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## Maaji

**N**OBODY knows exactly when Mamma was born.

She must have been about ten or twelve years old when the new colony of Lyallpur district was established. Back then, poor people from every village and hamlet of Punjab were being attracted in droves to acquire the free land on offer. Settlement had just begun in the area which, along with Jhang, Sargodha and some other places, was colloquially known as the Baar region. So, calculating backwards, Mamma was probably born sometime in the last ten or fifteen years of the nineteenth century.

Mamma's ancestral home was in Manila, a village in the Rupard division, a part of the Ambala district in eastern Punjab. Her parents owned a few acres of land there. At the time, the Sirhind canal was being dug from the River Sutlej by way of Rupard and passed right through part of Grandpa's land. In such cases the English magistrate's office in Rupard used to make reparations. Grandpa went to the city several times seeking compensation, but he was a simple man. He had no idea where the office was, much less what to do should he find it. Finally, he resigned himself to his plight and took a job as a laborer, digging the canal.

One day he chanced upon a posting stating that a colony had been established in Baar and that new settlers would receive free land. He gathered together his whole family—his wife, two little sons and a daughter—and set off for Lyallpur. As they weren't fortunate enough to own a horse they had to trudge along on foot. Along the way they managed to fill their stomachs by doing hard labor. Here and there Grandpa took on odd jobs as a coolie or chopping wood. Grandma and Mamma would take in spinning or else replaster the floors and walls of people's houses.

They asked many passersby, but nobody seemed quite sure how to get to Lyallpur. So the family wandered from place to place, often taking

weeks to reach a destination that was really only a few days away. Finally, after almost two months of traveling, exhausted and bedraggled by the grueling journey and hard labor, they arrived in Jaranwala. Their aching bodies and swollen feet convinced them to stay put for a few months. Grandpa got a job lifting sacks all day in Ghulamandi, Grandma would spin thread and sell it, and Mamma took care of the little hut that they now called home.

At long last the festival of Baqar Eid arrived. By this time Grandpa had managed to save a bit of money, so he gave Mamma a small Eid present of three anna coins. Never in her life had she held such a princely sum! The little girl racked her brains but hadn't the faintest idea what to do with this small fortune. Poor thing, even when she passed away at the age of about eighty she would get totally flustered trying to tell the difference between hundred, ten and five rupee notes.

For several days the little girl kept the precious three annas tied tightly in a corner of her dupatta. On the day they were to leave Jaranwala she finally decided what to do with her treasure. First, she changed the three annas for twelve paisas. Then, she bought some oil for eleven paisas, filled the lamp at the mosque and lit it. The remaining one paisa she kept for herself. From then on whenever she had collected a full eleven paisas, she would immediately send oil to light a lamp at the mosque. For the rest of her days, on Thursday evenings, Mamma was scrupulously faithful to this practice. As time went on many mosques began to use electricity. However, Mamma used to keep track of mosques that still used oil lamps, even in big cities like Lahore and Karachi. On the day she died we found a few annas tied in a muslin handkerchief at the head of her bed. It was a Thursday evening so we knew she must have been saving them to light the lamp.

Mamma didn't have any money besides these few annas. In all the world she had nothing but a few pieces of jewelry and a handful of possessions: three sets of cotton clothes, a pair of country shoes, a pair of rubber slippers, her reading glasses, a ring set with three small turquoise stones, a prayer mat, a string of prayer beads and nothing else save God's name.

She took special care of the three outfits. One she wore, the second she would wash with her own hands and keep under the pillow so that it would be pressed, and the third was ready for the wash. If, in addition to these, she somehow got a fourth outfit, she would quietly give one away. Thus, never did she feel the need for a suitcase. Mamma was always ready in a jiffy for even the longest of journeys. She would make a small bundle

and roll it in the prayer mat, drape a woolen shawl over her shoulders during the winter, which would be replaced by a muslin dupatta during the summer, and she was ready to go anywhere.

Even her final journey was undertaken with such simplicity. She had washed her clothes with her own hands and placed them under the pillow, had bathed and dried her hair, and in a matter of minutes she set forth on the last and longest journey of her life. She left for the next world as peacefully as she had remained in this world. Perhaps it was for this very occasion that she often uttered the following prayer, “O Almighty God, take me up while my hands are busy at work. Never let me be a burden on anyone!”

Mamma was even more simple and modest in matters of food and drink than she was in clothing. Her absolute favorite food was corn flour chapati with coriander and mint chutney. Of course, she cheerfully ate other things, but not with the same zest. She used to thank God with almost every mouthful. If she were pressed to take some fruit, she would occasionally ask for a banana. For breakfast, two cups of tea were a must, as was a cup of black tea in the late afternoon. She used to eat only one proper meal a day, usually at lunchtime, but occasionally at dinner. In the summertime, her favorite meal was one or two plain chapatis and some thin salty lassi to drink. She loved to see others eating with gusto and always prayed saying, “May everyone be well.” Never did she directly ask for anything for herself or for her children. First she would pray for others. Only then would she indirectly wish for the well-being of her own children and dear ones by praying, “May God provide all His creatures with their needs.” She was never so pretentious as to call her sons or daughters “my son” or “my daughter.” Instead, she would always say that they belonged to God.

Mamma felt very uncomfortable if someone did something for her. She preferred to do all her work with her own two hands. If, despite her protests, an attendant happened to do something for her, she would be overcome with a strange sort of shame and, beholden, would spend the entire day praying for him. Her pious simplicity was an inborn aspect of her nature, but this characteristic was deepened by the vicissitudes of life.

After staying for some time in Jaranwala, the family set out for Lyallpur Colony in search of land. Mamma hadn't the faintest idea where they were headed or what would have to be done to obtain the land. She would always tell us that back then she imagined that “Colony” was a noble elder, an angelic being sitting by some roadside distributing the world's land-deeds.

The little traveling band wandered around the region of Lyallpur for many weeks but never found a Moses to lead them to the Promised Land. Finally, frustrated, they pitched a tent in Plot 392, which was being newly colonized. Hordes of people were coming to settle there. In his naïveté, Grandpa imagined that perhaps this was how one settled in a colony. Accordingly, having laid out a small boundary, he made a grass hut, and finding a scrap of untilled land, began making preparations to cultivate it. Then a court clerk from the Department of Revenue came for an inspection. When he found that Grandpa didn't have any allotment papers he expelled him from the plot. As a fine for building an unauthorized hut on government property they confiscated his pots and bedding. One of the officials even made Mamma give him the silver earrings she was wearing! It was taking the little girl some time to remove one of the trinkets so the man just yanked it off, badly ripping the lower part of Mamma's left ear.

Leaving Plot 392, they set out on the road before them. It was the middle of summer and the blazing sun beat down overhead. All day the dreaded hot winds of that season blew. They didn't even have a clay cup for water, so wherever they came across a well Mamma would soak her dupatta so that she could give it to her little brothers to suck whenever they were thirsty. In this way, trudging along, they reached Plot 507 where a settler whom they knew took Grandpa in and kept him as a tenant farmer. While Grandpa ploughed the fields, Grandma grazed the cattle and Mamma gathered grass and fodder for the landlord's cows and buffaloes.

Back then, they couldn't even afford one square meal a day. Sometimes they would subsist on wild berries and other times they boiled melon rinds to eat. Occasionally, if they found unripe mangoes fallen in some field, they'd make chutney from them. One day they came across some mixed greens of mustard plant and vetches. Grandma was hard at work, so Mamma cooked the greens on the hearth. When they were soft and ready to be stirred she turned the ladle with such force that the bottom of the pot broke. All the vegetables flowed out and fell into the stove. Grandma gave Mamma a sound scolding and even slapped her. That night, they were so hungry they scraped up the vegetables that had fallen onto the kindling of the stove with their fingers and managed to appease their hunger somewhat.

Plot 507 suited Grandpa well. After several months of hard labor and the payment of easy installments, he even received his own parcel of land. Gradually the days passed and within three years they came to be regarded as fairly prosperous villagers. As Grandpa's cares and anxieties

drifted away, wistful memories of his ancestral homeland began to return. Therefore, after four or five years of relative prosperity, the entire family boarded a train for Manila.

Mamma enjoyed the train ride immensely. She would stick her little head out the window the whole time, her eyes drinking in all the excitement. But the coal dust afflicted her eyes and they were painfully inflamed for several days. After this experience Mamma learned her lesson. Throughout her life she never allowed her children to stick their heads out of train windows.

Mamma loved traveling third class. Within minutes she would be happily chattering away with the women and children in her car. She wasn't affected in the least by the fatigue of the trip or the dust clouds of the road. On the contrary, it was the higher-class compartments that bothered her. She was reduced to pure exhaustion on the few occasions she was forced to travel in the air-conditioned section, as though weighed down the entire time by chains and shackles.

Arriving in Manila, Grandpa repaired his ancestral home and gave gifts to his dear ones and relatives. There were parties and banquets, and then began the search for a groom for Mamma. Back then, there was much ado about the plot-holders of Lyallpur. They were considered lucky upper-class folk. Thus, proposals for Mamma's hand began pouring in from all over, one after the other. Even otherwise, back then Mamma was quite the catch. In a bit of grandstanding, Grandma used to dress her in pretty clothes every single day without fail, adorning her as a lovely bride at all times.

Occasionally, remembering the old days, Mamma would muse with innocent pride, "Back then it was almost impossible for me to even leave my village. Wherever I went people would stop in their tracks and say, 'There goes the daughter of Khayal-baksh, the plot-holder. Let's see which lucky chap gets to marry her.'"

Teasing her, we would always ask, "Mamma, wasn't there some lucky chap that you had a crush on?"

"Heaven forbid, child!" she would say, touching her ears to ward off the evil eye. "How could I have had my heart set on anyone? Of course, deep down I cherished a small desire. I told God I would be very thankful if I were to find a husband who was just a little bit educated and knew how to read and write a few words." It's possible that throughout her entire life, this is the only thing Mamma ever wished for herself. God fulfilled Mamma's desire that very year with her marriage to Abdullah Sahib.

In those days, Abdullah Sahib was the talk of the town. He was the scion of a wealthy family of noble extraction, but at the age of five or six the star-crossed lad became fatherless and absolutely destitute. When his father passed away they discovered that his entire ancestral estate had been mortgaged. So Abdullah Sahib moved into a hovel with his mother. Having seen the fate of gold and land, he resolved to earn the kind of wealth that couldn't be pawned at the hands of bankers. Thus, Abdullah Sahib pursued his education with heart and soul. Earning scholarship after scholarship and finishing two-year courses in a year each, he finished first in the matriculation exam at Punjab University. This was probably the first time ever that a Muslim student had set a record for the highest score on the university exam.

The news spread quickly and even reached the ears of the famous Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who had just founded Aligarh Muslim College. Sir Sayyid sent his special emissary to the village to present Abdullah Sahib with a scholarship to attend Aligarh. Once there, Abdullah Sahib studied hard and made much progress, passing with flying colors. At the age of nineteen, after completing his B.A., Abdullah Sahib stayed on at the college as a lecturer in English, Arabic, philosophy, and math.

Sir Sayyid aspired that ever greater numbers of Muslim youth should enter the upper echelons of the workforce. Accordingly, he arranged for a government scholarship for Abdullah Sahib to go to England to take the Indian Civil Service exam.

But the wise old folk of the previous century believed that traversing the seven seas was a terrible curse. Thus, Abdullah Sahib's mother refused to let her son go to England. His sense of duty toward her prevented him from accepting, and so he returned the scholarship.

Sir Sayyid was livid at this affront, and he was hurt as well. Thousands of times he tried to convince Abdullah Sahib to go to England. He reasoned, cajoled, admonished and threatened, but the boy refused to budge. "Is what your old mother says more important to you than the betterment of the nation?" Sir Sayyid thundered.

"Yes sir," answered Abdullah Sahib.

Hearing this curt answer, Sir Sayyid was beside himself. He closed the door to the room and beat Abdullah Sahib with all his might, punching, kicking, slapping, and thrashing him with his shoes. Then he fired Abdullah Sahib, expelling him from Aligarh saying, "Go die in such a God-forsaken place that I never have to hear your name again!"

Now, Abdullah Sahib was as dutiful a student as he was a son. He looked at a map and found far-off Gilgit at the foot of the mighty Kara-

koram Mountains to be the most distant and difficult destination for reestablishing himself. Thus, he made a beeline for the area. In good time he attained the post of the governorship there, what was known among the locals as the "Governory."

Just when Mamma's family was searching for a suitable match for her, Abdullah Sahib happened to turn up in the village for a holiday. Their union was thus fated. They were engaged straight away and the wedding was fixed for one month later so that Abdullah Sahib could take his new bride back with him to Gilgit.

The day after the engagement, Mamma and her girlfriends went to a fair in a nearby village. Coincidentally, or maybe knowingly, Abdullah Sahib also happened to show up there. Mamma's friends surrounded him and they teased and cajoled him until he gave them five rupees each. Abdullah Sahib also offered Mamma much money, but she refused it. Only with his great persistence did she finally cave in and reluctantly request eleven paisas.

Bewildered, Abdullah Sahib asked, "What in the world will you do with just eleven paisas at such a big fair?" Mamma replied, "Next Thursday I'll have the lamps at the mosque filled with oil in your honor." Throughout the fair of life, Mamma's trade with Abdullah Sahib was limited to the simple eleven paisas for Thursdays. Never did she ask for an amount more than that, nor did she ever keep a sum greater than that.

In Gilgit, Abdullah Sahib lived a life of pomp and ceremony. He had a beautiful bungalow, an expansive garden, servants, attendants, and guards keeping watch at the door. When he went on his rounds or returned from them he was greeted by a seven-gun salute. Even otherwise, the Governor of Gilgit was the bearer of considerable political, administrative, and social power. However, none of this pageantry and circumstance had any effect on Mamma. No surroundings, great or small, fazed her at all. Instead, Mamma's own simplicity and self-confidence quietly permeated every environment.

In those days, Sir Malcolm Hailey was the British government's appointed political agent on the Empire's Chinese and Russian frontiers in Gilgit. One day, Lady Hailey and her daughter came to pay Mamma a visit. They were wearing frocks, and their calves were bare. Mamma didn't approve of this immodesty one bit. She chided Lady Hailey, "In your life, what is done is done. But now don't go ruining your daughter's future." So saying, she took young Miss Hailey under her wing. In a few months she taught her how to cook, sew, scrub pots and pans, and wash clothes, and then she sent her back to her parents!

When the Russian Revolution broke out, Lord Kitchener came to Gilgit for a border inspection. As governor, Abdullah Sahib arranged a banquet in his honor. Mamma prepared nearly a dozen different delicacies with her own hands. The meal was absolutely delicious. In his speech Lord Kitchener said, "Mister Governor, by way of thanks, on my behalf please kiss the hand of the cook who made this food."

After the feast Abdullah Sahib returned home beaming with pleasure. He saw Mamma seated on a straw mat in a corner of the kitchen, eating a corn flour chapati with salt and chili chutney. Like a good governor, he kissed Mamma's hand and said, "If Lord Kitchener had indicated that he himself wanted to kiss the hand of the cook, then what would you have done?"

"I," Mamma said indignantly, "would have grabbed his moustache and yanked it out by the roots. Then what would you have done?" "I," Abdullah Sahib replied dramatically, "would have wrapped the moustache in cotton and sent it to the Viceroy. Then I would have taken you and high-tailed it out of here, just as I fled from Sir Sayyid!"

Mamma was never discomfited in the least by such playful banter. But there was a time when she burned and roasted like a kabob in that envy and jealousy which is the primordial inheritance of every woman.

In Gilgit, all manner of orders were promulgated in the name of the "Governory," the governorship. Poor Mamma, when she heard of this she thought that since people called her husband Governor, they must be calling her Governory! She complained to Abdullah Sahib saying, "Goodness, you're the one who runs the government. So why does everyone blame me, the poor Governory, whenever they don't like what's being done?"

Abdullah Sahib was an Aligarh man with an Aligarh sense of humor. He was in a mischievous mood and so he declared impishly, "My lucky lady, fret not. When people speak of the Governory it has nothing to do with you. In fact, Governory is the name of your rival who pursues me day and night."

The joke had a bite to it. Abdullah Sahib forgot all about the matter, but on hearing his words Mamma's heart was filled with grief at the thought of her husband's mistress, Governory. She lamented, bottling up the anguish inside herself.

After some time the Maharaja of Kashmir, Pratap Singh, came on his rounds to Gilgit with his Maharani. Mamma couldn't bear to remain silent any longer and so she confided everything about her husband's mistress to the Maharani. The Maharani, also a simple woman, was incensed.

“Good gracious! Such an outrage in our kingdom! I will tell the Maharaja this very day that he must give Abdullah Sahib his comeuppance.”

When the matter reached the attention of Maharaja Pratap Singh, he summoned Abdullah Sahib and interrogated him severely. Abdullah Sahib was taken aback by the barrage that seemed to have befallen him out of nowhere. But when they finally got to the bottom of the matter they couldn't stop laughing. Both men were well-bred, therefore the Maharaja good naturedly issued an order that from then on the “Governory” of Gilgit should be called the vizierate, or ministry, and the governor should be called by the title of vizier, or minister. These very governmental conventions persisted in Gilgit right until the 1947 Struggle for Independence.

As soon as she learned of this decree, the Maharani called Mamma and related the good news. “The Maharaja has had Governory banished!” she said excitedly. “Now, may you be rich in cattle and children.” Then she sighed, “When you have a moment, please say a prayer for us as well.” The Maharaja and Maharani had no children, so they would often ask Mamma to pray for them.

With regard to children, was Mamma herself truly fortunate? This was a question with no easy answer. She would always say that she was one of the luckiest mothers in the world. But if you were to remove the curtain of patience and gratitude, of submissiveness and contentment, then behind the veil of this good fortune you would see immense pain, great sorrow and untold hardship.

God had blessed Mamma with three daughters and three sons. However, two of her daughters died soon after their weddings, one after the other. Her eldest son too, having gone to England, died in the pinnacle of his youth. Of course, Mamma would always say that they belonged to God after all, and so He had taken them back for Himself. But when she was all alone, by herself where nobody could hear her, mustn't she have wept anguished tears for her lost children?

When Abdullah Sahib passed away he was sixty-two years old and Mamma was fifty-five. It was late afternoon. As was his usual practice, Abdullah Sahib had set a pillow down and was half asleep on the rough hewn rope charpoy. Mamma, sitting at the foot of the charpoy, was peeling sugarcane and handing it to him. He sucked it with great pleasure and was joking merrily. Then, all of a sudden, he became serious. He

said, “My lucky lady, before we got married I gave you eleven paisas at the fair. Isn’t it time to return them?”

Mamma, like a new and blushing bride, lowered her head shyly and busied herself in peeling sugarcane. Many thoughts flooded her heart all at once. “My dearest, how has the time come now? How indebted I am for those eleven paisas you gave me before we were married! But for how kindly you have treated me after marriage I ought to worship the very ground on which you walk and even give up my life for you. How has the time come now, my dearest?”

But in the ledgers of fate the time had already come. When Mamma lifted her head, Abdullah Sahib was sleeping against the pillow with a piece of sugarcane in his mouth. Mamma called his name, shook him, and coaxed him ever so much, but Abdullah Sahib had fallen into a sleep so deep that he would not awaken till doomsday.

Mamma, hugging her remaining two sons and one daughter in her arms, instructed, “Hush children, don’t cry. Your Papa left us as peacefully as he lived. Hush, don’t cry, for it will trouble his soul.”

Though Mamma told us not to cry lest Papa’s soul be troubled, mustn’t she herself have wept silently? Mustn’t she have mourned her lifelong companion who, even at the age of sixty-two, treated her as his young bride? Mustn’t she have sobbed in memory of her dear husband who never burdened her with a mistress other than the dratted “Governory”?

When Mamma herself passed away she left a dilemma for her children that will keep us wandering helplessly in the desert of faith until doomsday. If we give alms in her name then we daren’t give more than eleven paisas. But the mullah of the mosque is worried because the cost of electricity has gone up and oil has become expensive. If a prayer meeting to recite the *Fatiha* be held in Mamma’s memory then all that can be offered to the guests is corn flour chapatis with salt and chili chutney. But the fakir uttering the prayer insists that arrangements for pilaf and sweet rice are absolutely necessary.

Whenever my Mamma’s name is mentioned, my heart feels like sobbing uncontrollably, but as the tears begin to flow, I fear lest her soul be troubled. And yet if I try to hold back, my God, I swear, I can’t! □

—Translated by Shafique N. Virani