

## Chapter Two

### Bibi

My leaf had fallen as they say, and the end was here and now. Never would I have dreamt it would come in this way but this is my Takdir (fate).

A clean sun streamed through the steel framed windows of the ward on the 2nd floor of the Burn Unit at Tygerberg Hospital. It was all but quiet with the bustle of my offspring circling the bed, with sombre, shiny tear-stained faces. In a corner, like a sentry with a stopwatch, stood the monitor recording the last efforts of a heart worn threadbare. "He is here," I said to them, "The old man, your father is here". Startled by that they all joined hands with me.

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It was a tranquil day when I decided to burn the letters, five years after John's passing under the pomegranate tree where lay the eleventh child I aborted. This was the cross of unforgiveness. Life was hard and the babies kept coming, year after year and John was on a level I could not reconcile with my logic, saluting the sun, feeding the birds and vagrants, fostering peace, in a world of such discord. And yet all that he did worked ironically, every remedy, every prophetic prediction he made, even though I constantly referred to him as 'mad'.

A sudden gush of wind caught the back end of my Indian silk skirt. Engulfed in flames suddenly, I screamed and rolled on the sand to

crouch under the low nozzle of the garden tap, barely conscious under the extreme searing pain, as I burned all the way up my back and buttocks, around to my tender breasts until the neighbour came out of her shock to take action and get help.

I was the daughter of Bhappaji Hussein an Urdu speaking mattress maker and immigrant from Moradabad, about 160 kilometres, from the Capital of New Delhi in India. Whether he was one of the recorded settlers offered land incentives in the Bathurst area for agricultural development during the 1800's or came here as a soldier of the British Army, I never got to know for certain.

I am more inclined to think it might be the first. We were a family of four sons and five daughters. Inevitably, as the story goes, there were amongst us two camps and my brother and I were definitely in Bhappas. We were just eight months apart miraculously, both scholarly types. I had taught Bhappa most of the English he knew.

Salt River was a hive of heavy industrialisation and a mix of cultures and traditions towards the end of the war, with the first ever steel foundry, railway junction and a significant textile industry where most of the community's men and women were employed. I always found living in Salt River too close for comfort with everyone traipsing in and out of each other's houses as though it were public domain. Needless to say, one family's problem was everyone's problem at the end of the day. Salt River had a culture that was very difficult to ignore, the same as the fragrant smell of basmati rice from our tearoom as it permeated the air.

“Chapel Street close to the Banana Store,” Bhatta would say in his broken English to anyone asking directions from Malta Bridge. That’s where Bhattaji ran his tearoom and we all lived in a rundown cherry - coloured Victorian Cottage on Coleridge Road in Salt River, with a white Broekie- lace trimmed verandah. He was such a gentle soul, my Bhatta.

Two streets away on Pope Street, the double- storied Mirza Singh’s Ginger Beer Factory with adjacent homestead and staff quarters stood amongst rows of terraced Victorian cottages with sizzling hot tin roofs and soot-stained chimney pots. Although close in proximity, it was miles apart and aloof from a community dominated by Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faiths that knew little or nothing at all about Sikhs.

The men who lived there were tall, wore turbans and the women were in silks and chiffons like royalty, drinking tea on the balcony at exactly 4.00 pm every day. The novelty of who is different to whom soon lost its fascination in a community where all existed in peace and blended well. That’s when I first met John Singh. He was four years my senior, a Sikh without a turban and he had the best manners I had ever found in a man.

“Bibi...Bibi...wait up!” I heard one day, walking home toward that wafting fragrance of steaming rice. It was Milan and someone else. I turned as he ran up, catching hold of my long braid of hair to slow me down. Following him at a more decent pace, was a tall suited gentleman with a muffler over his shoulder and a hand in his trouser pocket, approaching in rather shy confidence. “This is my friend John

Singh and we would like you to do some correspondence for us. I had to catch you before reaching the house because I can't take him there as you know, without questions asked. Will you do it, please?"

Call it fate if you will. I think it was less than a millisecond in which our eyes met but it was the day my life changed forever. I agreed even though by then my duties for Bhappa had expanded to include the monthly monetary donations to the university in Ajmer, and his village in India amongst other ad hoc writing, and still the regular English lessons. I knew it was wrong to be thinking about anyone named John, but I told myself I was not wrong. Besides, John ought to know better, I thought.

The uncanny thing is I think none of us were aware how fast my mother's diabetic condition was deteriorating until she was completely blind. All knew her as 'Blinde Tiemie' and the eldest daughter started ruling the roost. My comfort was my books, the smell of basmati and the refuge I found in being with Bhappa, listening to his stories about life in Moradabad.

"Milan, your friend John: is he Christian or what?" I asked once. "I don't think so," he said. "His family owns the Ginger Beer Factory as you know but they are

Sikhs, from India also," he said further, when I asked why the men wore turbans.

Just then Nan my younger sister burst through the door with the news that Tia the eldest of my sisters had been proposed to.

"What!!!" said Milan and I simultaneously, dropping everything.

“To whom?” we said again.

“Dullah,” she said. “The foreman from Pal’s Clothing Factory. He came for you, Bibi, but Bhappa flatly said NO! She is not ready for marriage, but Tia is”.

*Thank God for Bhappa* I thought with my mouth agape, turning a shocked expression to Milan. It seriously started me thinking about whom I am to marry when the time came. I talked it over with Bhappa that night during the English lesson. “We are little bit like different Bibi, so Dullah is not a good match for you but your time will come,” he said planting his warm kiss on my forehead.

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The century turned the corner and what a magical time the 1940’s brought in music, fashion, bioscope and the public baths in Spencer Street with hot water. At dusk, the streets turned to lovers’ walks, all leading down toward the Bijou and Majesty Bioscopes where Coloureds sat upstairs and Whites below, or the Palace and Gem where it mattered not. John was on my block more often in his car, dressed in a Palm Beach suit sending my heart racing, crooning beautiful love songs to me over the little wall of my verandah when everyone was down town or under the lights at the bioscope.

I loved the fashion, discarding the Salwar Kameez during the day, for English costume complete with hat and gloves. Only Mrs Phoenix could see the story unfolding and she feared for me. I assured her it was harmless teasing, but she rolled her eyes and said, “Uh uh...not when he

waits here on the street and sings “When my dreamboat comes home....”

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Like a slide presentation the episodes of my life flashed by in just those couple of days, but my body continued to burn without flames. I prayed for mercy and relief. There was so much I wanted to say but *No, I would rather die*, I thought, looking at them; with self-consciousness, remembering how wildly that trait infuriated and provoked John always, but he loved me still. The charred remains of my buttocks, back and breast area dragged the rest of me along, but held no resemblance any longer to the woman who was once Bibi and so proud. I cast my eyes up toward the sky at the next grip of crippling pain and cried out, “God, what have I done to deserve this...” The words on the clipboard at the foot of the bed were highlighted in red “Nil per Mouth” and I am dying for a cup of tea.

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I will never forget the day Bhappa died. It was a perfectly ordinary Friday. I stood out alone in the street still, long after the procession in white carrying Bhappaji had turned the corner and the dead of silence had been broken by the shock of his death. It all happened too quickly for me. Just as the shrill Railway Hooter went off over the air at 1.0 p m exactly in the afternoon as usual, competing with the call to prayer from the surrounding mosques, did they carry him into to the house, and before sunset they carried him out again to the burial ground.

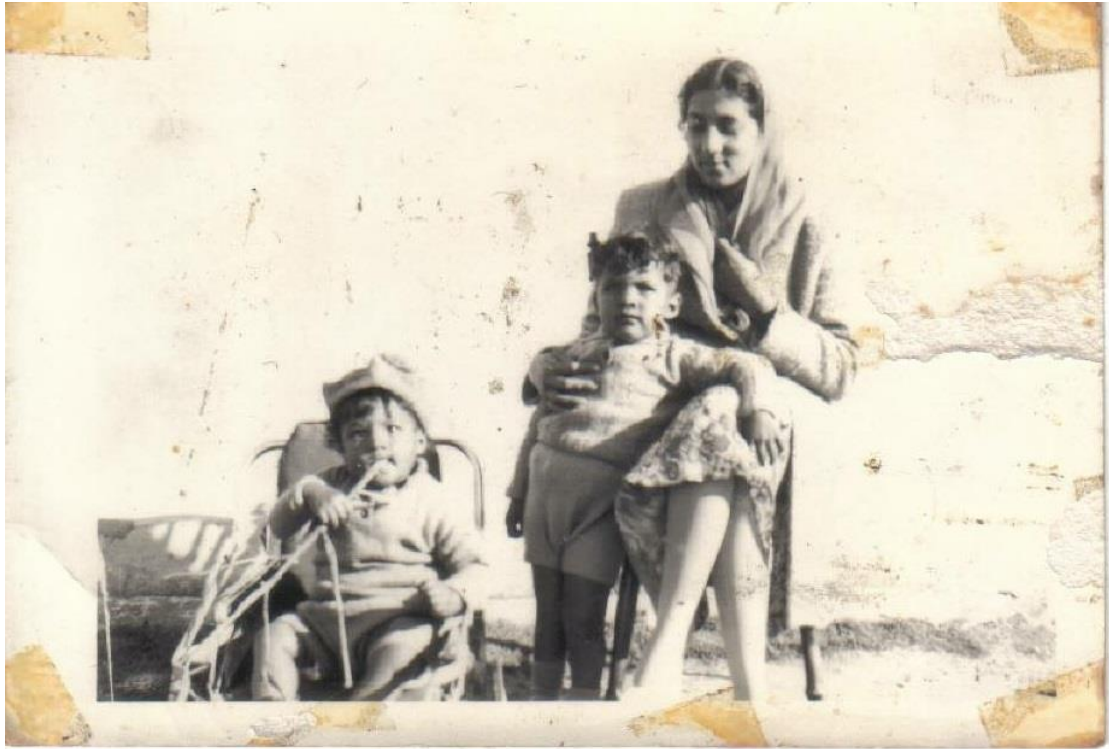
There have always been two versions of how he met his death, and the truth has never been known.

According to Salie, he was attacked in the shop and hit with the steel scale on his head, while Joggie claimed “Huh Uh...Mr Joseph the shoemaker didn’t have his shoes ready for mosque again that day for the third week.” So, when Mr Husain shouted at him, he knocked him with the butt of the shoemaker’s hammer, also on the head.

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Doringhoogte was the other side of the world from Salt River then. The rural farm area was dense with bush and tall Port Jackson trees. The nights were like black velvet and water was drawn from the pits. Over the tips of these trees the lights of the tall green minarets of the mosque could be seen in the distance like an Arabian Night fairy tale.

Ouma, probably in her eighties at the time, lived there on her farm. She was the ‘Vroedvrou’ of the area, well respected, and was referred to by big burly men of all colours and creed, as Ouma. She was my grandmother and a nurturing soul, a real “salt of the earth” woman. I yearned for someone like her as I mourned Bhappa with the fresh pain of realising for the first time that I haven’t had a mother for most of my growing years and with Bhappa gone, the void was insurmountable. There was nothing left for me.



*Figure 1 Bibi and sons*



*Figure 2 John, the horse and wagon boy*



*Figure 3 John and Bibi in Salt River*



*Figure 4 John Singh*





*Figure 5 Mr. Pye and John Singh*



*Figure 6 The Maidstone Road Shop*



*Figure 7 John, friends and neighbours at the beach*



Figure 8 Mirza Singh ginger beer



Figure 9 Baby Brownie Camera



Figure 10 The Bijou building, Salt River