

**THOUGHTCRAFT****BY NASRIN SOBHAN**

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A trip down memory lane

We were three couples with young children. We lived as most young families did, in modest homes, simply furnished, with one air conditioner that had pride of place in the bedroom. We drove secondhand cars and carpooled our children to school to save on fuel. To augment our husbands' earnings we taught at school or gave lessons.

We were never too busy to drop in on each other for chats. At weekends we liked to play cards in someone's air conditioned bedroom. Sometimes we would find Russian caviar or Heinz baked beans or Bulgarian jam in Gulshan market. Then we would feast on baked beans on toast, or scones with Bulgarian jam while we played charades or Rummy or Flush.

One year we decided to go on holiday to Cox's Bazaar. We drove off in high spirits, our

cars filled with sun hats, nappies, toys, tiffin carriers full of parathas, halwa, shami kababs, bakarkhani and our beloved jam. We managed to fit the children in too. The roads were relatively clear and we had a smooth drive except I think someone ran over a chicken.

When we arrived, we checked into the Government Circuit House and decided to go straight to the beach to catch the last rays of the afternoon sun. While unpacking, we women found that we had left behind the bag that contained our swimsuits. The children and the menfolk had theirs, so we went anyway.

To our delight and by sheer good luck, we found a peddler selling some swimsuits that had been left behind by female tourists. We three women all found suits to fit and put

them on as soon as we could. We lay on the beach sunning ourselves in our new swimsuits, sunglasses on, sunhat on, while the men took the children with their buckets and spades to play near the water's edge.

We passed happy days on the pristine beach, sunning, eating, or swimming in the gorgeous blue water. Everything was perfect except the circuit house food. Our friend 'A' who was a superb cook, decided we could not go on eating the terrible meals we were getting, so she took over the kitchen. The men were sent off to get the groceries, and 'A' set to work with the cook and several assistants. While 'A' prepared the evening meals, 'B' and I sat on the veranda and passed the time experimenting with different types of eye shadow and makeup.

Sometimes there were parties. One young

couple used to throw a party every year on New Year's Eve. There was music and food and conversation with the highlight of the evening being a Black Forest cake from the Sheraton.

We wore platform heels, silver lamé, false eyelashes and even wigs. We were all very slim. It was a standing joke among our husbands that our sari blouses were so small that the tailors needed only six "giras" of cloth to make them.

We listened to Ramsey Lewis, Creedence Clearwater, John Lee Hooker, and the Rolling Stones. Our children often say "Your generation really knew how to enjoy themselves. And you still do".

And it is true.

READER'S CHIT

Rehana Anvery – a friend across borders

It's not easy to find someone like Rehana; she is one in a million. I went to visit her and her husband Rahat – a hospitable couple – after a long time. We reminisced and talked about the years that had passed and when it was almost time to leave, I could not hold back my tears.

As I was visiting them, Rehana took the effort to locate and invite all of our mutual friends and the whole lot greeted me at the Karachi Gym Club. It had been a while since I last visited the place.

This was fascinating, with the stag heads and photographs of the past few years framed in gilt and labelled carefully, so one could read them years later. I tried the food -

an egg meal, chicken roast, vegetables, and sweets of various types, including pudding and cake. And it tasted just the same.

Some of my other friends invited me for dinner later on, and I got to meet my friends, and heard stories of their families and friends, in turn. One of them grew flowers and exhibited them on an international level. She was called Tanvir and her husband, who had studied medicine with one of my older brothers, took photographs of us. Thus we were preserved in time.

Rehana had travelled the world and come back finally to Karachi to rest, with Rahat's early retirement. Her brother, also a friend, asked me to have dinner with the

family one evening. There were photographs and paintings and what have you, and Rehana's brother was skilled at commenting on them in detail. He even talked about the carvings on the table. He had paintings of various sizes to adorn the rooms. They were green gilt-edged ones, like our own, back in the Maldives Island, where my husband and I once stayed before departing for Melbourne.

Rehana had a splendid collection of books and there were stacks of them in every room. She loved reading, as I did too. I remembered the golden days when we often gathered together in the veranda to watch TV, but most often we went through her family

albums and had a lot to comment on.

We spoke about her son, who used to visit me in his childhood, with his nanny, in white clothes. There was her light-eyed brilliant girl, Nigar, who was not as shy as her brother Murad, who had dimples and won over every female who saw him. As we turned the pages of her various family albums, she fashioned her story, which was gripping, to say the least.

As I sat admiring the pictures, many episodes of our lives spilt over. And seeing her after such a long time brought all those special moments back.

By Fayza Haq

Parul

A young Bangladeshi woman in her mid-20s, Parul works at a nail salon in Queens, New York. I met her in January during a weekend trip to New York City. My childhood friend and I went to a nail salon for a treat and that was where I met Parul.

Parul was my nail technician. That's a difficult-sounding designation for a task apparently as simple as a manicure but the reality is, one has to take nail tech classes and get a certificate before they can start working for a licensed nail salon, because manicures now involve way more than just clipping, filing, buffering and pushing cuticles. Clients of manicures now go for nail enhancement, nail art, and they also want to wear long-lasting gel nail polish, a kind of polish whose application and removal generally requires a professional manicurist. In short, manicures

have reached a whole new level!

Parul, who came to the USA nearly five years ago after winning the Diversity Visa (DV) lottery, has called Queens her home ever since. She puts in 10-12 hours on her job each day – summers are busier than winters. She has been working at a Chinese nail salon for two years now. She moved here from a Bangladeshi-owned nail salon, where she started her career as a nail technician.

I had a long conversation with Parul as she worked on my hands and feet. I learned that she hailed from Narsingdi, a district in central Bangladesh. She was a first-year college student when she won the DV lottery. Her DV application was submitted by an "agent" on behalf of her – she didn't even know her "confirmation" number! When the

agent found out that she won the DV lottery, he demanded money. "My family spent almost Tk 15 lakhs to send me to America," she said.

Young Parul came to New York alone. She felt lonely and scared in one of the biggest and busiest metropolises in the world. And even after having spent nearly five years in NYC, she says she is still too scared to travel alone. "I have been to Times Square only 2 or 3 times, I am scared to go anywhere alone. Sometimes I wish to go back home," she said.

"Maybe I will return once I get my American passport. Life is tough here," she added.

I was very satisfied with Parul's work – it was a relaxing treat. But when I tried to tip her, she vehemently refused. She said she couldn't accept tips from another Bangladeshi

because it didn't look right. The warmth in her words touched me, but then I knew that most of her earnings came from tips.

It was past 9 pm and I was still in the salon with my hands under a manicure fan so that my nail colour would dry faster. Parul was around, tidying up the manicure table – she was exhausted after a 12-hour shift and was eager to call it a day.

Before leaving the salon, Parul came up to me and asked me for my phone number. And as we exchanged our phone numbers, I forced the tip into the pocket of her jacket – she refused again and again, but I didn't listen. I will always remember kind-hearted Parul and may even call her next time I'm in New York City.

By Wara Karim