her face. I will move the paper towel so that it is under the left side of her mouth – to catch the mucus that sometimes comes out of her mouth and so save the pillow cover. I will put a cushion between her two knees to make sure her legs do not stick together. Through this whole process, sometimes her eyes will open and sometimes they won't.

Every life is a story. Billions of people have been born on this earth and billions have died and that translates into billions of stories we do not know. But right now I wish I knew more of my Mum's story. She was born in Pakistan but where? I think it was back in Mataji's (my grandmother's) village but I think her passport says Sialkot. What was Mataji's village named? Family stories say they there was a large house with a huge door inlaid with brass. Mataji's father was supposed to be a saintly unworldly man who was possibly a bit off his rocker. Mataji's mother and only brother died early of a typhoid like plague. Mataji's marriage was arranged with Pitaji because he was handsome and had a BA degree. Otherwise, he did not have a lot going for him. He had been orphaned early and brought up by his aunt and uncle. The aunt is supposed to have been quite a bitch to Mataji. I remember something about her taking all of Mataji's jewellery and making her work when she was pregnant and ill. Mataji lost her first couple of children before Mum was born. Fortunately, somewhere along the way Pitaji's job with the Accountant General's office took him on postings to different places, which is why I don't know where Mum was born.

Mataji always felt inferior to Pitaji because she had not studied beyond a few classes. She made sure her daughters went to school. Mum was a good student especially in Maths. More than her other three siblings, she took after Pitaji, in terms of both brains and strong personality. When she finished school, Pitaji thought that was enough education for a girl. The story goes that she went on to do her BA because the school principal came home to beg my grandfather to let my Mum study further and offered to find financial aid if that was his worry. Pitaji was so upset at the suggestion that he could not afford to send his daughter to

college that he let her enrol to prove otherwise. Anyway, Mum ultimately got her BA degree, though because of India's partition there was some complication, and my impression is that it was given even though she was not able to complete it in the normal way.

Pitaji arranged for Mum to marry Dad when she was eighteen. I know that Mum objected to the marriage because of the dowry demands which came from Dad's family but Pitaji overruled her objections. Dad was a MA first class first and Pitaji valued education. This must have been quite a contrast to the family her sister got married into around the same time. They were rich business people and insisted they wanted no dowry but only the prettier daughter of the family.

This is the story of my mother's early years but please note how little I really know of it. I am only able to give a vague outline of the events that must have been so huge in her life and caused so much worry, pain and possibly happiness. She has been my mother for sixty years but did I ever get to know her? Now when she can no longer speak, I have so many questions for her. What were the highs of her life? What were the low points? What did she think was the meaning of life? What did she think happens after death? I never saw Mum cry. Thirty years ago, she lost her only sister with whom she was very close. I asked her once how she dealt with that loss and she said she still talks to Shakuntla about everything. What did she mean by that? Why did I not probe further then?

When my sister Sapna died, Mum told me it was a quick and peaceful departure. My sister was a Down's syndrome child. Sapna probably never grew beyond the mental age of two or three and she never learned to speak. Mum looked after her baby for 40 years. She made sure she went to a special school; she worked with her on puzzles, art and crafts. She bathed her every day. She taught her how to stay neat and clean always. She made sure she was integral part of our family and social life. Yet the only emotional remark she ever shared with me was a guilt ridden statement she made a couple of days before my sister's death. Sapna had a short but adult body by then and Mum was in her seventies. She had become too heavy for Mum and apparently Mum said to her "Mar ni tu" while taking her to the bathroom the night before Sapna's death. Translated, it sounds terrible "You should die" but it can just be

a comment of exasperation in Punjabi and I know with all my heart that is all it was. But it obviously bothered Mum.

When Dad died, I cried buckets but I did not see Mum's tears. She had been married to him for 65 years. All she said was that he could not have had a better death. He did not suffer nor did he make others suffer. Now as she lies there I see an occasional tear coming out of the corner of her eyes. Her face does not change, her body is not racked by sobs and no sound comes out of her mouth. She is so well and truly paralysed that I am left unsure if these are tears or just her eyes watering. I wipe her eyes as gently as I can. I think she understands what is happening around her. I think she understands what I say to her but should I acknowledge the tears and her suffering with words or keep quiet in case they are not tears? I play safe and talk about something else hoping to distract her just in case they are tears.

Tomorrow is Mom's birthday. She was born on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1929 and will be 85. I plan to bring gulab jamuns. There is no way that she can eat cake but I am hoping that she will be able to taste and maybe eat the softer gulab jamuns. Will there be any point in wishing her a happy birthday or many happy returns of the day? Yet it will seem weird not to wish her. Perhaps the day will bring her happy returns and she will pass away gently in her sleep holding my hand that night.

She was awake tonight when my brother called. We heard Caelan's voice for the first time as he cried. Her great-grandson. It should have been a moment of great joy but she could show no reaction. I want to scream out to the universe. Tell me why this is happening. Is there any point to this suffering? Would I be doing the right thing if I ended it for her? Or is this the result of her karmas. If I interfere, will she have to go through all this again in another life?

We celebrated her birthday in the end with rasmalai. The day nurse and I sang Happy Birthday and then enjoyed the rasmalai. Mum drank 2-3 spoons of the milky part. Then she had breathing problems and as I held her hand, I panicked. Was this the time when she would go? I wanted it to be while I was holding her hand but what happened to her going peacefully

in her sleep, God? The nebuliser and steam helped and she began to breathe normally again. My panic subsided. I went out for a smoke and wondered if I was relieved.

It was 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2014 and I was working on my computer in Auckland. My brother was calling on Skype. A bit surprising because usually I was the one to call Chandigarh later at night. He told me that Mum was having trouble breathing and the doctor had suggested he let me know. The wonders of technology. He turned the laptop so I could see Mum and she could see me. Her eyes seemed to be asking me a question and I found myself replying “Mum, your suffering is coming to an end and I am on my way.” Within an hour of that call, Mama passed away. She knew how upset I was that I could not say good-bye to my father. She made sure that she said her good bye to me before she went.

Mama, we will never stop missing you but all that you taught us remains and guides our every day.



**Kusum Seth**

20 February 1929 - 4 September 2014