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Umeeta Sadarangani

Parkland College, usadarangani@parkland.edu

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How to Interview Your Mother about Her Lost Childhood

by Umeeta Sadarangani

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SUPPLIES YOU WILL NEED:

- a voice recorder (a digital one is best, but an old cassette recorder can work)
- paper, clipboard, and a fast-writing pen
- Sweet Parle Gluco biscuits to nibble on when your nervous stomach needs to be soothed.
- facts about the 1947 Partition of India, “the largest forced migration in history”
- a list of questions you can ask without starting to cry
- the flexibility and agility to add or delete questions
- the insensitivity to keep asking questions even when your mother seems troubled
- forty minutes of uninterrupted time alone with her when your father is not in the room
correcting and clarifying everything she says.

TO BEGIN:

OPTION ONE

While standing across the kitchen counter from your mother as she peels potatoes for her famous *aloo ki tikki* and asks you about your income and savings (she only wants to know you’re doing okay), take the conversation in another direction, the one you want it to go in. Conceal the voice recorder behind the bag of potatoes. A small, digital recorder will be easy to hide—until she gets to the last potato.

Forget the paper and pen. She shouldn't see you writing, or she might not tell you the sad stories. Lean on the cool kitchen counter, pick up a peeler, and offer to help your mother. Smile at her as you steel yourself to begin.

OPTION TWO

Forget option one. Forget the whole project. You were delusional to think you could talk with your mother about this. You cry when you read novels about the Partition, especially novels in which children are separated from their parents or witness their parents being hurt. You can't do this. Put aside the recorder, take the package of Gluco biscuits, go out to the backyard, and eat the whole pack.

OPTION THREE

Give yourself a pep talk.

Gather your supplies, and invite your mother to sit down to chat with you; let her see all your equipment. Tell her it is an interview for a writing project, but be prepared for her to take phone calls or to get up to check the potatoes boiling on the stove. During the phone call, she will tell your aunt in Sindhi that you are "taking an interview" with her. She will sound proud. She likes that you are a writer, that your work is published (though she really wishes you would publish a *book*). Hide your surprise when it becomes clear that she is pleased you are going to ask her questions. Expect that she will take all other phone calls as well.

HOW TO CHOOSE QUESTIONS:

Consider what you really want to know.

- What did she miss most about Karachi?
- Were any of her friends on the ship that brought her from Karachi to Bombay?

- How did she say goodbye to her father as she boarded the ship with the rest of the family?
- When she left her home in Karachi in 1947 when she was twelve, did she know she would never return?

But you know that talking about the Partition makes her sad, so just ask her briefly, “What do you remember about Karachi?” And hope she will tell you the rest.

“In Karachi, I had my own room,” your mother smiles. “With a desk and an armchair! I used to study there.”

Picture your mother reading in the armchair, her pretty hair tidy, her legs crossed. Think of her next permanent home, your Naani’s home, a two-room house in the Sion Sindhi Colony in Bombay, which had no armchairs at all. The beds served as settees during the day.

Notice that your mother is still smiling. “And my uncle, who was a manager at a bank, he had a car with a driver. He used to pick us up and take us for drives. It was fun.”

“Where did you go?” You did not know any of this before.

“I remember he took us to the zoo. The driver would spread a bedcover in the back of the car, and all of us would get in and sit there.” She is smiling.

“Did you have a favorite animal at the zoo?”

Her smile widens. “Giraffes!”

Make a note that your mother likes giraffes. Picture her at the zoo, looking up in delight.

A little later, when she describes the first place they stayed after the voyage to Bombay, note that she looks far away: “All the families were in a big shed. We had to put our trunks like dividers on the sides to make a kind of room. But there were no walls. Everybody could see.

Our people in Delhi asked Naani to send me to them. Not good for a young girl to be in a place like that, they said. I said, 'no.' I didn't want to go. Naani didn't force me."

Try to picture your twenty-nine-year-old Naani managing four children in a cavernous shed in a strange city: your pretty, proper mother, the eldest; your Auntie Maya, who played marbles with the boys and got her knees dirty; your handsome, generous Uncle Mohan, quick-tempered and loving; and the youngest, sweet Nimu, whom you never met because she was killed crossing the train tracks to get to school.

About fifteen minutes into the interview, when your mother tells you about waiting in lines for the latrines at the camp where they lived after the time in the shed, do not tear up when you see her shudder. Above all, do not let her see you cry. Crying will jeopardize the interview.

You have already taken notes about your mother and father meeting as twelve-year-olds at the camp and about the long walk to the station where they caught the train to school early in the morning. Your parents have chuckled about their friend who would dry his only shirt by holding it out of the train window on the way to school. Now take notes about the rationed food at the camp. Write down that your mother took food for your father each day because he did not get enough at home.

About twenty-five minutes into the interview, your father will call to ask if your mother needs him to pick up anything at the Indian grocery store.

She will smile.

When she gets off the phone, she will move to the stove to make tea.

The interview will be over.