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Ninny was a little over two years when Abdel was born, ten weeks before the Nazis invaded Poland and Britain replied by imposing an economic blockade and declaring war against Germany, a war that would change the world beyond recall and change our lives forever. The whole decade leading to the Second World War saw an economic Depression in the Western world. War came on the heels of sugar strikes that brought the colony to a crisis, sugar barons to their knees, and the peasants to abject poverty. If Hitler could only guess the devastation he caused in homes thousands of miles away, he no doubt would not have cared, powerful nation that Germany was, but Hitler could not know that the colonies would come to the assistance of their imperiled Mother Country, nor was he counting on capitulation.

Haniff would surely have seen newspaper reports of the war raging between Germany and Great Britain, of the Battle of Britain – the large-scale aerial battle between Britain's RAF and Germany's Luftwaffe over London and the English Channel from 1940 to 1941. Driven back with heavy casualties in the day raids, Hitler blamed it on the weather and then started the night raids, called The Blitz, when Britain was pounded with bombs as fast as the Germans could regroup, until May 1941; the RAF pilots showed their mettle but with

heavy losses also, and under the skillful leadership of the British bulldog Winston Churchill, defended their country successfully to the bitter end. The Nazis were driven back to Germany on that occasion but they continued to send people to the gas chambers.

Shelly was born exactly two years after Abdel to the date, by which time war had been raging at its height and food shortages were acutely felt in all the British West Indian colonies. The presence of German U-boats in Caribbean waters made it dangerous for British vessels to traverse with cargo, many were torpedoed, and new babies in the colony grew up on plantain flour porridge and boiled and diluted fresh cow's milk. Basketfuls of food items, now mostly locally grown, from Mariam's shop to Lily and Haniff's cottage, were still regular. Miraculously, villagers, with a lack of resources, became more resourceful. They lived on what they planted in their kitchen gardens and backdam plots.

Haniff displayed much patience with his children: he fed them dinner, read storybooks which Mariam bought when she went to the city, sang nursery rhymes, taught Ninny to write, as well as sang popular western songs and Moonajaats and rocked them to sleep one by one. He had a beautiful voice and sang soulfully. When they fell asleep he would then absorb himself in the day before's newspapers, which he brought from work, or in an engineering manual. He still found time for the cinema, and visiting his friends at the bakery and his parents. Another son, Kemel, was born when Shelly was almost two.

All of Lily's babies would be born at Mariam's house. All the older children would be transferred to Mariam's care for about five or six weeks or until such time as Lily was well enough to resume her domestic chores and pedal her sewing machine. Haniff came often to have his meals at grandmother's house, to play with his children and take them for long walks but, on the odd occasion, Daadie took over his meals to the little cottage across the trench where he ate all by himself.

Ninny, Abdel, Shelly and Kemel grew up to the sound of a sewing machine whirring furiously while their father studiously avoided

the incessant chatter of the villagers who brought fabrics to be sewn into functional or exquisite garments as the occasion demanded.

One day while chatting to Lily casually Haniff said, 'You know how close I came to going to India? This close', holding his right thumb about a half of an inch from the tip of his index finger, 'when my sister went back in thirty-three.' Lily was puzzled. Why would he think of India at a time like this? What does he know of India? To her, India was a mythical land from which her grandparents, Tara and Ojeer, had come and had never returned. Although they had labour contracts and expected to return to India, for them the journey was their destination and destiny. No one she knew had ever returned to that vast, unknown land. And even though in the last few years Indian movies had been introduced in the colony and showed the world of the songbird Lata Mangeshkar; khatak dancing; the soulful sitar; the monumental Taj Mahal; the sacred Ganges . . . many Indians in the colony were still ignorant about India, so completely did the colonialist influence permeate the second-generation Indians' brains. Lily did not know anything more about India: its invaders and warrior kings; its forts and citadels; its astounding landscape; its people; its customs; and, as she would later discover, the land of Tagore, and of Gandhi who was still in South Africa at the time, and of the Kashmir Valley from whence her father-in-law had migrated as a boy. Not having grown up on an estate nor even visited an estate, she did not know of dhoti-clad and betel-chewing Indians, neither had she ever seen a logie right here in BG. All this thinking about India only complicated her head; she did not see the relevance to their lives of that far-away country. Lily sensed a change of mood in her husband and said tentatively, 'You don't like people coming here? You want me to stop taking in sewing?'

If Lily could have read his mind then, she would have discerned that he was indeed thinking deeply about the future in a godforsaken backwater village with no prospect of a change. How was he to ever provide for four children on his present

paltry salary that remained the same since he began to work at the pumping station close to ten years ago now? At least she brought in an income even if he didn't like the loud-mouth customers. And all their food items were free, deposited by the basketful from Mariam's shop. He had thought of turning to teaching but that would require converting to the Christian faith which was out of the question; his parents would never hear of such an unthinkable idea. No use thinking of going to the city in search of work either for neither the civil service nor the banks in the early 1940s employed East Indians no matter how fair your skin was. Unless one had money to set up a business in Water Street, the only options of jobs in the city open to the Indian were as jobber, messenger or chauffeur to an official. Besides, he cringed at the thought of moving to the city and squeezing into one of the congested city slums with a family. He knew he could never go into a middle-class cottage in a tree-lined street in Queenstown; those were the reserve of white colonialists and near-white and coloured business people. He wondered how his sister was faring in India; he was convinced that it would have been better to have gone back then . . . but he knew that was futile thinking because now he had a wife and four children. As these thoughts raced through his mind, he avoided her glance in lieu of an answer.

It was during the holy month of Ramadan that the tantalizing sound of bugles began to float in the air in the late afternoon from an empty lot on Cross Street. Soldiers selected for duty in the armed service came there to drill: left, right, left, right, turn, one, two, three, halt. This was quite a novelty to the village children who gathered to watch them. While Azan called men to the mosque and to prayer, bugles called them to war – to leave their homes, their wives and children and go to war. The haunting sounds that accompanied recruits in training were quickly translated into a catchy refrain by village children which they chanted on the sidelines: 'Soldier boy, soldier boy,

lef yuh wife and come to the war, come to the war. Left, right, left, right, turn’.

During those times, half-drunken men on the rum-shop’s verandah would sing out ‘Rum and Coca-Cola, working for the Yankee Dolla’. America, drawn into the war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in Hawaii on 7 December 1941, had set up a base at Atkinson airfield in British Guiana. This was like a beacon of light in the colony, for many men found work at the American airbase, which in some measure relieved unemployment in the deepening economic crisis.

Anyone glued to a Marconi short-wave radio or following newspaper reports since the outbreak of war would know of the innumerable theatres of war in which Britain was engaged and that young men from the West Indian islands were joining the RAF to support Britain against the Germans, who seemed to be invincible, to try and stop Hitler and his army in their tracks before they took more countries, and more lives to the gas chambers. Some British Guianese lads had already been recruited by the RAF and had left the colony months earlier.

Lily sensed that the mood in the hitherto peaceful village had quickened since Yankee soldiers began roaming the streets in jeeps. When the attractive Hilda walked along the street, minding her own business and going and coming from her job as assistant at one of the grocery shops on Main Street, big people whispered scandalously that she was going to meet the Yankees. Hilda lived with her younger brother and almost blind father; she was the only breadwinner and was never seen with a Yankee but the village was no stranger to malicious gossip. Many American soldiers took local wives with them when they returned home at the end of their tour of duty after World War II.

Lily cooked and washed, scrubbed and ironed clothes, bathed children, filled feeding bottles, and sewed for the villagers round the clock. Babu came every morning after Haniff left for work and walked Ninny to school, middays he walked her home for lunch

and back to school, and afternoons back home again. A curious child and much wiser than her age, Ninny asked her uncle lots of questions as they walked the roads.

‘The children say that Dutch jumbie playing under that silk-cotton tree? Is true?’

‘There is no such thing as jumbie, it’s all in people’s imagination’, he told her.

‘What is Dutch?’ she persisted.

Her uncle told her, ‘The Dutch men came from Holland a long time ago, more than two hundred years; they were the first people to come and plant on the land; they brought workers who they kidnapped from another country, from Africa, to dig all the trenches and build kokers to drain the land, to farm, and plant tobacco, cotton, dyes and sugar canes; that long seawall to keep out the ocean; African slaves built all that without wages; the Dutch sold the produce and took the money back to Holland.’

Ninny took a while to digest this information and then ventured again, ‘and what means kidnap? The Dutch still here now?’ she wanted to know.

‘Kidnap means the workers did not come freely, of their own will. They hired people who snatched men from their homes, from the streets, from their farms, anywhere, and brought them here in slave ships. The Africans worked long hours for no wages, only for meagre food and a meagre space to sleep at nights . . . This went on for some two to three hundred years. Some British men arrived here in ships sometime after and fought the Dutch for the land and so the Dutch left; Frenchmen were here for a short time, but British planters came and stayed; they are still here today planting sugar canes. From that we get sugar; sugar is made at those factories with tall, smoking chimneys; there’s one not far from our village . . . you’ll see them everywhere, at places where sugar estates are.’ Her uncle answered all her questions as much as he knew. Only British history he learnt in school and that was from the British point of view. That was more than an earful for a seven-year-old who blissfully replied,

‘That big jar that Ma set her ginger beer in, is a Dutch jar.’ Ninny was proud that she could at least make a small connection and contribute one detail to the conversation.

‘The Dutch left many things here besides jars, beer bottles and inkwells’, Uncle went on. ‘They left plenty of Dutch names such as *Betervervagting* where we are now walking, *Stabroek*, *Uitvlugt*, *Meten-Meer-Zorg*, plenty more estates where they planted canes and produced sugar. They built forts to look out for pirates, miles of seawalls to keep out the ocean, plenty *kokers* so the land won’t flood, and *stellings*, a really big platform where steamers can dock and passengers can come off.’ Uncle was sure Ninny won’t remember much of it but he kept on talking by way of telling himself that he knew something of the history of the colony.

‘Oh’, she said with all the innocence of a seven-year-old, ‘and children went to school like me?’

‘Well, no. The fathers worked here but the mothers and children mostly stayed in Holland’, he said. Babu knew that Amerindians were the first people on the land but he did not want to complicate her little mind; he will tell her another morning. The trips up and down to and from school saw varied conversations, mostly about the teacher and school; Ninny wished she could have brought her big ‘sleep and wake’ doll to school, at least one time.

On Monday morning as Lily was getting Ninny ready for school, Haniff, on his way down the short flight of steps, turned around and said in an off-hand way, ‘I’m thinking of joining the RAF.’

He must be teasing her, thought Lily, and she replied lightly: ‘What you want to join RAF for? You have a good good job. And besides, only single men joining up for RAF, not married men with children.’

Haniff silently wheeled his bicycle from under the cottage and with a cheerful wave of the hand he was gone. He had recently acquired a bicycle. He pedalled slowly up the Middle Walk Road to the pumping station near the ocean. He worked diligently all day on the pumps that must be kept in good repair continuously in the

event of heavy rains and floods which the colony was prone to, being below sea level. That afternoon, locking his bicycle under the cottage and taking off his muddy boots at the bottom step, he walked up the freshly scrubbed steps in his socks. As soon as they had eaten dinner and when the children were put to bed, he said to Lily calmly, 'There's no future in the pumping station, no promotion. No matter how long I work there I have nowhere further to go, stuck at the same salary for years. There's no future in this colony. No jobs. The colony poor as a church rat. Is an opportunity.'

Stunned and choked to the brim, the questions came pouring out, 'An opportunity? For what? To leave four little children? What kind of opportunity is that? Why you want to leave us? There's plenty jobs at the air base if you want to change your job.'

As if anticipating her questions, Haniff added quickly, 'I will come back. I don't know how long this war will last but I will come back. Is an opportunity.'

Lily tried to surmise a reason for this sudden decision; she did not see it coming, but, in the end, she gave up and said something trivial to herself, 'if he really born on the sea; maybe the sea calling him', yet she did not want to give voice to her real fear and that is, that soldiers die in war.

She could not fall asleep that night and tormented herself trying to find answers to questions that kept popping up in her head. Had he been thinking about it for a while unknown to her? The next morning, Lily plucked up all her courage and calmly announced, 'Well, if that is your ambition, I will not stand in your way.'

In another two weeks Lily signed the necessary consent forms for Haniff to enlist with the RAF. She could not help thinking: he who never killed a chicken, how would he kill an enemy?

* * * * *

I have no recollection of my father joining the drill session in Cross Street, left, right, left, right, turn, one, two, three, far from the theatres of war. Neither do I have any recollection of the day

in March 1944 when my father left my mother and four children, his parents, relatives, friends and his job as engineer at the village pumping station to board a ship bound for the USA in the first instance and thence to England. He must have been a very worried man that day, leaving family and his children, for the uncertainty and the submarines in the Atlantic, but he did not show it; it seemed he could hardly wait to go. His younger brother Yacoob also heeded the call of the bugles and enlisted with him for the RAF, with the solemn promise to his parents that he would return to the house, land and the future their parents had scrimped and struggled to secure for him.

Ninny and Abdel cried to go on the ship with their father (this story was told once or twice to tease Ninny) but Mariam held their hands firmly, close to her side, on the busy wharf with many other recruits and their families milling around. Then Ninny said between tears, 'But Daddy could have wait for my birthday next month.' Mamoo had hoisted me on his shoulders but I saw nothing except a mass of people hurrying by and hailing out. Lily stood stock still and stared at a point in front of her all the time, holding Kemel in her arms for he was still a baby and not yet a year old; when she found her voice, she said as if in explanation to Ninny's plea, 'He going to fight war for England.'

Aja and Aji were on the wharf also. Aji wailed in muffled sounds, 'Haniff, yuh gone, and yuh carry Yacoob wid yuh?' while Aja stood silently by, stern-faced.

Haniff's two older brothers were on the wharf as were his two younger sisters and about a dozen young children between them, some of them shy and hiding behind their parents; they had all come to wish their brothers well in this adventure they had chosen. After that day, we scarcely saw those family members. My mother's cousins, Sarah's sons, especially Uncle Mars and Uncle Sheriff took an exceptional interest in us, while Uncle Murs's wife, Auntie Baby, a jolly lady who had six children, would come from Kitty to the village time and again, and she would always come by to visit us with a

small gift of fruits. Aunty Baby was a realist, did not bother to waste her time thinking ifs, ands and buts, and did not mince words; she considered us fatherless and said so quite plainly too.

It seemed as if Mariam, serene with doe-like hazel eyes, accepting of fate like an ancient brown goddess, was imbibing everything and only waiting for the ship to sail. Both she and Babu knew what they had to do. The war had been raging in Europe for more than four years. Mariam's shop shelves were nearly empty of imported goods and business was almost at a standstill but the colony produced fresh vegetables to keep everyone alive. Cigarettes and cooking oil were in short supply as were tinned foodstuffs as the colony had a high dependence on foreign goods. But Mariam was not leaving her daughter with four young children alone in a cottage across the middle-walk trench. The very next morning she called the village carpenter Uncle Coco and within the space of less than two weeks a new little cottage on stilts, high enough to accommodate an oven on the ground floor, was built up in the shade of the spreading jamoon tree, in the fenced yard that contained Mariam's shop-cum-living quarters. The oven was built by local carpenters under Lily's instructions, wooden outside and metal-lined on the inside with space for a coal-pot and coals to provide the heat. That same coal-pot and fresh coals Lily used to heat three or four flat irons to iron our school uniforms, customers' clothes and so on, with an improvised ironing board that was really our kitchen table; on those occasions Lily brought the coal-pot into the kitchen. Babu and Biya slept on the couches in their living room where there was always a clay goblet with fresh cool water for drinking, resting on a saucer in one of the Demerara-shuttered windows with a few cups. Lily's three older children jumped into Mariam's bed with her every night and took up the other bedroom as well. Less than six months after Haniff's departure for Britain our new baby brother arrived.

A small, light-brown tibusiri basket woven in intricate patterns of tiny rounds and squares dominates my memory. It hung from a nail on a wall high over our black iron-framed bed and in it was placed

every blue air-letter that arrived from our father, beginning with the first one that described the sea journey and a close encounter with one of the dreaded German U-Subs which were scouring the Atlantic ready to torpedo allied vessels from Canada to both the South American mainland, from where they brought aluminum, and to Britain where the aluminum ended up as guns to keep their stocks up during the war. About six German submarines stalked the Atlantic and sunk dozens of ships in the first three years of the war at great cost of lives and merchandise; oil tankers taking fuel from Venezuela and the Dutch islands to Britain and ships laden with bauxite from Mackenzie, British Guiana, were prime targets – bauxite intended for Alcan, Canada, where it would be smelted and made into aluminum ingots which in turn would be used for building new fighters, bombers and helmets constantly needed by Britain for the war. The US finally started anti-submarine patrols of Zeppelin balloons and began to sink the Nazi submarines thus the loss of allied ships considerably decreased. My mother read all my father's letters aloud to us children gathered around her whether we could understand or not; Ninny cried while us younger ones giggled. One early letter told of their short but rigorous training period in the USA; another letter described the turbulent crossing to England and his new life in the RAF in almost every detail. In time, photographs of my father in RAF uniform, photographs of the batch in uniforms, postcards and greetings cards arrived and were all displayed on a shelf in the living room.

Thereafter, the words 'Home Office' became everyday words for us and a pattern emerged in our home where every fortnight, on a Wednesday, Lily would make the journey to the city, invariably dressed in a sober gabardine skirt and white embroidered blouse, her white chiffon orhni pinned at both sides of her head with two gold brooches, to uplift our garnished allowances from the Treasury. It would be the same routine of collecting garnished allowances for servicemen's families in all the British colonies through the world from wherever RAF soldiers were recruited.

All grocery shops in the countryside were obliged to close on Wednesday afternoons when Mariam would make her way to the city just after lunchtime to pay her creditors, replenish her stocks or deposit cash which she transported in a black mantle like a midwife's bag. Sometimes Lily would meet Mariam in Georgetown and they would return together in the afternoon in Tulna's black Humber Hawk car. Uncle Tulna lived three lots away from us, next to the new Mosque; the whole village we called auntie, uncle or cousin – to call people by their names only was considered very rude and precocious. He was chauffeur to Miss Woolford who held an important office at the Legislative Council (Legco) and so he drove to the city every working day. On those days, we children would be left in Daadie and Babu's care when we were spoilt silly with cakes from the glass case in the cake shop and allowed to sit, one at a time, on Mamoo's lap in the driver's seat of his Opel car, forward, reverse, forward, reverse in and out of the garage; we all got at least a turn after fighting who should be first. After that Mamoo taught us to play Xs and Noughts on our slates and Daadie taught us more words in Hindi – never the juicy curse words we heard she was famous for, although we egged her on, Mamoo would always open his eyes wide on her and that was the signal for her to desist while we teased her.

Another blue air-letter arrived: 'My dearest Lily, I am happy to know that you and the children are well. Autumn in England is quite breathtaking with many-coloured leaves, and although not yet cold, we have no time to notice the weather; the routine is rigorous. Yacoob and I have been separated to different parts of the country. You know that I had to leave BG because my salary was nothing to raise a family on; I was not cut out to serve in a shop and what else was there to do? If only I could see a future in the colony, I would not have chosen to leave you and the children. I am posted in Leicestershire; it is beautiful countryside. I miss you all very much. Much love, Haniff.'

Lily read the letter twice, first time to herself in silence and second time aloud to us children, before duly assigning it to the

tibisiri basket. The letters didn't make much sense to us smaller ones but my mother would always maintain a sober face when each new blue air-letter was read out.

No one knew when or how Lily found time to reply to each and every letter; now, upon reflection, no doubt, in the dead of night when she was free to have a good cry. She faithfully wrote about each child, how we each passed our birthday soon after he left, how we were faring in school and so on, but very little about herself. Amply supplied from Mariam's shop, a cottage within Mariam's compound, and with the protection of Lily's two brothers, we were assured of food, love, protection, a roof over our heads and school. I can rarely recall any time when we were rushed to any of the hospitals in Georgetown or had to put up a white flag to attract a passing doctor; I think bush medicine and home remedies were working well for us except one time when our little sister was rushed to hospital with typhoid and had to remain there a few days. My older brother had frequent attacks of asthma in the growing-up years but from what I recall Lily was adept in applying steam coming out of the spout of a teapot and covering his head with a large towel, exercise and fresh air, all with good results; eventually, my brother seemed to have outgrown that childhood ailment. Once every month Mariam and Mamoo took me to the district doctor at Buxton for a medical check-up it seemed for years but I cannot recall what those visits were for or when they ceased. The box-oven under our new cottage constantly produced freshly baked plait-bread at all hours of day and night which we gobbled up with creamy Australian Cow and Girl Butter that squirted high to the roof when the can opener was applied to the rim. Aunt Basso, always stylishly dressed and with a parasol to keep off the harmful rays of the sun from her fair complexion, dropped by regularly on her way to market – the Singhs were a Brahmin family who lived on the same road as us, north of the new mosque, and whose son had joined the RAF with the same batch as my father and uncle; his sister stopped by to compare

notes and share the contents of their air-letter forms and, unintentionally, reopen dormant wounds.

The arrival of each new blue air-letter made us sad and hopeful at the same time: sad at our father's absence in our everyday life but accepting, believing, that he had not abandoned us but instead was needed to do something more noble somewhere else. We children all felt that we were making a huge sacrifice for the good of the world . . . it seemed like a good enough reason for his absence and people didn't ask us where our father was as the whole village knew . . . illogically, we felt special from other children with fathers who did regular jobs such as driving bulk sugar trucks from estate to terminal or those who were shopkeepers or those who sold provisions, milk, coals, farmed or fished for a living, those who worked in the fields as cane cutters or in the factories as pan boilers, pharmacists and so on – fathers who watched their children grow up from day-to-day, fathers who were a part of their family's life – their presence at home was important. Our father was a soldier . . . and he was in the Mother Country . . . subliminally we felt linked to that foreign place. Moreover, we wanted for nothing and did not in the least consider ourselves poor or fatherless. Those were our perceptions of ourselves; some of the villagers realistically saw life differently but what they thought they kept to themselves. Were it not for my grandmother's big heart, Mamoo's love and constant attention to us, and my mother's courage and her knack for hiding the hurts and pains, we would have known how poor and deprived we really were. But, as we found out many later years, we grew up sheltered and enveloped in sheer love; the scales fell from our eyes much later.

In time, we collectively cultivated the feeling that we were only temporarily in BG, that we had one foot here and one foot on a boat to England to join our father anytime soon. Women who came to our house to get their clothes sewn reinforced this feeling with their constant questions, 'So wen yuh goin' to England? Yuh fadder sen fo yuh yet?' to any of us children they happened to find at home.