Once, a farewell party had been organised for us as we were leaving the station where we were posted. Under normal circumstances, Anees would have looked after her, but that day he took ill, was medicated and asleep. Protocol demanded that we attend. I thought for a while, turned to Nafisa and told her we'd go to the party and return in half-an-hour. Before I could finish my sentence, she put my agitated mind at rest by saying, "Mama, don't worry, I will look after little brother." I hugged her tightly in gratitude and left after locking the door from the outside. When I returned, I peeped through the window to find her sitting on a chair, which she had pulled close to the bed. She had placed a glass of water nearby. My little Florence Nightingale had applied balm on his head and was watching over him. Who said she hadn't grown up?



Nafisa, when she was five years old.

With Nafisa around, life has been so different. Yes, we've had our share of bad, sad moments. We've been at the receiving end of the cruelty of people. But, all those bitter moments fade away when I think of the goodness her presence has generated. The number of times we've met strangers who have come across with a helping hand not mere sympathy, but real understanding and an open mind. Many times it's because of Nafisa that those strangers have become wellwishers and good friends. Like Vijaya, Bunty, and Salina, her teachers in various schools. They are not specially trained teachers, just sensitive women, who took Nafisa under their wings. Or that kind ticket collector on the Goa Express, Mr Khan Yusufzai, who, when he found she was sick and vomiting on the journey, actually sprinted to the market outside the railway station at Agra when the train halted there for five minutes. He rushed in and gave us a packet of Electral he had bought within that brief time. And he called up the next day at our Pune home to find out if she was okay. Or, for that matter Jaswant Singh, the tailor at the National Defense Academy's shopping complex. He spent ages tailoring a dress, adding embroidery and a gold fringe, for her broken dolly, or the lady in Kuwait, at the spectacles shop at Sauk al Wattaniya, with whom we had a language problem. Finally, when we managed to convey to her that we wanted a frame for the child she took one look at Nafisa, who was then five, produced a beautiful frame and refused to take the money.

Under their tough exteriors, human beings have golden hearts. Perhaps, it takes a child like Nafisa, for them to discover their own potential, as it did for me. I know Nafisa in her own way has lived up to the message I wrote on the first card, she is the humming bird with a song which has so enriched our lives.

Now, Nafisa's condition has progressively deteriorated. A neuropediatrician who examined her says that she is a rare case whose faculties are progressively shutting down. She has become totally blind; both her eyes have cataracts, and we cannot even test her eyes, because she is heavily allergic to atropine. She copes with the blindness very well. She still reaches for the light switch whenever she enters her room. We took her to "See" the popular film Titanic. She would clap her hands in excitement when the sounds were loud. Her teeth are mere stubs in her mouth, so eating solid food was quite a task for her. But her favourites are still crisp fried things and she often goes on a samosa binge.

No longer can she come for walks to the nearby Gurudwara. Her gait is even unsteadier, coupled with low stamina. When the caring Pinto family gifted her a walker, we were able to take her out. The acupressure doctor tells me that I should just keep her happy, the rest she'll manage. Today, her hands have become her eyes and ears though her frustration at not hearing and seeing shows and she weeps bitterly without any reason. This is a lesson for me. My funds of patience increase with her growing problems. At times she spends endless hours playing by herself singing her own song, in a different sort of way.

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Nafisa passed away on 18 June 2004 before her 27th birthday.

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