

# **My Family - A Historical Journey through the Seasons**

## **Part One: Winter**

There is a legend in Delhi that when a male-child is born, the parents are visited by a group of 'Hijras', a derogatory term used to describe the Transgender community. The troupe gather en-masse outside the home of the parents of the infant boy and sing and dance, and offer blessings to the new arrival, while in return a small sum of money is offered to the visiting party and all returns to the relative 'normalcy' that prevails in a home that has just experienced the birth of a child.

These were the early 1970's, and this story was told to me in great detail by my parents, who themselves were recently arrived political exiles in India, having to leave South Africa, where my father was arrested along with Nelson Mandela and 156 others in the infamous 'Treason Trial' of 1956.

The 'main' "Treason Trial" lasted four years till 1960, though the entire trial lasted till 1961, when the 30 remaining accused (of which my father was one) were acquitted by the Supreme Court.

The outcome of the trial was that all 156 were acquitted of the charge of 'High Treason'.

During the 5 years of the trial my father and his co-accused had to travel daily to court in Pretoria from Johannesburg, some 60 kilometres away.

The accused were all charged with 'High Treason' and faced the death penalty if found guilty. My father was the youngest accused at 22 years of age.

## **A Flash Forward -**

Later, in 1963, when my father was arrested again and held at Marshall Square Police Station in central Johannesburg, my father and three fellow political detainees managed to convince a young Afrikaner warder, Johan Greeff, into helping the four escape from the downtown Johannesburg prison. He was promised financial remuneration for his cooperation.

The news of 'The Great Escape' embarrassed the Apartheid state at a time when it felt that it had crushed the African National Congress (ANC), with most of its leaders either in jail, or having gone underground. The 'Sharpeville' massacre of 1960 resulted in the Apartheid state declaring a State of Emergency and banning the African National Congress (ANC) and other political organisations.

My father, Moosa 'Mosie' Moolla and his three fellow escapees (Abdulhay 'Charlie' Jassat, Harold Wolpe, and Arthur Goldreich) parted ways and moved from one safe-house to another, until my father, heavily disguised, managed to slip through the border into neighbouring 'Bechuanaland', now the country Botswana.

Goldreich and Wolpe managed to disguise themselves as clerics and made their way to Swaziland, a British High Commission Territory, from where they flew over to Bechuanaland (now Botswana).

The South African authorities offered a reward of 5000 Pounds Sterling for the capture of any of the escapees.

Following the escape my father and His fellow escapees were separately sheltered by members of the ANC underground for a few days.

They then parted ways for safety reasons and Abdulhay Jassat made his way to Bechuanaland where he sought political asylum.

By the time my father made his way about a month after the escape to Bechuanaland, the two white colleagues ( my father and Jassat are of Indian-origin) Wolpe and Goldreich had flown over to Tanganyka (now Tanzania) where the ANC's external headquarters were located in Dar-es-Salaam.

It should be noted that a chartered plane to ferry ANC students and Wolpe and Goldreich was blown-up on the tarmac by South African agents in the early hours of the morning.

Wolpe and Goldreich then flew over on another flight. Jassat followed suit.

### **An Interesting Fact –**

My father and Abdulhay ‘Charlie’ Jassat were both born on June 12th, 1934, and the two were arrested and escaped from prison together, and subsequently lived 30 years of their lives in exile, and both men returned to South Africa following the release of Nelson Mandela and all political prisoners, and the unbanning of the ANC and all liberation movements, and the return of political exiles.

As I type these words, my father and ‘Charlie’ live a few kilometres apart in Johannesburg and meet fairly regularly – mostly at functions or events held to commemorate the years of the struggle for freedom and democracy in South Africa.

But more about my father in a bit.

### **A Flash Back –**

My mother, Zubeida or ‘Zubie’, a nurse at the time, and expecting my brother Azad (which means ‘to be free’ in Urdu) was subsequently arrested and detained while having to endure interrogation about her husband’s whereabouts. Azad was born in late 1963, a few months after my father’s escape.

Thus my father did not see his first-born son till 5 years later in 1968 when my mother and young brother and sister reunited with my father on the Tanzanian border. My father had by then joined the Armed-Wing of the African National Congress, Umkhonto-we-Sizwe, or MK, ‘The Spear of the Nation’, which was formed in 1960 following the ANC’s decision to abandon non-violent opposition against Apartheid and to take up arms.

My sister Tasneem Nobandla, ‘Nobandla’ or ‘she who is of the people’ in isiXhosa was given her Xhosa middle name by my father’s comrade-in-arms and his Best-Man, Nelson Mandela, who couldn’t make it to my parent’s wedding because he was in detention at the time, a few years earlier!

My sister Tasneem Nobandla Moolla was born on October the 14th 1962

'Nobandla' was named when Mosie asked his comrade and Best-Man, Nelson Mandela, who could not make it to his wedding to name his new-born daughter. The two men had spent time in jail together in adjoining cells a year earlier in 1962.

Times were tough in those early years of exile, with my father off on military training with the newly formed ANC's 'Spear of the Nation', and my mother having to shoulder the extreme difficulties of life in exile, in a strange country, having left her family behind, and having to essentially fend for herself and her two young children.

This led to a decision that continues to haunt my family to this day.

According to my parents, the situation in exile in those early years of the Anti-Apartheid struggle abroad was so dire, and my father being away training in guerrilla tactics and the like, while my mother worked as a nurse trying to raise two young kids, suffering from bouts of Malaria and being short on money as well, a decision was made to send my young brother and sister back to South Africa to remain in the care of my maternal grandparents, in the hope that when things in exile 'improved' or at least settled a bit, the kids would leave the care of their grandparents and join their parents abroad.

This did not happen, and this is one of the most difficult parts of our family's history to write and talk openly about. Due to circumstances beyond their control, and due to a myriad other reasons, my young brother and sister remained separated from our parents, and grew up in Apartheid South Africa with my maternal grandparents in Johannesburg.

My mother, who passed away in 2008 after a lengthy battle with Motor-Neurone Disease, carried the pain and the guilt of that decision till she died. My father still lives with the guilt and the trauma of being separated from his children, and his family for over 30 years.

My brother Azad and my sister Tasneem, had to endure the unimaginable trauma of knowing that their parents were alive and on distant shores somewhere, yet being utterly helpless in joining them and living as a family, albeit a family in political exile.

The wounds are deep, and the trauma is still raw, all these years later, and my mother died broken-hearted, having to endure the separation of a mother from her children, as well as having to deal with a husband who was engaged full-time in the ANC and the anti-Apartheid struggle in exile.

It is only now that I can understand my mother's strength of character and fortitude in remaining sane under circumstances that no parent should ever have to go through.

My siblings, on the hand, had to grow up with grandparents, and this has led to our family having to continuously grapple with the scars of a family torn-apart by Apartheid.

My brother Azad, a lawyer, is married with two beautiful young girls, and my sister, a teacher, is married with four beautiful daughters as well.

We all live in Johannesburg, and though some progress has been made in reconciling our family, it is very painful to say that there are many unresolved emotional wounds, which are completely understandable given the circumstances.

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## **Part Two: Spring**

The narrative here is neither chronological, nor is it meant to be a complete history of my family thus far – that would be highly presumptuous of me to attempt – so what you, dear reader, are reading (praise be to your perseverance!) are the disjointed thoughts and memories and anecdotal and other stories that every family shares.

I must state that the facts about my father's internment and escape are all verifiable using a web-search engine, as are the facts about my parent's involvement in the struggle for liberation in South Africa, and my father's subsequent appointment by then President Nelson Mandela as South African Ambassador to Iran (1995 – 1999) and later by President Thabo Mbeki as South African High Commissioner to Pakistan (2000 – 2004) in the newly democratic country that countless South Africans sacrificed their lives to achieve.

My parents often spoke of the privilege that they felt to be alive and return to the country of their birth after spending virtually their entire lives as foot-soldiers in the African National Congress, the liberation movement that included in its ranks giants of South African history – Nelson 'Madiba' Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Dr. Moses Kotane, Dr. Yusuf Dadoo, Joe Slovo, Bram Fischer, Chris Hani, only to name a few, and with no disrespect meant to the many, many more that I have not named.

The 'privilege' my parents spoke about was that they were the 'fortunate' ones, the ones who lived to see the non-racial, non-sexist, democratic constitution being drafted, and a South Africa without the crime against humanity that was Apartheid.

So many comrades and friends and fellow compatriots did not live to cast their vote on that glorious April day in 1994, and to see Nelson Mandela being inaugurated as South Africa's first freely elected black President, a President who represented the whole of South African society.

## **A Flash Back –**

And so it was that I was born in 1972 in an India that had just been engaged in a war with Pakistan, which in turn led to the establishment of a new country – Bangladesh.

India at the time was the in midst of austere Nehruvian Socialism, and my parents who had spent the mid and late-1960's in Tanzania, Zambia and Britain, were deployed by the African National Congress to India, where my father was the Chief-Representative of the ANC.

My early childhood years were spent in India, and I recall the sweltering Delhi summers and the torrential monsoons that offered respite, albeit briefly, from the furnace of the Indian summer.

When I was 6 years old, my father was deployed by the ANC to be its Chief-Representative in Cairo, Egypt, and to be the ANC Representative at the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO).

This was 1978, and as a 6 year old, I am afraid I have very few fond memories of Cairo – we lived on a meagre stipend and though we lived in an apparently 'better' suburb of Cairo called Zamalek, an island on the Nile, the flat we occupied was on the ground-floor of a high-rise apartment block and it was damp, dark, and had the unfortunate distinction of being right next to the apartment block's garbage-disposal area!

This meant a steady stream of litter, literally being flung from the windows of our neighbours in the flats above us, and often landing with a crash of shattered glass right outside our tiny kitchen.

Cairo was also where I had to unlearn the Hindi I had learnt in Delhi and pick up Arabic, which I did as most 6 year olds do when required by circumstance to learn a new language.

I faintly remember the Presidents' Sadat-Carter meetings around the time of the Camp David Peace Accord signed between Israel and Egypt and my days were spent riding my bicycle through the dusty lanes of Zamalek.

One memory that is particularly poignant is that of my mother, with her head in her hands, sobbing as she pined for her two children at the opposite end of the African continent. I remember many days walking back from school and

before stepping into our apartment block, seeing my mother through the window of what was my room, head in hands, crying.

It is a memory that I carry with me still.

Another indelible memory is when we visited the WWII museum of the battle of al-Alamein, in al-Alamein. Walking past the graves of the fallen in the war against Nazism, we came across many South African names, and I remember vividly how my father explained to me what Fascism and Nazism meant, and how important it was at the time for the world to fight it.

As we walked through the tombstones of the WWII soldiers from all parts of the world, my father explained to me how Apartheid in South Africa was a scourge (though not in those words!) like Fascism and Nazism, and how just as the world had joined forces to fight Hitler and Mussolini, we too had to fight against Apartheid in South Africa, and that is why I was not at 'home' with my brother and sister.

'Home'. That was something for a 9 or 10 year old to hear, because I had grown up always being told about 'home' being South Africa, which was as distant to me as the stars above the Pyramids. I was aware from as young as I can remember my parents' sometimes angry insistence that home was not where we happened to be, at a particular time, whether in Delhi or in Cairo, but in distant South Africa.

I however, could not understand why 'home' was not where I was. In Delhi I spoke Hindi like a local, and had friends and felt that 'home' was our little flat on the 1st floor of a block of flats in Greater Kailash. But then came the move to Cairo, and in no time at all I completely forgot my Hindi, and learnt Arabic like a local, and had friends and felt that 'home' was our dinghy flat in Zamalek.

And then in 1982, my father was re-deployed from Cairo back to Delhi, and suddenly there I was, 10 years old, meeting my old friends and not knowing a word of Hindi!

So the idea of 'belonging', of 'home', of being rooted in a place and time was alien to me from a very young age. I remember dreading when the next 'move' would be, given that my parents were political exiles and often having to pack up our few belongings and travelling at very short notice. I do not want it to sound like it was particularly unpleasant in any way, because there also was the thrill a child has of the packing and the plane rides, and the new places that



were so, so new to me. Cairo and Delhi probably had only the following things in common: the heat, the population, and the fact that both Egypt under Gamal Abdul Nasser and India under Jawaharlal Nehru were two of the four countries (the others being Sukarno's Indonesia and Marshall Tito's Yugoslavia) that founded the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the Cold War.

## **A Flash Forward –**

The year is 1990, and my parents and I found ourselves in Helsinki, Finland, where in November 1989 the ANC deployed my father as ANC Secretary to the World Peace Council (WPC) which had its headquarters in Helsinki.

For the 17 year old that I was to suddenly, in a matter of weeks, pack up and leave high-school, friends and a girl-friend at the time, was particularly harsh for me.

I remember spending the winter of 1989 holed up in our two-bedroomed flat in Helsinki, not knowing what had just taken place. I pined for the girl I was (kind of!) dating back in school in Delhi, and I was thoroughly shocked by the below-zero temperatures of winter in Scandinavia, and thoroughly disheartened by the short days and long, long nights. I did love the snow however!

Then it happened. We heard the news that Nelson Mandela and all political prisoners in South Africa were to be released, unconditionally, and that the liberation movements and the ANC were to be unbanned!

This changed everything.

It was a chaotic and heady time, with high hopes and renewed life as the once impossible dream of returning 'home' was to be realised.

A very memorable trip was made by my parents and I, by ferry from Helsinki to Stockholm, Sweden. An overnight ferry-ride, the trip was magical, for we were to meet Nelson Mandela, free after 27 years on Robben Island and in Sweden to meet the President of the ANC, comrade Oliver Reginald Tambo, Mandela's old friend, law-partner and life-long comrade in the ANC. President Oliver Tambo, who had been in exile for almost 30 years was a dynamic and charismatic and intellectual giant who had built the ANC in exile from being just another liberation movement in exile into the voice of the South African

freedom struggle, launching successful campaigns to isolate Apartheid South Africa from the world community.

Unfortunately President Oliver Tambo had suffered a stroke and was convalescing as a guest of the Swedish government; themselves staunch allies in the fight against Apartheid. Nelson Mandela met his old comrade in Stockholm and we met the godfather of my sister, and the would-be best-man of my father in a hall in Stockholm. I have photographs of the tears and joy as Mandela hugged my father and mother, and as old comrades including Ahmed Kathrada who also spent 27 years in jail with Mandela and the other Rivonia Trial accused, met after nearly 30 years! I was overwhelmed, as were countless others to finally meet the man who had become the face of the worldwide struggle against Apartheid.

That my parents knew the Mandelas as young friends and comrades only made the reunion on a Scandinavian day all the more special.

There was a sense of vindication, of oppression though still not defeated, but definitely in its final moments, as we acknowledged that we all stood on the cusp of something so many had not only dreamed about, but dedicated their entire lives to achieve.

We spent a few days in Stockholm and Uppsala, and then hopped on the ferry back to Helsinki, to finally begin preparations for the return home.

The trip we made was on freezing November night, when we boarded a train from Helsinki to Moscow, and then flew to Maputo in Mozambique where we spent a night, before boarding a South African Airways flight to Johannesburg.

I will never forget the stifled sobs of my mother as the pilot announced we were flying over South African soil.

My parents and I returned to South Africa on a November day in 1990, as part of a batch of returning political exiles.

I was 18 years old and met most of my family members for the first time.

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## **Part Three: A Summer Digression**

And now, dear reader (may your patience be praised!), I am going to steer this ship of memories as we embark on a journey of emotions – a subjective voyage through the feelings that I have felt, the emotions that I have experienced during the course of my 40 year old life.

You, dear reader, may stop reading right now if you find outpourings of emotion and wearing one's feelings on one's sleeve not your cup of Earl-Grey! If however, and I sincerely hope you do decide to read through this 'summer' of life's memories, I assure you that what you will read will be savage honesty, however painful and hard it is to bare one's soul for all to see the flawed human-beings that we all are.

And so it was that just past my 18th birthday in September of 1990, I found myself 'home' in South Africa, after 18. Years of dreaming what 'home' would be like and how my brother and sister and cousins and aunts and uncles would take me into their homes and lives.

I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and kindness showered on me, the 'returning' boy who was not really returning, but was dipping his toes into the early 1990's, a period of South African history, just preceding the first free and democratic election in 1994 that was one of the country's most trying of times.

The Apartheid regime, having unbanned all political organisations and liberation movements and releasing political prisoners such as Nelson Mandela and others, was still not willing to relinquish power, and had embarked on a cynical and dirty campaign of fomenting violence in the sprawling black townships in Johannesburg, Durban and other cities around the country.

There were killings and hit-squads that roamed and terrorised communities while negotiations between the Apartheid government and the African National Congress (ANC) offered hope and then broke down, and then were restarted until finally, on April the 27th, 1994, black South African, for the first time in their lives, cast their ballots which resulted in sweeping Nelson

Mandela's ANC into power, with Nelson Mandela or 'Madiba' as he is known becoming South Africa's first black President.

I attended the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first truly democratically elected President in Pretoria on a crisp May 10th morning along with friends and comrades, and we openly wept as the South African Air-Force flew overhead, the flag of our new 'rainbow' nation fluttering below.

## **A Flash Back –**

My early days in South Africa were ones of family dinners and visits to relatives and old family friends and comrades in the struggle. My father started work almost immediately at the ANC's headquarters in central Johannesburg, and I attended my final year of high-school, also in central Johannesburg.

Looking back now, I see myself then as a caricature of the immigrant who just wants to fit in, always being on one's best behaviour, and under no circumstances allowing the turmoil within to bubble to the surface.

I was born to parents who were non-religious; my father definitely more so than my mother, who 'believed' in God, though was never one to make a show of it.

I grew up not really knowing what religion I was born into, as my parents never, and though never is a strong word, it is applicable here; my parents never mentioned religion at home.

My mom would cook up a storm on Eid-ul-Fitr every year, the feast that is the culmination of the fasting month of Ramadaan, but then we never fasted or paid attention to religious ritual or practice. I can say that religion was absent from our home, whether we were in India, Cairo or Helsinki.

I am forever indebted to my parents for having raised me with and this may sound pompous of me to say, humane values, rather than strictly religious ones, not that the two are mutually exclusive!

I attended a school in Delhi in the 1980's, Springdales, an institution founded by two great humanitarians, Mrs. Rajni Kumar and her husband Mr. Yudhishter Kumar, both human-beings who possessed the highest qualities of compassion, humanity, and a burning sense of the need to tackle injustice, wherever and in whatever shape or form it was to be encountered.

My years at Springdales in Delhi, though I was hardly a promising academic student (having failed standard 8!), I now look back and am forever indebted to the culture of tolerance and respect for all people, regardless of station in life, religion, caste, gender or race, that my still-beloved Springdales inculcated in me.

The culture of Springdales School and the manner in which my parents raised me, has led to a life-long aversion to intolerance in any shape, colour or form, and a strong belief in the power of rational and critical thinking.

I thank my parents again, and my Springdales, for bestowing on me this invaluable gift.

### **A Flash Forward –**

And so I find myself, now in the teen years of the new millennium, still always feeling that I am on the outside, looking in – and I find this vantage point to be, strangely, comfortable now, I must admit.

I do not have much time for religion or for cultural affiliations. Again, this is not meant to be offensive to anyone, these are the feelings I am comfortable with. I cannot stress this enough, just how my upbringing and my years at Springdales have hewn into my consciousness, and the absolute need for the respect for all.

I am growing weary of talking about myself, as I am sure you, dear reader, are as well, and so I shall stop this monologue with the words of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara who when responding to a woman who also bore the ‘Guevara’ name and who had written to Che asking him where in Spain his ancestors came from. This was Che’s response ...

“I don’t think you and I are very closely related but if you are capable of trembling with indignation each time that an injustice is committed in the world, we are comrades, and that is more important.”

Thank you, dear reader, for your patience, and for your taking the time to read these ramblings of mine.

# **My Family - A Historical Journey through the Seasons**

## **Part Four: Thoughts about Exile, Home, Identity, Belonging**

### **A Flash Back -**

I look back to that November evening in Helsinki, Finland in 1989, where the temperature was around -20 degrees Celsius, and we stood on the railway platform with our little luggage (mostly books, photographs etc) with tickets to Moscow via Leningrad (yes, it was still called Leningrad back then).

I recall my mother and father, by then already in their late 50's, and preparing to return to their home, South Africa, after almost three decades living in exile all across the globe, from Zambia to Tanzania to England to India to Egypt to India again and then to Finland, and now following the Apartheid regime's unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and other political parties and the release of Nelson Mandela and political prisoners, my parents were to return to a country they had called 'home' for as long as I can remember. South Africa was always; always home, no matter where we happened to be.

Whether it was in our ground-floor, bleakly dark flat in Zamalek, Cairo where we had to keep the fluorescent lights on during the day, or in our 1st floor flat in Safdarjang Development Area in Delhi, or in our cramped 2-bedroom flat in Helsinki, Finland, I was always told about 'home', about family and about the country that I grew up loathing (Apartheid South Africa) as well as the country that I grew up idealising, for South Africa was after all 'home', that mythical place where family stuck together and where my brother Azad and my sister Tasneem grew up, separated from their parents, and where finally, at long last, Nelson Mandela walked free after 27 years in Apartheid's jails.

I often look back on my years growing up as a child of political exiles, and I am thankful, as I grew up without the hardships that so many fellow exiles had to endure.

I am also thankful, for the depth of humanity that I saw in strangers and friends and people who took us in, and loved us, and extended hands of solidarity and assistance and warmth when we were most alone.

I owe a debt of gratitude to so many people, ordinary folk, workers, labourers, academics, doctors and engineers, school-teachers and students, who chose to

identify with the plight of the oppressed people of South Africa, just as they chose to support the cause of justice, of freedom and of self-determination in Namibia, Western-Sahara, and Palestine.

I can vividly remember the pain and anguish that my mother endured, being separated from her family and her children, and I remember her tears, her quiet sobbing when I used to return home from school, knowing that my father was away travelling, often for months at a time.

It is not easy to put everything down on paper, and indeed it is impossible to capture all of one's experiences, yet I feel it is very important that I share these thoughts with you, dear and patient reader, not because of what I wish to say about myself, or even about my parents, but to honour and to remember and to cherish the strong bonds that were forged during those sometimes hard times, and to convey to all, that no matter what one hears about our differences as people, be it differences of creed, of colour, of nationality, there is a 'human' connection that I have seen that simply extinguishes the claims by the religiously fanatical, or by the jingoistic nationalists who seek to impose upon us a barrier, a wall, a divide that cannot be breached. I have mentioned what I am about to write earlier, and I only repeat it because I believe it needs to be repeated, so forgive me, dear reader, if I seem to be revisiting old ground.

The old ground that I feel I need to revisit now is that of a story that my mother used to tell me, repeatedly, and always with tears in her eyes, and always with her crying openly as she retold this story over and over again to me.

Let me place the story in its historical context. The year was 1971, and India had just been at war with Pakistan, and my parents had arrived in what was then called Bombay and had rented a small apartment in one of Bombay's high-rise blocks of flats.

It is important to remember that India had gained independence only 24 years earlier, so the wounds and the trauma of the division of India (into Pakistan and East-Pakistan) were still very fresh.

My father was sent by African National Congress (ANC) to India, in order to work to further strengthen the support that the liberation movement had received from India.

My mother, who was a nurse by profession, had started working at Bombay's Breach Candy Hospital, and my father was busy establishing links within the sizeable South African student community that Bombay was home to.

One day my father decided to jump over a railing, in order to catch a bus, and slipped and fell.

### **I shall now let my mother tell her story ...**

*... Now we had just arrived in India, and though Mosie and I spoke Gujarati, we still didn't know Hindi or Marathi (the language spoken in Maharashtra, the state in which Bombay/Mumbai is located), and here comes Mosie, limping and in pain. I am a nurse and so I took a look at his foot and it looked bad, but what were we to do? We didn't know anyone, we didn't have a telephone, and we didn't speak the language. So I went and knocked on our neighbour's door. An elderly lady opened the door and I explained in English that we were new in the apartment-block and that my husband had suffered a possible fracture. The old lady then asked me to sit. I sat. The elderly lady then asked me my name and I said 'Zubeida, but you can call me Zubie'. I then told the lady all about South Africa, about how I had been separated from my two children, about Apartheid, about Nelson Mandela, and about how we were freedom fighters and were in exile. The old lady broke down and sobbed, and I cried too, feeling her warmth towards me, even though I was a total stranger. Then the elderly lady told me that they were Punjabis and during the partition of India, they had to flee their home in what later became Pakistan because they were Hindus. The old lady sobbed when she told me about the rioting, the massacres, the pain of leaving everything behind and fleeing with only the clothes on their backs, and then she grabbed my hand tightly and said that she understood everything, and she shared my pain, because she too had been a refugee once ... (at this point my mother would be crying openly while telling me the story) ... and that from then on, she was my elder sister. This from a woman who had experienced the horrors of partition, and who realising I had a Muslim name, chose to share her life story with me, and who could understand what we were going through. Anyway, we called a doctor who turned out to be a Parsi 'Bone-Setter' ... (laughing between tears now) ... and later when we moved to Delhi and her daughter Lata got married to Ravi Sethi and also moved to Delhi, she told Lata that 'Zubeida hamaari behen hai' (Zubeida is my sister) and that Lata should keep in touch with us. That's how Papa and I know aunty Lata and uncle Ravi ...*



Hearing my mother tell me this story over and over again, emphasising that aunty Lata's mother had gone through hell at the hands of Muslims, and still she chose to see my mother not as a Muslim, but as a fellow human-being, who shared a similar life in the fact that my parents were also refugees, having fled their country, and that aunty Lata's mother 'took' my parents in, and shared a bond that cannot be described sufficiently in words, as words would only dilute the depth of feeling that the two women shared for each other, only makes my belief in the power of the humanity that binds us all together that much stronger.

Yes, there will be those who will say that those were different times, and that nowadays things have changed.

Yes, there will be many who may call it idealism, romanticism, or simply burying one's head in the sand, but I still hold on firmly to the belief that aunty Lata's mother and my mother shared, one person to another, regardless of religion, colour, caste, wealth, status or any of the many other 'yard-sticks' that people are measured by, and by emphasising our shared humanity, rather than by highlighting our differences, that we can, and that we shall, indeed, overcome, someday.

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## **Part Five: Thoughts about Exile, Home, Identity, Belonging**

This scribble is going to be a rambling, not too coherent piece all about my thoughts on identity, belonging, exile, and about 'home'.

So, my dear friends, I invite you to accompany me, with sufficient forewarning I hope, on this scribbled ramble...

### **'Home'**

Looking back now, I can say that I grew up with two very separate yet entwined ideas of 'home' – 'home' being both the idealised country of my parents, who spoke of 'home', which meant South Africa, as being the place where 'family' was an umbrella of safety and a source of comfort, and the other reality of what 'home' meant was the reason I was born in exile in the first place, the country that had become a pariah of the world, with its brutal, oppressive system of Apartheid racial-segregation.

Now this may seem odd from today's historical vantage point, but back when I was growing up in India and Egypt, there was a definite sense that we would never see 'home' again.

The hopes and aspirations with which my parents lived by, and probably had to live by, was that freedom would come in our lifetime. But a lifetime can be a long time, so there was also the possibility that we may never see the end of Apartheid, and this fear, which I think is shared by exiles, refugees, and all displaced human beings, was always just below the surface.

This ever-present and often repressed fear was fuelled by the deaths of fellow exiles who passed on before South Africa's transition from Apartheid state to democratic nation took place in 1994.

I recall an old ANC comrade, an elderly man in his 60's, who lived with us in Cairo in the early 1980's, and to whom I became quite close, who later took ill and passed away in a Cairo hospital.

I was 8 years old at the time, and even though my parents did not tell me that 'uncle' had passed away, I knew it. I sensed it from his deteriorating health

earlier, and from the grave expressions my parents wore for months after 'uncle' 'left'.

My parents carried their own feelings of guilt and pain, of leaving behind a young son and daughter (my siblings Azad and Tasneem whom I did not grow up with) in South Africa, who grew up with my maternal grand-parents in Johannesburg. My parent's guilt and pain never left them, and I remember my mother as she lay bedridden with Motor-Neurone Disease almost 14 years after freedom still carrying the anguish of the separation of parent from child.

My father still carries the pain with him, and I think even more so today because of the difficulties and emotional minefields that he has to navigate through knowing that he did not share his two eldest children's childhood, and only now, after all these decades, are the relationships being strengthened, and that too is still a work in progress.

I can only imagine the pain, emotional trauma, anguish and heartbreak that my sister Tasneem, and my brother Azad felt growing up knowing that their parents were out in the world, yet remaining separated from them.

It is a legacy of pain, of homes and of families split up and separated that remains with us today, of Apartheid's continuing brutalisation of South Africans.

These complex and conflicting issues that we as family, and we as a nation have to deal with may still yield some measure of peace, if that is at all possible, given the weight of the past.

I have so much more to say, dear reader, but it can wait for later.

I can say that my experiences growing up here, there and everywhere have been a convoluted scattering of disjointed places, of half-remembered faces and of many a restless night spent contemplating the questions of identity, home, belonging and of what 'anchors' a person.

Perhaps there are reasons for the times when that vagabond exile blood gets restless and that itch, that impatience, that urge to move, to flee, to rejoin the nomadic community surfaces.

And perhaps, there are reasons too, for my ability to suppress the sometimes fiery urge to trade quiet suburban stasis for the unknown path of the unnamed exile.

I leave you, respected reader, with a poem I scribbled some time ago

### **Searching**

*Searching,  
in the debris of the past,  
scraps of casually discarded emotion.*

*Searching,  
in hastily trashed yesterdays,  
an inkling of moments flung away.*

*Searching,  
in heaps of rubbished words,  
that tiresome sigh of defeated thought.*

*Searching,  
in the layers of moulted skin  
the wilting self that once was true.*

*Searching,  
in the reflections between the ripples,  
for the whispered pangs of roaring desire.*

*Searching,  
in the blank eyes streaming endlessly,  
an echo of the faintest sigh of new life.*

*Searching.*

[ please email me with your thoughts at [afzaljhb@gmail.com](mailto:afzaljhb@gmail.com) ]