4368 words

THE GARDEN OF POMEGRANATES

There was an earthquake the day we entered the apartment in Delhi in the summer of 1967. The ceiling fan in the bedroom shook. I ran to the dining room. The china in the sideboard rattled and the sideboard tipped forward. My mother stood in the doorway smiling nervously. "Earthquake," she mouthed. It was only a tremor; we learned that Delhi had hundreds of such tremors.

A little later, from the apartment downstairs, a heavy-set woman who seemed in her upper fifties with greying hair tied in two braids, lumbered up the stairs with a tea tray. The tea service looked English and different from the Bengal Potteries china we got in those pre-liberalization days. On a plate were coconut macaroons and a slab of cake. The blue and white teapot sat on an embroidered tray cloth.

Her slanting eyes made me guess that she was a *Pahari,* a hill woman from the foothills of the Himalayas. She wore a tunic over a long ankle-length skirt and a scarf wrapped around her head that came halfway down her skirt. Her gums showed when she smiled. She said she was Mrs. Ross. My mother said a quick thank you, assuming she was the maid sent to deliver the tea.

We had just finished drinking the tea. It was good Darjeeling tea which came with a pitcher of warm milk and a sugar bowl. I was digging into a big slab of lemon drizzle cake when the doorbell rang again. A slight cross-eyed figure stood outside the door. My hand tightened on the doorknob. She said she was the washer woman who lived in the servants' quarters, pointing to a structure behind our apartment building. "Avoid all contact with your neighbors downstairs." She said loudly. "That woman is very bad." Placing a thin hand on my arm which I shook off, she continued, "She does black magic. She casts spells by putting something in the food. She killed the first wife of the English sahib who lives downstairs and married him."

"What impudence," my mother said when I shut the door. It was most unusual for a washerwoman to be so familiar with the families of sahibs. My mother was perplexed as she realized that the woman who brought the tea tray was perhaps not the maid but the lady of the apartment below.

***

Our flat was one of four apartments and similar four flats made a horseshoe around an open *maidan.* To the right of the apartment building was the road that went over a culvert over which every half hour a Delhi Transport bus trundled. These were supposed to be temporary housing arrangements for my father, until suitable accommodation befitting his rank as chief engineer could be found, but as it turned out, we stayed there nearly three years. From our balcony we could see a high border of pomegranate trees that enclosed the downstairs garden.

Across the landing from us lived a bachelor in his fifties. He had remained a bachelor, we learned by and by, because he had not been able to marry the girl he loved. She had been a Muslim and he was a Hindu. This was during the days of Partition; her family had migrated to Pakistan. Even now scores of highly-educated elderly women wearing chiffon sarees continued to woo the bachelor; they trooped up the stairs bearing presents of chicken biriyani and *rasmalai* on his birthday. But he remained steadfast to his lost love.

Downstairs lived a childless couple, Mr. and Mrs. Dubey, who were both social workers. I called them Aunty and Uncle, as was the custom. They had a house boy who came from the hills. His name was Bahadur. Mr. and Mrs. Dubey treated Bahadur like a son. They were the only family with a TV in those days. But if I wanted to watch TV I was told to come at specific hours that did not conflict with Bahadur's nap-time, which he took in the drawing room where the TV was. I adored Mrs. Dubey not only because she had adopted nine stray neighborhood dogs but also because during the heat of summer, when mendicants knocked on her door asking for a drink of water, she'd let them use her toilet and invited them into her drawing room and offered them lemonade with ice. But Mr. Dubey was a bit of a busybody.

What can I say of my own family? In our home, my father was God. My mother supervised all the household matters. My father never stepped into the kitchen. When I got my period at the age of twelve, my mother asked my older sister to explain things to me. "Why don't you do it?" my sister asked. "I feel shy," Mother said. My older sister married when I was thirteen and now lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, and I missed her terribly.

***

None of the other families in our four flat had children. I was fourteen and bored. My new school would not start for another month. Time lay heavily on my hands. The following week, I rang the doorbells of the other flats to ask if they had any girls my age and the only one I could find was Helen. Thanks to the encounter with the washerwoman, I felt uneasy as I rang the

doorbell. The girl who opened the door had a perfect oval face and green eyes. Long straight brown hair hung down her back.

"I'm Anita, "I said. " I live upstairs. Thank you for the tea and cake last week."

"Anita," the girl repeated, "I'm Helen, come, let's go to my room,"

Helen led me through the living room which had sofas and chairs covered in flowery chintz, like an English cottage. The curtains were pulled back showing a Queen of the Night bush. Narcissi and cannas in terracotta pots formed a semicircle in the front garden, behind which stood a border of pomegranate trees. I gazed admiringly at the scarlet blossoms on the trees. Soon they would turn into pomegranates.

Catching my gaze Helen said, "Daddy planted them. He planted the whole garden. But passersby keep picking the fruit."

Against the wall of the living room stood a piano, with a framed picture of a pretty Pahari woman, waving a scarf. She stood on a grassy knoll surrounded by pine and oak trees. In the background were snow-covered mountains. I stopped to scrutinize the picture.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Mummy," Helen said. From the kitchen came a smell of rum and something baking.

Helen's bedroom had a bedside table with a lamp next to her bed. On it was black leather bound Bible with gold lettering on the cover. Her bedroom smelled musty from never opening the windows. A large stack of English women's magazines lay on a table: *Woman's Own* and *Woman's Week*. "Ooh! Magazines!" I cried and made a beeline for the stack. I had never been to England; I had scarcely seen an Englishman or Englishwoman in India during those post-Independence years. In my family I am famous for having said when I was seven or eight that "Paris was the capital of London," and I have never been able to live it down.

Helen sat on her bed while I rifled through the issues, looking at pictures, picking up tips on makeup, fashion, home décor, glancing at recipes for seafood Mornay and shepherd's pie. Apart from the magazines, there were no books in Helen's room.

I learned that Helen was twenty (which made her six years older than me) and that she had spent six months in England.

"Daddy wanted me to do a secretarial course in London, but Mummy pined for me so much that I came back," Helen said.

The lady with the tea tray was indeed Mrs. Ross, Helen's mother. I found it hard to equate the sylphlike woman in the picture frame on the piano with the watermelon-shaped figure

of Helen's mother. Mrs. Ross didn't say much but mewed like a cat or made soft noises of endearment to her daughter.

"Thank you for the tea and cake," I said turning to Mrs. Ross.

I don't know if she spoke any English. When I was leaving, Mr. Ross gave me a freshly baked rum cake to take home.

I suspected that Helen's father, Mr. Ross, was an Anglo Indian, a name given to Brits who have lived in India for several years and some of whom have varying quantities of Indian blood. Mr. Ross was a quiet man with watery grey eyes, thin lips under a stubby grey moustache and ashen hair. He wore buttoned grey sweaters in the winter. I never heard him speak: I only heard Helen repeating his utterances. He seemed very self-contained and liked to keep to himself. Most evenings we could hear Helen's father play on the violin, *"Oh Danny Boy,"* and *"Shenandoah."* It sounded so plaintive, with the darkness outside and the lights coming up in neighboring homes. Sometimes it would be Chopin's *Nocturnes* on the piano. I only know this because I saw the music on the stand the next day. After a while I began to visit Helen's home nearly every day. All the other residents in our building, except for Mr. Ross, owned a car, but I would see him around our neighborhood on his bicycle. He had once been a forest ranger in Shimla and that was where he met Helen's mother. He did not seem to have any friends.

Some afternoons, Mrs. Ross sat in the back garden on a *charpoy* in the grass patch under a mulberry tree, surrounded by vegetables, chatting with the young postman who stopped by on his rounds. The postman belonged to Mrs. Ross' village in the Himalayas. He may have been in love with Helen, because he would sit up very self-consciously whenever she passed by, although Helen wouldn't give him the time of day. The postman spent so much time stretched out on the *charpoy*, drinking tea and popping mulberries in his mouth that I wonder when he ever delivered his letters.

Helen's mother came from one of the hill towns in the Himalayas. Not long after our arrival, I saw her running back and forth from her flat to the *maidan*, she was all out of breath and excited as she supervised a shindig in the *maidan.* At first I thought there was a fair going on. The *maidan* was milling with hill people, there was music of pipes, drums and flutes. That night men danced slowly rocking back and forth with their arms linked. They wore *churidars* and tunics with cummerbunds around their waists. The musicians were playing a drum beat all night and the music got louder and faster, and past midnight the dancers were jumping in the air. According to Uncle Dubey lots of marijuana and liquor must have flowed, too. Only later we learned it was not a fair, but a wedding of someone from Mrs. Ross' village.

Mr. Ross loved to bake and Helen brought us small gifts of baked goods made by her father. One time it was an English trifle in a glass bowl, another time it was Scottish shortbread. Helen had perfect manners, especially when she was talking to my family, always remembering to say please and thank you. When she came to dinner at our place, she always said, "Thank you

for a lovely evening," to my mother. She must have gone to a good school because she had a proper English accent acquired in good schools like mine. My parents held a favorable opinion of her. Helen's life was so different from my own that I was fascinated.

When Helen offered to take me shopping for some bras and panties, I noticed that all the store keepers gave her a second glance. She had the knowing look of someone who had been around the block, (an expression I learned later in life) and men sensed this. Helen herself was strikingly beautiful. She had backcombed her brown hair into a beehive. She wore a tight *kurta* and *churidars* and spiked heels--attire that accentuated her triangular shape: enormous breasts, knock-knees and skinny bowed legs. From below she looked like a child, from above like a grown woman. She carried a big leather purse slung over her shoulder everywhere.

Helen's boyfriend, Amroo, used to visit her when her father was not home. He rode a Bajaj motorcycle and wore a black leather jacket. He was handsome but shifty-eyed; the son of a moneylender in Karol Baug and he worked for his father. I didn't trust Amroo. I could tell he was up to no good. He gave me a sheepish grin whenever he saw me and made a quick getaway.

Once, Helen said to me, "We were lying on the bed Amroo and I."

"What! You lay on the same bed as Amroo?" I was shocked.

Helen noted my shock and swatted me on the arm saying. "No silly, he slept one way, I slept the other."

It was after these visits with Amroo that I noticed Helen opened her Bible at random more and more. Once she told me, "Daddy says, "Don't forget you are a descendant of John Knox." I learned later that John Knox started the Reformation in Scotland.

One Friday at about three o'clock in the afternoon, I wanted to ask Helen if she was free to watch a movie at the theater in Connaught Place that evening. Helen's apartment door was open so I crossed over to her bedroom. There seemed to be no one at home, but I recognized Amroo's Bajaj motor cycle propped against the pomegranate trees. Just as I was about to walk into Helen's bedroom I caught a glimpse of Amroo and Helen stretched out on the bed. They had no clothes on. Helen lay on her side with her arms around Amroo's neck. Unseen, I went back the way I had come. I felt disgust and wished to have nothing more to do with Helen. Weeks passed and then she pushed a note under our door, asking me to come over because she had something very important to tell me, and curiosity got the better of me.

When I went to her bedroom, she was dressed in a red georgette sari with silver spangles. She stood before the long mirror and surveyed herself appreciatively. She wore long green pendant earrings, a necklace of large green and topaz stones. There was a huge *bindi* on her forehead.

"So, what's going on?" I acted as if nothing had happened between us..

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Like a bride." I said.

The answer pleased her.

"Why are you so dolled up?"

"We are going to a hotel in Chandigarh."

"You and Amroo?" I asked, disapprovingly.

"Oh, don't be such a marm, we are going as Mr. and Mrs. Amrish Khanna!" Her eyes looked far away and yearning. "I think he is going to ask me to marry him," she said.

My Dad would have broken my legs, before I did anything like that. Hill girls have a different mentality, I guess.

Amroo did not ask Helen to marry him.

I started attending the French classes at the *Alliance Francaise*. Helen said she'd like to take them too, so once a week the two of us would take the bus up to Greater Kailash. On the long bus ride I noticed that men looked long at Helen. Once when we were strap-hanging on the bus, I squirmed as a passenger squeezed his hot, perspiring body past us. He said something inaudible. Then looking at me, he said in Hindi, "And they take it in their mouth." Helen put an arm around me, then fixed him with a steely gaze, and replied in chaste Hindi,

"Hum Samjhe Nahin?" (We don't understand.) And then she socked him on the head with her leather purse. I was amazed. Thereafter I had a new respect for Helen and I had to admit that her Hindi was as good as mine.

The next week, before leaving for the bus stop I called, "Helen, are you ready?"

"Coming," Helen said. "You can look at my UK scrapbook while I get ready." she said, brushing her hair. "Daddy wanted me to go home to the UK," Helen said, glancing over her shoulder at the pictures.

"UK!" I cried. "Do you have family there?"

"Well Daddy left England when he was only fourteen. He was expected to work. His Dad was a coal miner. Daddy came to India to find work."

I leafed through the scrapbook. It was divided into sections, "The Voyage Out," "Southampton," "London," etc. In it she had pasted all the minutiae of her trip: a picture of the *S.S. Strathmore*, her ticket, luggage tags, the two-berth stateroom, the dining saloon, even each day's menu. There was a picture of a dessert.

What's that?" I asked, pointing to a dome-shaped cake.

"Plum pudding, silly! Daddy's making it today. I stuck it in because it reminded me of home. "

"You mean, the UK?

"No, this home," she said. "Here. Mummy and Daddy. You're such a dope sometimes," she said playfully. "In this photo I've landed in Southampton," Helen said, suddenly at my side, pointing to a picture.

By now my eyes were glazing over.

"The sailors were so handsome," she said wistfully, "They had the bluest eyes!"

"Who did you stay with?" I asked.

"Daddy's sister. Well, only for three days." Her face knitted into a frown.

"She said she could not let me stay any longer because she ran a boarding house. So, I was on my own."

As I was leaving she took me to the kitchen where Mr. Ross stood behind a wooden table strewn with aluminum baking trays.

"Daddy, Anita's never tasted plum pudding."

Mr. Ross was licking batter from a spoon and he passed it over to me to lick the rest of it. I winced. I felt a slipping and sliding of time-worn customs. In my family we just don't mix saliva in this manner, especially the saliva of strangers, but my desire to get a taste of plum pudding batter got the better of me, and I licked the spoon.

That October, Helen fasted on *Karwa Chauth* for Amroo. This is a fast that women in the North of India keep on the full moon in October. They go without food or liquids (other than swallowing saliva) for the whole day, to prolong the lives of their husbands. And they only eat that evening after seeing the full moon through a silver sieve. Helen had requested me to come over and talk to her to take her mind off food. When I arrived in her bedroom she was sitting on her bed with her feet stretched out. I noticed that she had flat feet.

"You know, Anita," Helen closed her eyes. "I think Amroo and I have known each other in previous lives," she said dreamily.

A few months later, Helen asked me to accompany her to see a powerful shaman who had come down from the mountains in Bhutan, it was said. As we walked towards a school building where the shaman was billeted, Helen said, "When I was sick, so sick that they thought I would die, the shaman told my mother to sacrifice a goat; that's what kept me alive."

“What boon are you going to seek?” I asked, kicking a stone and turning over this information.

“You know it.” Helen giggled. “But I shouldn’t tell. Not even you.” She said, putting her hand over her mouth. “It won’t come true.”

We walked the short distance to a room cleared of desks. It was buzzing with the voices of a hundred seated women. A wizened old man sat in the center hardly visible on account of the crowd. Some women began to shake, huff, puff and rotate their torsos. As Helen came to the head of the line, there was a power cut. The fans stopped and there was darkness all around. When the lights returned, a swarm of bees flew in through an open window, which spooked me so much that I tore out of the room and never came back. Helen never shared with me what happened.

***

“So is it true that your friend Helen Ross's mother was a servant and that she inveigled the man of the house into marrying her?” Uncle Dubey asked me, when I used their phone to report to the telephone company that our phone was not working. “They say that Helen is the first wife's daughter?”

“Who are ‘they’?” I asked.

“Bahadur! Who else? He is friends with the postman. Bahadur tells us everything.” Uncle Dubey said, waggling his head and smiling, his gold tooth glistening. Mrs. Dubey sighed gently.

***

Eighteen months after I first met her, I found Helen on her bed as usual, her knees drawn up to her chin. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. “Amroo says that he can’t marry me,” she said, “His mother has threatened to hang herself from the fan if he married me.”

Apparently, Amroo's family had learned about Helen, and they had forbidden him from seeing her. I could have told her that. Amroo, and their like rarely married the women they made merry with. The marriage would be with a virgin who would arrive with seven kilos of gold and within nine months a son would make his appearance.

And that is exactly what happened. Amroo married a girl chosen by his family. *Good riddance!*

Helen was disconsolate. “Romeo and Juliet, that’s what we are!” she cried.

As the months passed, Helen hardly stirred from her house. She sat motionless on her bed, in her nightgown, her hair uncombed. I would occasionally see her stare fixedly at some object. She felt it metamorphose into a demon and jeer at her. It frightened me to watch her. She

turned to me with sunken eyes, “Go away, I don’t want to see anyone.” Her lip curled. “You are all the same.”

When I rang her doorbell the following week, Helen’s mother opened the door. She looked wornout. She scarcely spoke, but this time she said, “Wait here,” in Hindi, “I will see if she will at least see you.” She returned after some time, “Helen says she isn’t feeling well, she does not wish to see anyone.” Mrs. Ross sighed.

“Is she okay?” I whispered.

“What can I tell you?” Mrs. Ross said, furtively looking over her shoulder. “She doesn’t listen to either her father or me,” and she burst into tears.

From inside, Helen yelled. “Will you two stop talking about me?”

After that I stopped going to Helen’s place.

***

On the day that Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, my mother and I traveled to India’s west coast to spend a few weeks with my grandparents. My father would join us later. It was a long trip. We took a train from Delhi to Bombay, and then another train from Bombay to Hubli. We were to take the State Transport bus from the Hubli train station. Our train was late coming into Hubli, and by the time we got to the bus station the last bus to my grandparents’ town had just left. At the bus station they said encouragingly, “You can still make it. Take a *tonga* and try to catch up with the bus at the next bus station.” So we got into a *tonga* with our suitcases and hold-all. I will never forget that *tonga* ride as the driver goaded the horse to a gallop, bells jangling, the *tonga* tilting, rattling this way and that, until we came within hollering distance of the bus.

“Stop the bus!” I yelled. I was halfway out of the *tonga*. “Stop the bus!” the passengers echoed when they caught sight of us and set up a clamor until the bus stopped. That was the only exciting thing that happened to us on that trip.

On our return to Delhi, our taxi from the train station was slowed down by an enormous wedding procession. The groom sat astride a white horse. Flower chains hung from his turban. The western sky was a flaming crimson and the bridegroom and his horse seemed to be ambling into the sunset. Relatives and friends danced in a desultory fashion and blocked traffic, like a herd of slow-moving cattle. A red-coated brass band struck up as accompaniment to Lata Mangeshkar’s voice on the loudspeaker, singing a Hindi film song from the fifties, *“Raja ki Aayegi Baraat…”* (The King’s wedding procession will arrive…) For some reason, the song and the bridegroom reminded me of Amroo, and bile rose in my throat.

It was dark when we reached home. In spite of the darkness, the black shadows of the garden downstairs looked different. Our surroundings seemed unusually quiet that night. The next day, a shock awaited me. I learned that while we were away, Helen had killed herself by hanging herself from the fan in her room. Both Mr. and Mrs. Ross had left their home. No one knew where they had gone. Helen had been a good friend, a surrogate big sister to me. There was no one around who could tell me anything. Before leaving, Mr. Ross had cut down all the pomegranate trees.

When I saw the postman doing his rounds, I came down the stairs. I had never spoken to him, but I felt that if I did not ask him about what he knew about Helen's suicide, I would explode.

The postman sighed, *"Kismet,"* he said, hitting his forehead with his palm. "What can anyone do?" He added bitterly, "But she never really belonged, did she?"

The postman's words made me wish that the gravel on which I stood would part and the earth would swallow me whole. A cry emerged from the depths of my being, I turned around to stare at the sawed-off trunks of the pomegranate trees, and I could not stop sobbing.

THE END