

## Kumkum is doing fine

- Zaheda Hina

My darling *Dadima*,

Namaskaar !

Today when after weeks I came back to Kabul, the post was waiting for me. Besides yours, I have received other letters from home: Mom's, Brother's, Uma Didi's and Sushmita's. But sweetest letter is yours, in which you threaten me with making me stand in a corner with my nose to the wall, and boxing my ears as a punishment for not writing home for such a long time. All this scolding of yours makes me feel as if I have again become a little girl, sitting in your lap, swaying to and fro with you in your rocking chair. You are telling me stories, the big white porcelain bowl on the nearby teapoy has the same blue border as your white sari of *aab-i-rawan*. You pick a walnut or raisin or almond from the bowl and put it in my mouth. I set my teeth onto your fingers. You glare at me and then start telling me stories of your previous births when you were a swan and flew to the top of Mount Kailash, and when you were a fish and swam in the waters of the Ganges, Jamuna, Saraswati and Sarda, and when you were the lotus with a thousand petals and Rajas and Maharajas came from far lands to have a glimpse of your beauty and got intoxicated with your scent. And then there was a real life story, from your own childhood, in this very life time about Rehmat, the hawker from Kabul. When you first saw him, you were frightened and thought that his bag was full of little children. Then you became friends, you would talk together, he would listen to you and fill your *aanchal* with almonds, raisins and walnuts. Once he told you that he had a huge elephant in his small bag. You told me that the day Rehmat Baba was released after eight years in prison, was the day of your marriage. He borrowed dry fruits from another hawker and gave it to you as your wedding gift. When you told me this story for the first time, your eyes were full of tears, and then I knew that even adults can cry like children. You told me that Rehmat Baba had also a daughter of your age who lived in Kabul. He didn't have the money to get her photographed or perhaps in those days, there were no photographers in Kabul, so he had a print of her hand on a piece of paper, and used to keep it in his pocket, near his heart, just like Papa used to keep my photo in his wallet. Your father, I mean my Great-grandfather, had given some money to Rehmat Baba so that he could go back to Kabul and see his daughter which made the Great-grandmother very angry. Rehmat Baba never came back after that.

Nowadays when I receive wounded, bleeding patients, shouting with pain or breathing their last, I sometimes ask myself, had you not eaten those almonds and pistachios from Rehmat Baba's bag seventy years ago, had my Great-grandfather not written his story, would I still be here in Kabul, in Kandahar, in Herat, in Helmund? Perhaps not. Most certainly not. I still remember well those days of last October when American warplanes started bombing Kabul and we watched those scenes on TV, you got your rocking chair

shifted to TV lounge and would sit glued to the TV all the time. Mom, Sushmita and Brother, everybody used to tell you not to do that, not to strain your eyes. But it was only me who knew the truth. I was your only true friend in the whole household, or perhaps, I considered you my property as soon as I was able to recognize faces and would not let anybody else come anywhere near you. Like oppressive feudal lords, I extorted each penny of the love tax from you. Nobody knows you as well as I do. The whole world loves the story of Rehmat Kabuliwala written by Great-grandfather. But in our home, nobody talks about it except you and me. You remember that story because you were its heroine, and I remember it because I have heard it so many times from your lips, sitting in your lap.

When there was a huge demonstration against American bombing in Afghanistan on the streets of Calcutta, then I, too, participated in it. You were extremely happy to see a glimpse of mine on TV and you rebuked Brother and Sushmita for not going there. Then there was a demand for doctors for relief work at the Indra Gandhi Institute of Child Health in Kabul, and I volunteered for it. You were the only person to give me your blessings. Everybody else in the family was unhappy. And mother, she was simply furious: "Leaving your running hospital and jumping into the valley of death! In which Veda, in which Gita have you read it?" And seeing you happy, she burst out: "Your *Dadima* has become senile, but what has come over you that you are leaping into this fire?"

It makes me sad that unlike you and Great-grandfather, my mother is not an idealist. She is a practical businesswoman, and had it not been so then who would have taken over the huge business left by Papa. Perhaps I have taken after you and Great-grandfather, that's why I dream with open eyes.

Oh, *Dadima!* Instead of a letter, I have started writing a book. As I have not written to you since a long time, perhaps I am compensating for it now.

I know that you like Kabul though you have never seen it. You have told me that you had made the daughter of Rehmat Baba an unseen friend of yours. In your imagination, you would marry your boy doll with her girl doll. Since the boy doll was yours, the girl doll would leave Kabul and come to Calcutta. Great-grandfather wrote stories and you were his only darling daughter. So who could blame you if you decorated your lonely childhood with these stories. But when Great-grandmother heard it from you she was angry, how could a Hindu doll be married to a Muslim one! And the wedding ceremony, according to which rites would it be held, *pherey* rounds around the sacred fire to the chanting of mantras by a Hindu priest or *Nikah* sermon recited by a Muslim priest? When Great-grandfather heard all about it, he was not happy at all: "You women, do you know anything else but making trouble? At least don't turn a marriage of dolls into a conflict of religions!" He said that, frowning, and Great-grandmother left the room, grumbling. You were laughing when you narrated all that to me. "My father's heart was very big, it could accommodate all: Ishwar, Allah, Hindus and Muslims." You said fondly, remembering Great-grandfather. And when I performed the heart dissection for the first time in the

medical college, at once I started looking for Allah, Ishwar, Hindus and Muslims, but there were only muscles, veins and arteries.

When I was leaving for Kabul, you went to pray at Birla Mandir, and then you decided to go to Nakhuda Masjid as well. When the driver told us that , everybody at home was shocked: "What was the sense of going to the mosque?" Mother commented. "Well I thought that she is going to a Muslim country so why not go to the mosque for praying for her safety, and ask Allah to take care of my granddaughter." And when mother's face turned red, you asked innocently: "But what's the harm in that. My father used to invite the Baul Fakirs at home, he listened to their Bhakti songs with rapture, and used to give them money." Mother didn't stay in the room after your answer and left in a huff, and I felt guilty in the eyes of everyone.

For my sake, you went to the temple and to the mosque whereas in reality, you are somewhat of a non-conformist, always fighting with the gods and goddesses. They say that Great-grandfather was exactly like that; that's why I am like that too. And perhaps that's why my friends call me Garbarjhala Kumari or the hotchpotch girl. You talked to Ishwar and Allah on direct line and sent me to Kabul happily. Had you seen this city even in a dream once, you would never have let me come here. Here, there are shadows of death on the walls of each house, and lines of blood in each street and bazaar. Rehmat Baba left ages ago, his daughter must have perished too. And who knows her children got killed by the Soviet gunfire or by American bombing, or perhaps they died of starvation. Here devastation stalks everywhere, each city of this country is in ruins. When I left home, you kissed my hands and told me "Stitch all their wounds with these hands." But *Dadima*, here I am, all exhausted, stitching the wounds but the wounded, they still keep on coming.

I have not written to you these months as we had no time even to have a proper meal or to have a full night's sleep. This team of ours in which are Indian, German and Japanese doctors, has been roaming from city to city. From morning till evening and then in the light of generators we have been picking out splinters and pieces of cluster bombs from the bodies of children, women and men, stitching the wounds of the hands and feet amputated by land mines. The smell of blood has permeated in me. First I thought of washing my hands and clothes with a full bottle of eau de cologne, then I felt ashamed. When you are living among those who haven't had a full meal in months, whose nostrils have smelt nothing but blood and gunpowder, even washing your dirty hands with clean water feels like a luxury.

There was a time *Dadima*, when our Ashoka and Kanishka ruled up to Bamiyan and Balkh. But who rules for ever? Arabs came, then Turks came, then came Genghis Khan's armies. He sent his grandson to conquer Bamiyan but that boy got killed in the war. The death of his dear grandson was such a shock for Genghis Khan that he swore not to leave anybody alive in the valley of Bamiyan. So no man, woman or child was left alive. The bellies of pregnant mothers were cut open and yet to be born infants were cut to pieces. Even the cats and dogs loitering in the streets of Bamiyan were not spared and the birds flying in its skies were pierced by arrows.

When we went to Bamiyan, for a little while we visited the place where those huge statues of Buddha used to be, carved out of mountains. Genghis Khan had not left any living soul alive in vengeance of his grandson. Taliban took their revenge from these stone statues. I saw tears in the eyes of a Japanese doctor but my eyes were dry. Just think *Dadima*, to a people who have destroyed their own kith and kin, a whole generation with their own hands, what could you say about blasting the statues of Buddha by dynamite and canon balls

Genghis Khan and other kings, Rajas, Maharajas like him wreaked their vengeance upon the cities which fell in their way and dared to raise arms against their hordes. But *Dadima*, the wrath of USA is all over - from Kandahar to Kunduz and from Khost to Qala-e-Jangi. Its warplanes bomb Tora Bora and Taleqan. Land mines are sown in this land as one sows seeds for cultivation, seeds of death. Children, old people, men, women, they all become victims of these mines. Those who are blasted to pieces are considered lucky as the country is full of persons who have lost either one hand or both of them, some have no legs. I have seen cases with no limbs left at all, just imagine a living human being, turned into a chunk of flesh who feels hungry, who can think and pass through the never ending torture of his existence each moment of his life!

You must remember that how I loved the rains, a little drizzle was sufficient to make me crazy. How mother used to scold me. And me! I would have joined the river with those small streams and rivulets if I could. My hands and feet smeared with mud, clothes dripping. You would tie the knot of your sari and follow me everywhere shouting: "O Kumkum! Come inside, have a shower and change your wet clothes, or you will catch your death of cold!" But at the same time, you would keep on laughing and muttering to yourself. "Only Kumkum in this whole house has a true relationship with the Earth. Otherwise, the rest of the children of my house have become posh, watching the rains through the window. Eating the *Kachoris* sitting on the dining table if the cook fried them. And that is their enjoyment of rains! Are children like that!"

And both of us would enter the house, dripping wet and splashing all over the clean tiled floor, dirtying it, Mom would keep on looking quietly. You were her mother-in-law and moreover, you were the Thakrain, the senior landlady. Great-grandfather had transferred all shops, houses, fruit orchards and gardens in your name before his death. Who could dare to say a word to you. Mom couldn't object to you so she took all her anger out on poor Raghuda, ordering him to clean the floor. And you, in those moments, would whisper in my ears: "Look Kumkum, look! Your mother's ears are smoking". And I would roll with laughter and advise you to call the fire fighters. Then you would box my ears: "Keep your mouth shut! If your mother hears that, you would go without food.", "So what! *Dadima*, then you and I will go to the Tollygunj Club.", "Will go to the Tollygunj Club", you would mimic me and then rebuke me "And then you would eat like a glutton and gulp down three days' food in half an hour, and then get sick and then we will have to call Dr Bannerjee, take you to the hospital, No, no, I prefer you to go hungry." "*Dadima*, you are really a miser, just like a *Marwari*. If you give a few pistachios and almonds, you will not starve." And then I would remember the cashew

nuts, the crisp, salted, roasted cashew nuts, golden brown, even now, writing about them after so many years, my mouth is watering. “Oh *Dadima!* I feel hungry for the cashew nuts. The glass jar in your cupboard is full of them”, my eyes would sparkle. You would first glare at me and then thump me lightly on the back “How do you know what I have in my cupboard? You have become Sherlock Holmes!”, “I know everything, you are my *Dadima*, so why I shouldn’t I know it all!”. I would sharply say.

Oh, *Dadima!* I am lost in memories. Perhaps I have started missing home. Perhaps I miss relaxing on your bed and gossiping with you. Since I am writing to you after such a long time, words flow like a stream during the rainy season.

I wanted to tell you that since I came here, I am frightened of rains. Here children can’t risk getting into rain showers, can’t make paper boats and sail them in water streams, for the fast current during rains shifts the land mines. What was a safe place to play, becomes dangerous with dynamite everywhere.

You have told me horrible stories of Bengal famine, when mothers sold their children just for two handfuls of rice. Once you were airing the contents of the big suitcase of Great-grandfather and you showed me the photos of the people dying in that famine. Men, women and children dying on footpaths. As if the dead were waiting for the last rites, for their turn to get burned in *Shamshan ghat*. *Dadima*, here too, hunger reigns everywhere. During my travels from one city to another, I have seen thousands of children and women who had walked hundreds of miles on foot but then collapsed just before their last few miles to the relief camps, they had no energy left for those last few steps. Children with bewildered eyes, and women through the netted veils of their soiled blue *burqas* stared at the blue sky, waiting for death, to bring in its wake the release from all hunger, sickness and fatigue. If I wrote to you whatever has happened to women here and whatever is still happening, the paper on which those words will be written, will ignite into a flame.

You must still remember the preparations for the *Jagannath Yatra*. You would get purchased for me the little wooden chariot, and the idols of Lord Jagannath, his elder brother Balram and his younger sister Subhadra. You would stitch tiny little dresses for them with your needle and thread, then decorate them with beautiful lace and embroidery. On the day of the *Yatra*, we would pluck flowers from the garden very early in the morning, before dawn. And both of us would adorn my little chariot and when I would get dressed in my new clothes and take out my chariot, it would stand out among those of the children of the neighbourhood. On *Shivratri* and *Dipawali*, clay lamps were bought, and white cotton wool was purchased from the medical store. With that cotton wool, you would make wicks for those lamps, then they were filled with pure butter oil which came from the village, then evening would fall and my lamp procession would glow and shine. And on *Dipawali* and *Dussehra*, you would get sugar toys for me: horses, elephants, colourful fruits and vegetables that would just melt in mouth. Their taste is still on my tongue, I have been to London, Paris, Zurich and have eaten the best chocolates at these places but, compared to your sugar toys, they seemed insipid. When I bandaged some Taliban boys, and operated upon them, I stared at them for a long time. Those whose childhood has had no roof of a home, who had never had never been fed in

a loving relative's lap, whose naughty teeth have never bitten those fingers which fed them *Rasgulla* and *Laddoo*, who never received handfuls of raisins and almonds clandestinely from an elder, who have never heard fairy tales from the lips of a grandmother, and who had never got *puris* fried and *malida* made for them by a mother, what would they do when they grew up if not strangle and kill others. How would they get sweetness in their hearts and compassion for other people's pain. The whole world vilifies Taliban, even I, when I came here, had my heart full of hate and anger for them. But when I passed a few days here, I understood them. When the children of a poor and barren land are deprived of their childhood, where they had no elder sisters to take them through their first steps, or to play hide-and-seek with, then in such a land you get Taliban who hate women.

Nowadays where I am living, is the war theatre of USA. Genghis Khan's army annihilated the population of Bamiyan and left. But today's Genghis do not leave. Like Dracula, they stick their teeth in the necks of nations and keep on sucking their blood. Their warplanes drop death with butter packets, and biscuits with land mines.

The day you were airing Great-grandfather's suitcase, his diaries, his letters and photographs, and putting them all back, you showed me that soiled piece of paper which dropped from Rehmat Baba's bag on the day of your marriage. Great-grandfather had kept it carefully so whenever Rehmat Baba came back, he would return it to him. But he never came back. And the coloured handprint of his little daughter is still lying safely in Great-grandfather's suitcase.

Did I come across your childhood hero in the streets of Kabul! I didn't meet even his daughter, his granddaughters. And how could I have met them when they must have perished in the cellars of their homes. Probably his great-granddaughters don't even have palms for their fathers to carry their coloured prints. I have stitched the wounds of those girls who no more have hands, who would no more put henna on their palms on *Eid*, would never put bangles on their wrists. My friend Razia, who still keeps on sending you greeting cards from Canada, used to run to you on *Eid* and *Shab-i-Barat*: "Dadima! Make the same design with henna on my palm as you did on Kumkum's on last *Holi*." She would insist. "Crazy girl! Do I remember what sort of flowers and leaves I made then. Now just keep still and don't stir." You would scold her and keep on making flowers and leaves with a big needle on her pink palm as if you were making silk embroidery. Here there are thousands of girls whose palms would never see an *Eid* or *Shab-i-Barat*.

You had told me that when our Nawab Sirajuddowlah Bahadur was defeated in Plassey by the army of the East India Company and the Company occupied Bengal, the English chopped the thumbs of weavers of Dhaka Muslin. You had tears in your eyes when you narrated all that to me. And I wiped your tears and asked why it was done, you explained that a whole stretch of Dhaka Muslin could pass through a wedding ring. The cloth produced in the mills of Manchester could not compete with the fine craft of our weavers, so the English chopped our weavers' thumbs off.

Now when I see here the wrists with no hands and stitch their wounds, I cry in secret. We had finally got the English out of our country, but from where have their kinsmen come and settled in our neighbourhood? And until when shall we keep on sacrificing our thumbs, palms, feet and heads at their altar?

When that conqueror of Kalinga, Ashoka the Great, saw a hundred thousand dead soldiers in the battlefield, he went through a transformation. That day not only he broke his sword, but from that moment, in his vast kingdom the swords of all his soldiers rusted. Of what stuff are made today's emperors that they keep on occupying country after country and yet their hunger for expansion and land grabbing is not satisfied? They devour nations, generations, and advance to their next prey. They arrange a new *Kurukshetra*, another war theatre.

*Dadima*, I have seen the heaps of dead bodies, the children who had gone out to play and were strafed by warplanes, the women who ran for their lives but were caught by gunfire and their bodies along with their were holed with bullets. I had taken out bullets from the bodies of those brides and grooms whose bridal parties were called terrorist meetings and were strafed and bombed.

Then *Dadima*, I had a strange night. We had journeyed through Bamiyan and Shabarghan and were camping in Dasht-i-Laila where the whole flock of media people had come, in search of the news and pictures of the mass graves of those Taliban who were being brought from Mazar-i-Sharif to Shabarghan in cargo containers. When all of them died of suffocation, trenches were dug in Dasht-i-Laila and all of them were buried in them. Years ago when Taliban conquered this region, they massacred the people and, to hide them, buried them in mass graves. Now Time has turned full circle for Taliban and they are resting in the trenches of Dasht-i-Laila. *Dadima*, Dasht-i-Laila is like a small hamlet in the sand dunes of our Rajasthan. This little hamlet of mud huts was bombed too. So the people there had neither food nor shelter. We stopped there for one day to look after the wounded. When night fell and we finished the day's work, I headed for my tent, totally exhausted, fell on my bed and immediately fell asleep. All of a sudden some sound woke me up. It was dark in the tent. It seemed as if an animal is scratching the tent with its nails. Without thinking, I came out bewildered. The greenish yellow moon of January on the dark sky, the sands of Dasht-i-Laila on all sides, mass graves at some distance, and before my eyes a young boy, reclining by my tent. Fresh, dry stains of blood on his shirt, fear and terror in his eyes, his whole body trembling. He was shot at by some American bullet, and falling and faltering, hiding and stopping, had crept up to our camp. I couldn't guess how long ago he was wounded. When I thought that maybe he was still armed, my nerves got strung. My first thought was of calling a camp guard. Then *Dadima*, something unexpected happened, it still gives me goose-pimples when I write about it. In a flash, the boy's face transformed, he took something out of the sack lying near his feet and extended it towards me. I looked at his hand, it was full of almonds, raisins and walnuts. He was calling you. Nervously, I looked at him. I swear by God, that was Rehmat Baba in the light of January moon, and his shirt was stained with blood. Great-grandfather had written that every January, he used to go back to his home, beyond the Hindukush Mountains. Tears came to my eyes. How could I get him arrested! He was

your childhood, my Great-grandfather's story. I brought him to my tent. *Dadima*, that night, I witnessed death with my own eyes, touched it with my own hands. That night I learnt that whether the bullet hits the ribcage of a friend or of an enemy, I am destined to take it out. That night, when I was stitching his wounds, neither could I say anything to him nor could I listen to his story. *Dadima*, we didn't know each other's language. Then I was constantly thinking of you and of the stories of those heroes of our past which you used to narrate to me: Tipu, Sirajuddowlah, Babu Kanwar Singh, Lakhshmi Bai, Hazrat Mahal.....

That night, when dawn was about to break, I gave him some medicines and food packets in a bag and a blanket, and then signaled him to leave. He kept on looking at me, then stood up faltering. As he was putting the bag and the blanket on his shoulder, I thought of something, I took some money from my purse lying on the bed, he shook his head refusing, his eyes were full of tears. Then *Dadima*, I put the money in his hand and closed his fist around it. He took the same hand to his forehead and saluted me, threw his bag and blanket on his shoulder and went out of the tent. I kept on staring at his receding form. A lone soul, enveloped in fog and moon dust. After a few steps, he stopped and turned and looked towards me. Those were the eyes of a defeated tribe. Then those eyes turned away from me and headed towards the blind caves of isolation and history, towards the dark forests of *Tarai* and unnamed graves of Dasht-i-Laila. In that moment, Time rushed past me, my age fast forwarded. And now I am a thousand years old, perhaps two thousand years. You are lucky *Dadima*, that you have only read the story of the defeated of the History, and not seen the miasma of isolation in their eyes.

Rehmat Kabuliwala was a fond memory of your childhood, but that night it was pure pain that he gifted your Kumkum. It's a good thing that Great-grandfather has passed away. Had he been living, he would he have written about the wounds of the Earth, about the palms that would never be adorned with henna, instead of writing the stories of Partap Singh and Kanchan Mala.

The winter is harsh here, despite the heater, a cold is spreading inside me. What more is there to write? I have written all to you. Don't tell Mom or anybody else in the house anything. Just tell them that Kumkum is doing fine in Kabul!

Yours Kumkum

*Translated by Yousuf Shahid*