



ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

First a sharp right from her house. Two residential apartments on both sides, both sandstone coloured, then a super-market (usually displaying a variety of Indian produce) and the Fuji Photo studio album, another stretch of a residential block and then onto the main road with the huge McDonalds outlet in the front and the sprawling supermarket named *Jamiya*. At least that is what her father called it. After the *Jamiya*, they crossed the large open market which smelled of incense, burning sandalwood and doner kababs in the evening. In the mornings, though, it was full of the lingering smells of last night's hookah, coffee, sandalwood and the Islamic perfume. Right after the big market was a left turn, which brought them to an expansive desert landscape and there, at one end of the desert, were the maroon gates of her school.

The first week at school went by in tears. Nauroze planned constantly of escaping but for some reason, her teacher Gretta had locked up the room. She still found tiny ways to resist. She tore up colouring pages, screamed in her mother tongue and even tried to grab the teacher's hand, but to no avail. She also distinctly remembered feeling shameful of her tiffin wrapped inside a polythene bag. The rest of the children brought the food in boxes and it made her ears burn.

A whole year passed before mother and daughter came to terms with a life among foreigners—and even managed to take some joy in it.

Minu found a friend and confidante in the old Bangladeshi lady her husband had hired to help around the house. Banu was like a grandmother to Nauroze and a mother and friend to Minu. Banu had lived in the country for nearly 20 years by then, working as a cleaner by day at a

local school where all the Arab children attended.

She often bought left over pencil boxes, colourful books in the Arabic language, and even some food when she came over after work. Nauroze would wait with bated breath for Banu, because her arrival meant she would get to gorge on falafel and aubergine sandwiches and on the weekends, all go to the park a little distance from their home. Most days, they would hitch a ride with someone heading towards that direction.

Nauroze's father was absent on most of these days. She would sometimes hear Baba heading out early in the morning and not return till late into the night. It was mostly her and her mom going about daily chores, watching hours of Animal Planet, Chip 'n' Dale, Talespin and Disney's Adventures of the Gummi Bears. Her mother slowly started to lose her inhibitions and make friends. VEDIYA'S mother taught her how to make fish curry with coconut milk, coconut shavings and curry leaves. Rumpa's mother, a nurse by profession, became her groceries partner, showing her from where to source fresh moringa sticks, new potatoes, *jhenga*, *dhundol*, *potol* and all the familiar vegetables that Minu was used to cooking with.

As they settled into their routine, Nauroze started to notice the strange unhappiness that would grip the house on certain days. Her father and mother would break into arguments over silly incidents that were blown out of propor-

*But going to her home would mean leaving everything behind—her school, the few friends she had managed to make and everything that was familiar, all over again, only to be plunged into another unreal newness.*

tion, thanks to her father's erratic temper.

She remembers one particular incident, after her little sister was born, when Baba started to accuse her mother of stealing. Ma swore against it. But he kept on insisting, breaking her little by little into a fit of tears.

Those were the bad days; but there were good ones too. When Baba drove them to the beach, just an hour's drive away from their home, they caught fish, grilled it on the sandy beach in the shade of a palm tree and ate it with fresh Lebanese flatbread.

They were sometimes accompanied by other Bangladeshi families but most often they had a hoard of men working at Baba's factory with them.

It was on one such beach outing that the man offered to take Nauroze swimming into the sea. He was nice, she knew him quite well. The man, Ali, did not work for her father. He was new to the country and was tasked with the job of caretaker for their house. Ali was Ban-

gladeshi and someone deeply trusted by her mother, so much so, that he would sometimes be left to babysit both sisters. During these babysitting hours, Ali would make Nauroze touch him down there. She found it odd, even knew that something about the activity was wrong. As Ali slowly fixed himself to the family's routine, these episodes with Nauroze grew more and more elaborate. Sometimes it would be him stripping her down to her panties and touching her as yet undeveloped chest to soreness. She sometimes resisted, sometimes waited for her mother to walk in on the situation, but she never spoke of it to anyone. Even nine-year-old Nauroze knew this needed to be hidden because surely this would get her into trouble. After all, she was reprimanded that one time she fell and scraped her chin while playing catch with the kids of their neighbourhood.

These episodes with Ali gave birth to a deep fear in Nauroze. She would constantly worry that something was growing within her, something that would give her secret away. Ali left the country after falling sick, a year after it all started. But the fear did not leave Nauroze. As she moved up to her senior classes, she understood how children were conceived and that gave birth to yet another fear in her. What if she had parts of Ali within her? What if a child was being made? These thoughts popped up unexpected, while she was playing basketball with her friends, while she was walking to evening classes with a Limca and chips in hand, and it would make her nauseated, force her to puke her guts out.

Stuck in this life, Nauroze sometimes wondered of her grandmother and her home faraway in Bangladesh. Sometimes she wanted to visit that home, watch her grandmother carry a huge bamboo basket to the betel nut trees, vigorously shake the towering spiny trees and run around in the backyard collecting the small betel nuts that fell into the soft ground.

She also nursed a deep sense of fear of her father. His tempers began to get more and more erratic and he would blame her mother for every miniscule inconvenience, sometimes opting to hit her, slap her and scream profanities. Those days would be especially hard. Nauroze, her sister and her mother would huddle in a room near the pantry and talk for hours into the night.

These nights made Nauroze want to head back to her village with Ma in tow even more. Surely Baba could not beat up her mother there, because there were so many people there to stop him, to protect her mother from harm.

But going to her home would mean leaving everything behind—her school, the few friends she had managed to make and everything that was familiar, all over again, only to be plunged into another unreal newness. She would be tasked with learning the language of her home yet again. Nauroze, a mere child then, thought of all these possibilities and found her thoughts wandering off, off to a place that would finally be home, where they would all be safe. But for now, that home seemed like a far-off dream. Yet, hushed conversations in the house revealed that their life in the Middle East was drawing to a close soon. Nauroze, her mother, and sister would soon embark upon yet another journey.