

God-Brother

Stories from my Childhood with Meher Baba

by Mani S. Irani

An Avatar Meher Baba Trust eBook

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God-Brother

Stories from my Childhood with Meher Baba

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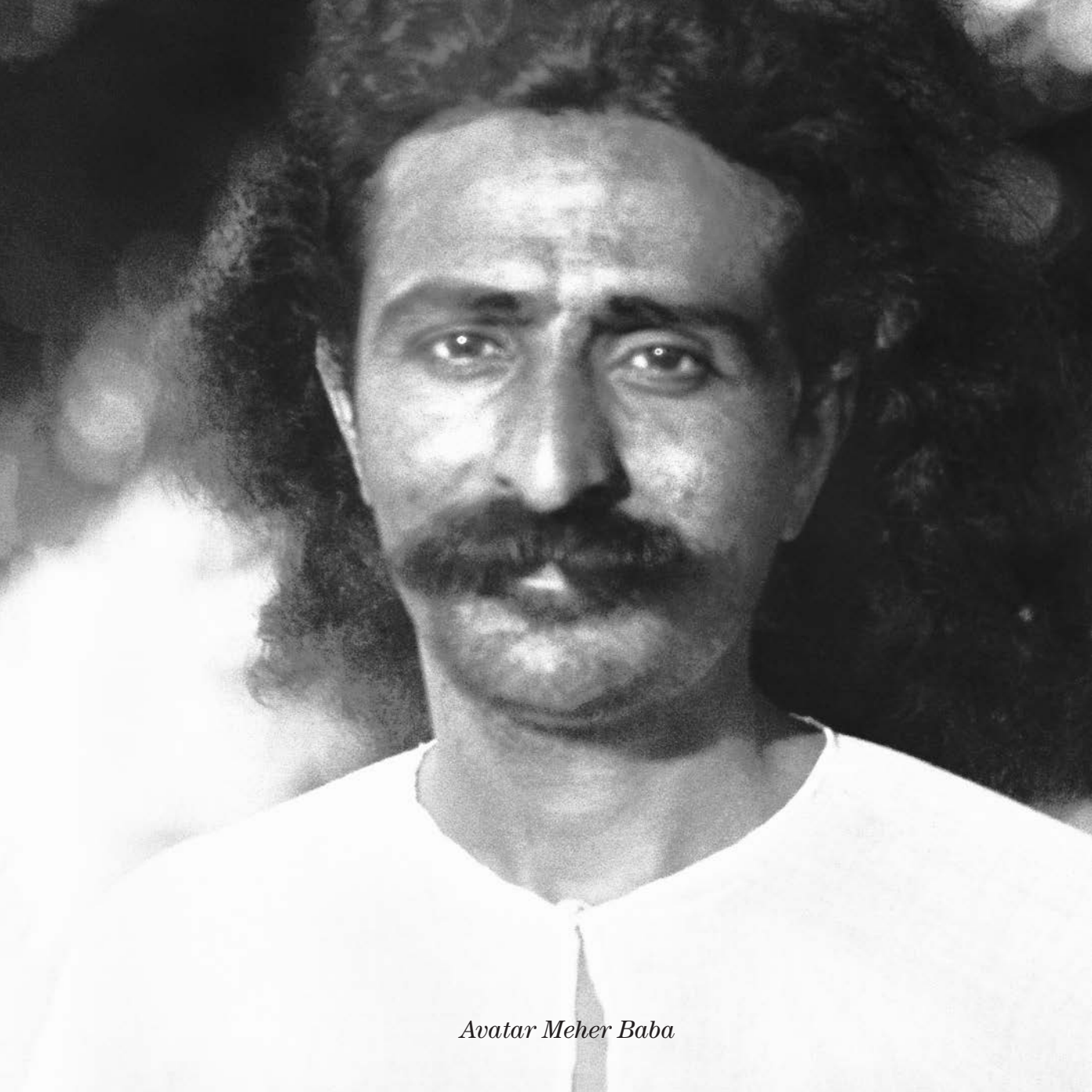
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God-Brother



Avatar Meher Baba

God-Brother

**Stories from my Childhood
with Meher Baba**

Mani S. Irani

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Illustrated by Wodin

Sheriar Foundation

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Author's Note:

*My special appreciation for Jane Barry Haynes' beautiful painting of
Baba and me, reproduced on the back cover of this book with
her permission, and for Anne Giles' patient encouragement
over the years, which has finally prompted me to
put these stories in book form.*

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*This book I place
where it belongs:
at the lotus feet of my
God & Brother
Meher Baba*



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Preface

To you, my universal family in Meher Baba's timeless Love, I present this bouquet of true stories. Walking in the garden of my childhood memories I have plucked thirty-five stories for your pleasure, each bearing a singular fragrance.

Because I am writing about my childhood with Baba, it is natural that children will relate to this book in a special way. But my book is not limited to age. The ageless message these stories carry is for all who are children at heart.

With Beloved Baba's grace, writing these stories has been amazingly easy. Knowing that your eyes will look only into the heart of a story, and not get distracted by questions about dates and place, has helped a lot. As I like to point out, if something happened in 1927 and I think it happened in 1928, it doesn't change the happening itself, does it?

I mention this because Baba books contradict each other in the matter of dates and things, and even the mandali do so when telling stories in Mandali Hall. You may notice that some dates and details given by me in this book differ from the ones I gave some time ago while recounting these same stories on tape or videotape.

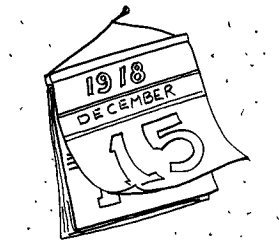
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All I can say is that telling a story off the cuff and writing it down with forethought are very different things. I remember my teacher always telling the class (in her very nasal voice), “Now children, think before you ink.” Well, before writing down these stories in *God-Brother* I have done a lot of thinking, as well as a good bit of research. That is to say, I have researched my old recollections and records to make this narrative as accurate as possible.

As for writing a preface, I was told it was a difficult thing to do. But this one has sailed along quite smoothly, like a happy duck on a blue lake. It’s been just like chatting with you, which I love doing. I can go on and on but I mustn’t, because the stories in here are impatient to welcome you to their wonderful world of long ago. So, how to stop? Let’s do what we used to do on Mehera’s porch when the pilgrims sat around her, long past lunchtime. Let’s all arise, and standing before Baba’s portrait call aloud three times:

“AVATAR MEHER BABA ki JAI!!!”





God-Brother

Can you imagine not remembering your first meeting with Baba? Well, I'm afraid I don't! I don't remember because I was only a few minutes old when I first met Meher Baba.

I was born on 15th December 1918 in David Sassoon Hospital in Poona, where Baba was born twenty-four years before. Being a girl after a line of boys and appearing on the scene some four years after my youngest brother, I was a much-welcomed child.

I never got tired of hearing my mother tell the story of my first meeting with Baba. "Tell me, tell me," I would beg her. "How did it happen?"

Baba's name was Merwan, but the family called Him Merog, an endearment in Dari, the language our family usually conversed in at

home.* And Mother would say that when I was born, Merog was right there at the hospital. He was the first to hear the news when the nurse came out to say, “It’s a girl.” At this, He hurried over to where I was and picked me up, cuddled me, and held me close to Him. Since a Zoroastrian newborn is never handled until it is washed, my mother called out excitedly from her bed, “No, no, Merog, don’t touch her! Put her down! She’s not been washed yet!”

How I wish I could remember those hugs I got from Baba as soon as I was born!



*Dari is a dialect commonly spoken in the villages of Iran. It is also said to have been the court language of Persia long ago.

However, I do remember childhood times with Baba from when I was three years old. And as far back as memory can go, I knew that Baba was God and He was my brother, both at the same time. Nobody had to tell me that. I knew it as naturally as a child knows a candy.

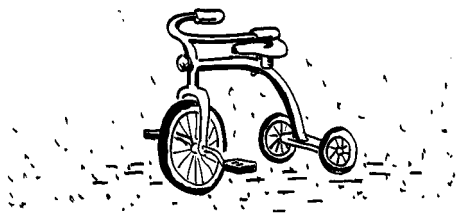
It was very simple really. Baba was my brother, who happened to be God; or He was God, who happened to be my brother.

I was never modest about this fact, never. I'd hear my Catholic friends talking about their godmothers and their godfathers, and I'd tell myself, "No one, but no one, has a God-Brother. I'm the only girl in the whole world who has a God-Brother!"

I'd also ask Mother to tell me what happened when Merwan left home for good and started His life as Meher Baba. She said that the last thing He did was to rock my cradle and say how very fortunate I was.

I'd make Mother repeat it again and again. "What did He say, Mother? What did He say about me when He was leaving home?"

So she would repeat, "Rocking your cradle, He turned to me and said, 'She's so very fortunate!'" Then Mother would look wistful and add, "Yes, Mani, you really are very fortunate, but not for me—because after you came, my Merwan left." My mother loved me very much, and I loved her. But this remark from her would make me realise how much she loved her Son above all, and that always made me very happy.



The Tricycle

*E*ven as a child I knew that Baba's Love was the most important thing in the whole world, more important than everything else. For me, Baba came first. Family, friends, pets, toys were graded second or third according to my mood of the hour. But Baba was always first.

Even so, there were times when Baba had to remind me of this fact. There were instances in my childhood when a stray longing for some exciting article beyond my reach would cloud my priority. Then Baba would show me, in His own dear way, that it is only His Love that really matters. Coming down to the level of a child He would make it a game and a lesson in one. A hard lesson, stamped indelibly on the fabric of my

life. An intricate game, played only with the few He accepts as His disciples.

One memory of such an instance revolves around a tricycle. With all the passion of a child, I coveted a neighbour's tricycle. In its three little wheels my baby heart got so entangled that I forgot for a while Who came first!

This happened when I was not yet four years old. I was in Poona, living in Baba-House with my parents and my brothers Beheram and Adi. Baba was in Bombay at Manzil-e-Meem, which was the first training ground for His disciples. My brother Jal was with Him.

Mother would always take me to be with Baba wherever He was stationed. Father would stay behind, taking care of home and shop. I was always a good excuse for Mother to visit her Son, for she also longed to be with Him. So, when Baba was in Manzil-e-Meem in Bombay, Mother took me there for a visit.

Shortly before this, one of the little boys in our neighbourhood had gotten a tricycle. I and my little friends had never seen one before, and the thought of riding it was very exciting. We would beg for a little ride, but the dreadful boy kept shouting, "No, no." He wouldn't even let us touch it!

Day by day, my dream of having a tricycle kept growing. It grew bigger

and bigger until it blotted out everything else. On the way to Manzil-e-Meem with Mother all I could think of was the tricycle. I kept telling myself, "I'll ask Baba for a tricycle. He'll give me a tricycle."

As a child, whenever I'd get to Baba, I'd run straight to Him, fast. Baba would be there with open arms and gather me in. He would pick me up, cuddle me, play with me, and hold me on His lap. Even as a child, I knew how lucky I was!

So here I was at Manzil-e-Meem seated on Baba's lap, and I told Him, "My birthday is coming soon."

"Oh," said Baba, beaming. "Your birthday? Great!" Then some more cuddling and He said, "What would you like for your birthday?"

That's just what I was waiting for. "A tricycle," I replied.

"Done," said Baba. "A tricycle is what you'll get."

I pouted, "But You'll forget."

Baba looked very surprised. "Forget?" He said. "When you love someone, how can you forget? I promise you I won't forget."

Still that wasn't enough for me. Every little girl has a bit of woman in her, and I was going to make very, very sure that I was going to get that tricycle.

There is an Indian equivalent of "Cross my heart and hope to die." For that, you hold the skin of your neck (throat) between thumb and



Here's me on my fourth birthday. I have a beaded cap, a silk dress with embroidered border, a gold necklace and bangles, a satin bow in my hair, and a big question in my heart, "Does Baba love me?"

forefinger and say “Kassam,” which means “I swear.” You swear by whatever is precious to you. You swear by your religion, by your mother, by your beard. You swear by that which you hold most dear, at the risk of losing it if you break the promise. So you see, nobody could break such a promise.

The usage of Kassam was customary in our family, and Kassam is what I wanted to have from Baba. So I kept playing coy, saying “You’ll forget.” I kept pushing gently till in the end He said, “Kassam,” while holding the skin at His throat in a strong pinch. “I swear I won’t forget. I swear by a hen!”

At last I was satisfied. Baba’s promise was sealed by the act of Kassam, and the hen was witness to it.

My next memory is being at home in Poona, and my birthday is coming up very soon. There are only a few days left. I can think of nothing but the tricycle. Every time somebody comes to the door, I get excited. “It’s the tricycle,” I think. “It’s Jal or someone with the tricycle from Baba.” I would run to the door before my mother could get there. But it wasn’t the tricycle. It was the milkman, or the bread man, or a friend, or a neighbour. It was never the tricycle.

My fourth birthday was celebrated with much rejoicing. But it meant nothing to me. I only remember feeling miserable during the whole thing. But now it was not because of the tricycle. Suddenly the tricycle didn’t

seem to matter any more. I was miserable because Baba didn't love me. He said that if you love someone you never forgot. But He did, He forgot! So, He didn't love me! I didn't want the wretched tricycle. All I wanted was Baba to love me, and He didn't, He didn't...Boo-hoo-hoo....

The next thing I remember is Mother and I at Meherabad. Baba was there waiting when we arrived. He had sent a horse carriage to bring us over from Ahmednagar railway station. Instead of running to greet Him, I just stood there, stiff and cold. It was Baba who came over to me and picked me up. I was still rigid. He sat me down on His knee. No response. He tickled me. No laughter.

He appeared puzzled, and asked, "What's the matter?"

I didn't answer. I knew that He knew what was the matter. But He pretended to be ignorant and said, "Somebody must've done something to you. I wonder who it could be. Was it this one?"

"No."

"Was it that one?"

"No."

"I know," Baba said, looking relieved that He had solved the mystery. "I know. It was Mother. She scolded you or perhaps even spanked you. I'll have it out with her!"

"No, not Mother," I said, trying not to sob.

“Then who?” Baba asked.

I turned round on His lap and stuck an accusing finger on His chest.

“You!” I said.

Baba looked surprised. “Me?! What have I done?”

Then of course it all came out, the accusations and the tears. “You don’t love me,” I sobbed. “You said if you love someone, you don’t forget. And You forgot! You don’t love me!”

Baba held me to Him while I ranted, “You promised me the tricycle, and You never sent it. You even swore that You would remember. You swore by a hen!”

Baba calmed me. Then He set me down and, with His arm around me, He told me, “You know I love you. Always remember that. It is true I promised you that I would not forget, and I did not forget. And I did swear by a hen. But do you know what happened to the hen?”

“No,” said His wide-eyed little sister.

“The hen died,” said Baba. “Before you could have the tricycle she died. So you see, it isn’t My fault; it is the fault of the hen!”

A child’s logic has wings which are unclipped by common reasoning. Baba’s explanation made perfect sense to me. When Baba had promised me the tricycle, He had sworn by a hen. When the hen died, the promise died also. How can you keep a promise which does not exist any more?

And how could Baba help it if the hen He had sworn by died before my birthday? Yes, it was all the fault of that horrible HEN! Oh the joy and relief. Baba had not forgotten. Baba loved me!

I never got the tricycle. I never again wanted one. All I wanted was Baba's Love and I had it. The tricycle episode showed me that being loved by Baba is more important than anything else in the whole world, including tricycles!

A lesson-game with Baba keeps growing like a young tree and bears blossoms and fruit in time. Years after the tricycle storm had passed away it dawned on me that Baba had NOT broken His promise. When Baba had sealed His promise to me with a "Kassam," all He had said was, "I swear I will not forget." It was *I* who assumed He was referring to the tricycle.

No, Baba did not forget. He loved me, loved me enough to make me remember through this lesson-game that HE COMES FIRST!



Flying a Kite

*I*ndian kites are made of flimsy coloured paper and thin strips of bamboo, attached to what seems like miles and miles of fine string. Fixing the string to a kite is an art which requires a precise sense of balance. A number of times I have squatted beside my God-Brother watching His beautiful fingers fix string to a new kite before flying it.

One of my earliest memories of Meherabad is of Baba flying a kite. I was perhaps five years old. Baba was still talking, and what you could see of Meherabad was mainly the old military barracks and water tank.

Whenever Mother and I came from Poona to be with Baba, we would get down from the train at Ahmednagar station and come by “tonga” (horse carriage) to Meherabad. As soon as we reached there, I would jump down and run off to find Baba. Seeing Him, I would race as fast as I could with my little legs to get to Him. Baba would pick me up, hug me, and play with me.

At the time of this story, when we arrived at Meherabad, I looked and looked for Baba but couldn't find Him. At last I saw Him way in the distance, standing in the wide open grounds of Meherabad, His beautiful hair and white sadra flowing in the wind.

Baba was flying a kite. The only person around Him was Padri, standing a little behind Baba, holding the "firkee" (a long wooden reel on which kite string is wound). The firkee was revolving incredibly fast between Padri's hands, as he kept releasing more and more string for Baba's kite. "Whrrrr...", went the reel, spinning faster and faster.

The string was also racing through Baba's hands. As Baba let out more and more string, the kite climbed higher and higher, till it looked like a little red bird way up in the heavens. It was so high that its string made a perfect arch as it met Baba's hand.

Baba looked down at me. "You want to fly it?" He asked.

"Oh, yes!" I said. I'd always envied my brother Adi flying kites with his friends in Poona, but I never got to fly one by myself.

"Here, hold it," Baba said, handing me the string. I held it tightly with both hands. As I clung to it, I was swaying with the force of the wind and the incredible pull of the arched string. After a few moments, Baba took over again. I was most elated and showed off to the others how I had flown Baba's kite.



How did Baba look when He let me fly His kite? Just like you see Him in this picture. My heart soars every time I look at it!

When I grew older, I realised that Baba alone had been flying the kite, while He made me believe I was doing it. Behind my hands were His hands holding the string, unseen by me. While I seemed to be steering the kite as it moved this way and that, it was really Baba who was controlling it all the time.

It continues to be like that. One thinks, “I’m doing this. I’m in charge of that.” But silently in the background, it is really Baba who is doing it. Baba alone is in charge—always.





The Leg That Went to Heaven

*B*efore joining Baba at thirteen years of age, I spent my life in Poona with my parents in the House-with-the-Well, now known as “Baba-House.”

At Baba-House we had a pet goat. Mother named her Sundri which means “pretty girl.” She was that, white and tall and graceful, with a little bell tied round her neck. When she was not standing by the well in our courtyard watching Father water the garden, she was all over the lanes keeping an eye on the neighbours. If she wandered too far, Mother would call out to her from the entrance of our home: “Soondree.” Sundri would bleat in reply and race down the long lane to Mother. Sundri was a special pet in Baba-House.

Perhaps that is why the heroine of my favourite childhood story was a goat. I made Mother repeat the story many times, and I would like to share it with you.

Here it is:

Once upon a time there was a “mullah” (one versed in the Islamic religion). He was a good and pious man who regularly attended the mosque. He did not lie or cheat or steal. He was very proud of it.

Then there was this bad man, known to be a rascal. The rascal never prayed. He stole, he lied, he cheated. He knew it was wrong, and therefore he was humble.

One day the mullah caught the rascal stealing. He caught him red-handed and was dragging him to the “kaazi” (judge) for punishment.

On the way, they saw a goat tethered to a pole. In front of her, but just out of reach, was a fresh bundle of green grass. The goat was hungry and was straining with all her might to get at that grass, the rope round her neck choking her.

The good man saw this, but he was in such a hurry to punish the bad man that he couldn't stop to move the grass closer to the animal. The only solution would be to kick the grass bundle nearer to the goat. But as everyone in India knows (or ought to know), it is a great sin to kick any kind of food. The mullah was too pious to commit such a sin.

The bad man also took in the situation at a glance. He couldn't stop either, because he was being pulled along very fast by the mullah. But as he passed by, he managed to give a good kick to the grass bundle. It fell right beside the goat. The goat began eating it with great relish.

The bad man had done a good deed. Or rather, one of his legs had done a good deed—the leg which helped to feed a hungry goat.

“All who are good go to heaven,” said my mother. “So, this ‘good’ leg of the bad man went straight to heaven.”

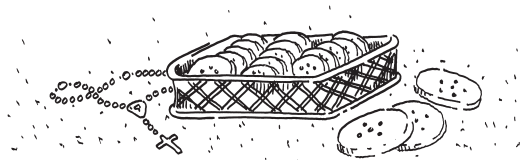
I could see that good leg, bright and golden, dancing happily in heaven. But I was very worried about his other leg.

“What happened to the other leg?” I'd ask Mother. She'd try to ignore my question, but I'd follow her around, pulling at her skirt and asking, “What happened to the other leg, Mother?” And she'd tell me, “I don't know.”

When I'd ask how come she didn't know, she'd say, “Because the other leg is not in the story.”

I like to think the two legs eventually got together, perhaps in heaven. Anything is possible by Baba's grace.

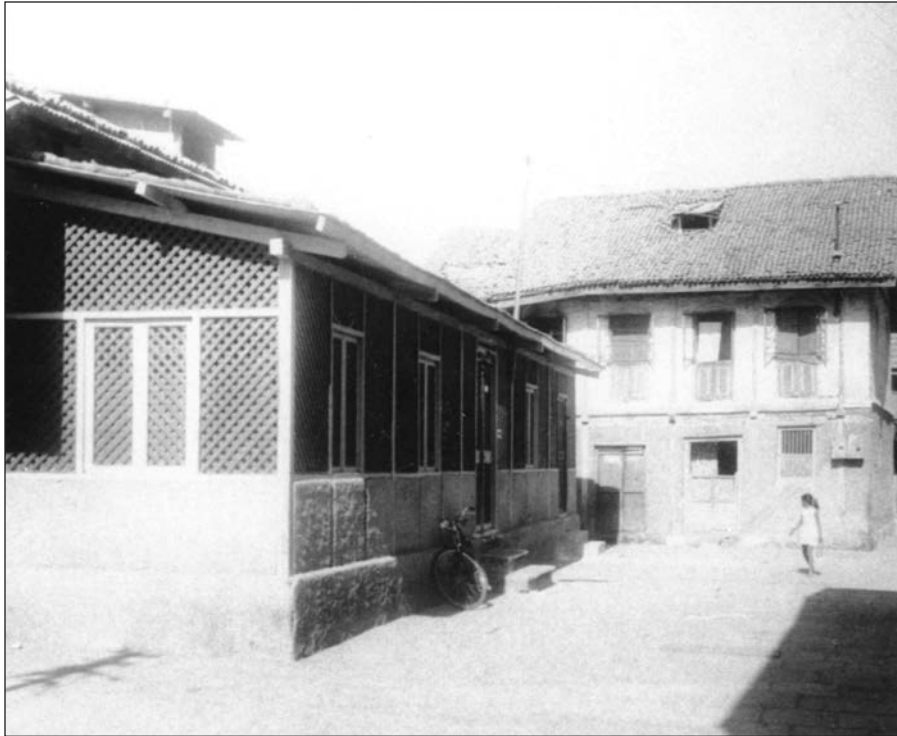




Moholla

*U*_p to the time I left my parents' home to be forever with Baba, I lived with them in a moholla in Poona. I loved our moholla and all the people (or most of them) in it. There were Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists—a mini-U.N. you might call it. And as we children played and argued together, we learnt to talk in different languages.

What's a "moholla"? Hedged between busy streets, a moholla is a quieter locality housing middle-class and lower middle-class families. It has all kinds of interesting lanes and spaces where children play and housewives bargain. It is a sort of private neighbourhood that you can think of as your very own.



The lattice-work which you see in this picture is part of Baba-House, or the House-with-the-Well, in Poona. Here Baba lived as a young man with His family.

The widespread development in the surrounding areas of Poona that we see today has somehow bypassed the Moholla, leaving its old buildings almost untouched. Here one can truly say time has stood still.

In the old days it was called an alley, but now I'm told the word "alley" has an ugly meaning. So let's use the Indian word moholla.

People living in a moholla such as ours are like a joint family, quite heartwarming and caring. In a moholla anybody's business is everybody's business. If one receives good news, everybody helps to celebrate. If a husband beats a wife, everybody is up in arms. None of our neighbours were rich, except in heart. And what with all the weddings and funerals, fights and festivals, life was always interesting where I grew up. Most interesting were the people, but if I were to write about all the characters in our moholla, that would be another whole book.

A number of the moholla residents whom I knew as a child were also known to Baba when He was staying with the family. The characters He recalled years later even included vendors who passed through our lanes selling their wares: samosas, ice-cream, coconut candy, poppadums, and whatnot. Baba specially remembered Gulam Hussein, the sherbet walla with the big moustache. Gulam Hussein pushed his wares in a gay little handcart, ringing the big brass bell hanging from its top. "Clang, clang" went Gulam Hussein's bell, and out ran all the children of the neighbourhood and surrounded him.

I was one of the children surrounding him. He would fix crushed ice at the end of a stick in whatever shape you ordered and then pour sweet



Let's peek through the trellis and meet the family at home. You see Father, Mother, Jal, Adi, and myself. Beheram is behind the camera taking this picture. It is the only picture I have where I'm wearing a solar topee, the good old British hat which I speak of in another part of the book.

Chandri, the maid servant, is standing in front of a wooden stand. On it are ceramic pots with delicate vines tended to by Father and also elegant bottles containing coloured water. This arrangement by Father held a special fascination for me.

syrup over it in different colours. I would suck fast on my iced peacock and beg for more syrup. “Please, please, Gulam Hussein, a little more green on the tail, just a little more orange on the head, please, please....” After a while he always gave in. Nice man—I’m so glad Baba remembered him.

And there was Mowshi, a Goanese Catholic, whom Baba especially remembered. “Mowshi” means aunt (mother’s sister), and she was Mowshi to everyone. She was said to be 110 years old and believed to have grown another set of teeth in her old age—no, I’m not kidding. Perhaps they said this because Mowshi was known to chew the toughest meat, bones and all.

This little woman lived in one shabby room near to my aunt’s house and cooked her own food in a tiny kitchen. Her life was ruled by the alarm clock and by Jesus. She had His pictures everywhere, and she wore a big rosary with a heavy cross dangling from it. And please note: she had a tin of biscuits on the shelf in her room.

Although Mowshi lived on the charity of the Catholic church, she was demanding in her needs. If she found the bread stale or the meat not pink enough, she would let the Reverend Father know exactly what she thought of the bread and the meat—and of him!

We children were enchanted with this very, very old lady. We were

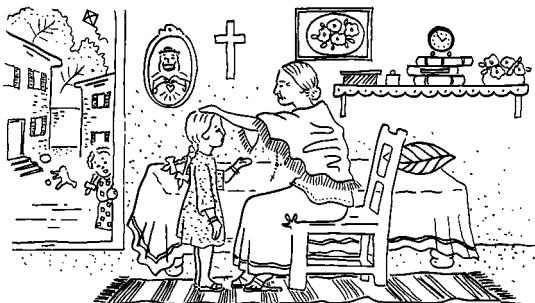
used to grown-ups of all ages, but Mowshi was definitely an overgrown-up!

Mowshi was very fond of me because (she told others) I was very pious. I'll tell you why she said that. It's because every time I saw her, I asked her to bless me. Her eyes would light up. She would fumble with her rosary and mumble a prayer while she blessed me with that cross. I would stand perfectly still while she blessed me, but my eye was glued to the biscuit tin on the shelf. I knew that after the blessing was over, Mowshi would reach for the tin and give me a biscuit from it. On a lucky day I would get blessed several times.

One Sunday afternoon after blessing me, she forgot to give me the biscuit. Oh heavens! What was I to do? How to remind her? Baba, Baba, Baba, please help. I got the answer immediately. Turning to her I said, "Mowshi, I want to be blessed once more."

Mowshi was thrilled. "Again? Oh my good child!"

After this second blessing, her hand automatically moved up to the tin and—oh, the relief—I got my biscuit.





The Forgotten Toy

*H*ow about telling you of my first meeting with Mehera? It was at Baba-House, Poona, when I was about five years old. Baba was on a visit home to our parents and had brought Mehera along.

Mehera told me later—many years later—that Baba gave her a toy and told her to give it to His little sister, whom she would meet for the first time. Mehera remembered doing so but could not recall what the toy was. She asked me, “Mani, do you remember what that toy was which Baba gave me to give to you as a child?” No doubt she felt that my love for toys would surely make me remember that first gift.

“No, Mehera,” I replied, “I don’t remember the toy. And I don’t remember anyone else who had come along with Baba and you. All I remember is you, as you stood by the well one morning, combing your



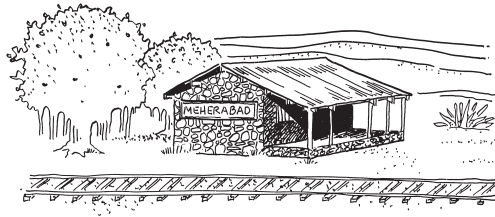
No camera took a picture of Mehera as she stood by the well when we first met. But this picture, taken at Meherabad years later, most nearly matches my first memory of her as I gazed in wonder at the vision of grace and beauty named Mehera.

hair. I could not take my eyes away from your beautiful hair.”

Mehera blushed happily as I said that. She knew her hair was beautiful. Falling below her waist in gentle waves, full and soft, her brown hair shone with glints of honey. She loved beauty for beauty’s sake and was proud of her hair. Early in her life with Baba, while still in her teens, she and the other women mandali had to wear white bandannas on their heads, which totally covered their hair. Here was a vanity happily given up by Mehera for Baba’s sake. She who loved beauty had already gained the most beautiful One as her Beloved!



And here’s a picture of me at the place and age when I first met Mehera. My heart’s instant recognition is clearly mirrored in my eyes and smile as I look shyly at her.



Post Office

*I*n 1925 the women mandali were staying in the Post Office at Meherabad. It was so called because that's exactly what it was, a post office. It was part of the overall military base set up there by the British during the First World War, which later became Baba's settlement called Meherabad.

The Post Office was a stone building close to the railway lines which divide upper Meherabad from lower Meherabad. For a six-year-old, it is a lot of fun to be running about in the open before bedtime. I loved brushing my teeth and washing my face close to the railway lines in the dark, watching a train go by. I could clearly see the firemen feeding coal into

the steam engine with enormous shovels. The engine would emit sparks from the deep pit of burning coal. Every now and then a spark would dart out onto my hands or face—that was special fun!

Watching the long line of compartments go by, I would wonder if the people on the train could see, as I used to see while passing by in a train bound for Poona, the single word M E H E R A B A D painted in huge letters on the end wall of the Post Office. Whenever I passed by it, I would lean so far out of the train window, waving excitedly, that Mother had to hang on to me with both hands.

Staying in the Post Office with Mehera and the other women mandali was happiness complete. We were short on comfort and food, and there were no beds or furniture, but being at Meherabad with Baba was fullness overflowing.

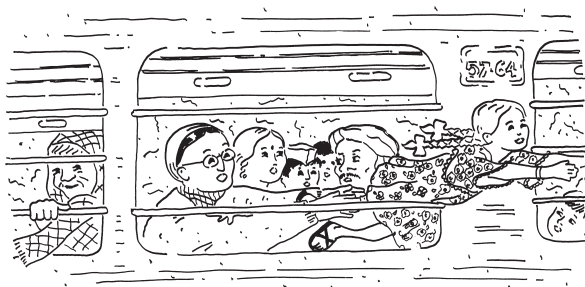
“Post Office” holds many special memories for me as a child. One of them is of Mehera combing and braiding my long hair, which would get all tangled after it had been washed. She made this process so painless that I would be happily munching a “chapatti” (unleavened bread) and talk-talk-talking at the same time.

Another very special memory is waking up in the middle of the night and hearing the booming calls of “ALL WELL” echoing on and on in the darkness outside. Meherabad was a very isolated and wild area in those

days. For the safety of its residents, Baba had three watchmen employed to keep watch at night. Stationed at different points of the property, the three would call out to each other at intervals that all was well.

Their calls of “ALL WELL” would roll and echo across the vast grounds from point to point as if some three-cornered game was being played in space. The first watchman would declare in a long drawn-out singsong boom, “NUMBER ONE, ALL WELL.” From a long distance away the second one would respond in the same manner, “NUMBER TWO, ALL WELL.” The third one would then boom out, “NUMBER THREE, ALL WELL.”

This went on all night, every night. Waking up in the dark and hearing these calls, I would snuggle into my blanket and go off to sleep again, feeling very safe and cared for in Baba’s Love. It was as if Baba was telling all the world, “Don’t worry. All is well.”





Bull's-Eye

One of the things I learned at a very early age is that you can't tightly hold onto Baba's damaan with one hand and just as tightly hold on to your desires with the other hand, both at the same time. My lesson was: with Baba you can't have it both ways.

Mother and I were at Meherabad. I was not yet seven years old. One day there was a special programme of "qawalli" (Eastern spiritual) singing arranged for Baba. It was held in some sort of a hall, and His followers from Ahmednagar were also there. Everyone sat on the floor, the men and women in separate sections. Baba was seated at the end of the hall on a "gaadi," i.e., a long and low wooden seat like the one you see at upper Meherabad under the old shed.

I was in the habit of being wherever Baba was, whether He was with the men mandali or with the women mandali. As a child, you see, I could be



There are few pictures of me as a child, and most of them are in the pages of this book. The picture you see here was taken at Meherabad on a special occasion, perhaps Baba's birthday. Mother is standing behind Baba, and over her right shoulder you can see Mehera, eyes downcast, seeing only her Beloved. To the extreme right is me, standing in front of Adi's sister Piroja, who liked to dress my hair with satin bows.

in either place. Before the qawalli programme started, I said to myself, “Hmmm. Wouldn’t it be nice if at the same time I had a candy in my mouth?”

Now in those days we used to have these large English peppermint candies known as bull’s-eye. They looked like pretty marbles with fine stripes on them. I thought, “Well, there’s just time to rush and get my candy and then come and enjoy Baba’s company and the music.”

So, instead of going straight to Baba, I went and opened my little tin trunk, got out a candy, popped it into my mouth, and then walked over to where Baba was holding court. As usual, Baba cuddled and petted me. He said, “Sit down next to Me.” So I sat down on the floor next to His gaadi, facing the others.

Whenever lovely things like this happened to me, I was keenly aware that everybody else was watching me and (so I imagined) feeling jealous of what I was receiving from Baba. They would no doubt be saying, “My, look what Mani is getting! Wish we could be in her place.”

For a while Baba patted my hair as I sat on the floor beside Him. Then He gently pushed my head onto His lap, holding it down with one hand and marking time to the music with His other hand. Now I could imagine a gasp from the others. “This! Mani’s getting this too!” I was very happy. I had Baba and I had candy—just like in the film, “All this and heaven too.”



This is an all-men gathering. So what! It isn't going to stop little me from being near Baba, and here's proof.

In this picture at Lonavala, I can be seen way back, hanging over the railing to get a better view of Baba. Standing next to me is Padri, the "tall one," as Baba referred to him by hand gesture.

Baba continued to lovingly hold my head down in His lap. It was so wonderful—for a short time. Suddenly I realised that things were not what they seemed to be. It wasn't such ecstasy any more. Some very agonizing thing was happening to me. The big candy in my mouth was melting fast, and the sweet saliva was collecting inside my mouth. Of course I would not push Baba's hand away, and I could not swallow the saliva because my head was at such an awkward angle in His lap. It was horrible—worse than being at the dentist!

I couldn't concentrate on Baba. I didn't hear the singing and the music. All my thoughts were on the candy and on the liquid collecting relentlessly in my mouth, while I silently shouted within me, "Oh, it's getting to be too much. But perhaps I can hold it a little longer? A few more seconds. Oh dear, now it's much too much! I'll have to swallow, but how? Help, Baba, please help!" Then gulp after painful gulp, and oh what a relief—until it started all over again....

Just when the candy was finished, Baba raised His hand. I sat up and looked at Him. He had such an incredibly innocent smile on His face. I had imbibed the silent lesson. I promised myself, "Never again will I go to Baba with a candy in my mouth. Just Baba. Or at the same time."





Little Mug

“*M*asa” means uncle, the husband of one’s mother’s sister. Rustom Masa was Baba’s uncle and was also one of His earliest mandali. He was known simply as Masaji (pronounced maasajee).

Old Masaji was quite a character. He looked fierce like a pirate but had a soft heart and a loud humour. As a child I was always complaining that he was being very tricky, and he complained that I was always bossing him. We were good friends, and he was fun. But when I thought he had cheated me, I was ready for a fight. I’d pound his big stomach with my little fists—I was just old enough to reach his stomach.

We were at Meherabad, and the men mandali lived in what is now known as the Old Dharmshala. Every afternoon they would be standing in a line with their aluminum glasses in hand, for Baba to pour their tea.

Here was the tea all ready in this huge aluminum kettle. And here was Baba, slim and delicate-looking, His slender hands lifting the heavy kettle with ease and grace, pouring out a glassful of tea for each one in that line.

I was in that line too. I would never want to miss anything which concerned Baba! I was standing next to Masaji, holding by the handle a battered little enamel mug which he had found somewhere. I also received tea from Baba.

One day it dawned on me that I was being cheated out of my full share, cheated by Masaji, who gave me a small enamel mug for my tea instead of a nice big aluminum glass like everybody else had. Turning round I started pummelling his stomach. "You cheated, you cheated," I cried. "You cheated me out of my share of tea from Baba. The mug you gave me is small."

His stomach undented, he looked at me with a roguish twinkle and asked, "You want 'big'?"

"Yes," I replied fiercely, "I want 'big'."

"From tomorrow you will get 'big'," said Masaji. And next day I held in my hands a big aluminum glass, one just like the men mandali had.

As soon as Baba poured tea in my glass and swiftly passed by, I realised the mistake that my greed had led me into. I couldn't hold onto

that aluminum glass of tea, it had become so very hot! Silently screaming, “Baba, Baba, Baba,” I somehow managed to get the glass down to the ground without spilling the tea. And then I whirled round and began pounding Masaji’s stomach. “You knew, you knew, and yet you gave me the big thing.”

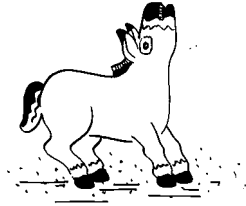
Bending over with a wide grin, he asked, “So, you want ‘small’?”

“Yes, I want ‘small’.”

“Then from tomorrow you will get ‘small’.”

I did, and next day as I stood in line holding my little mug by its handle, I could have said, “Blessed are the little ones who are content with little things.”





The Donkey Race

Games have always been a part of our life with Baba. As a child at Meherabad, I loved seeing Baba play games and hold races and little competitions. There were even singing contests, speeches, and skits. Baba gave prizes to the winners.

One of the games was needle threading. There were four players at one end of the field, each with a needle in hand. Their four partners at the other end were each holding a thread. I was one of the latter. My brother Adi was my partner at the other end, holding a needle. Like the others, I had to race to my partner, thread the needle and run back with it. I got a prize from Baba, plus a hug.

There's one race I especially remember because it was so funny and Baba enjoyed it so much: a donkey race!

Some donkeys had been brought, and the men mandali had to ride

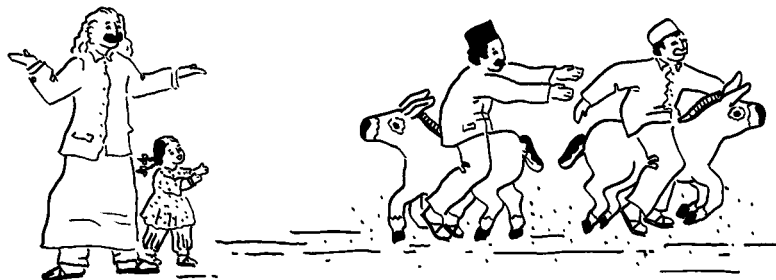
them. Gustadji and Pendu were there and also Behramji, who was nicknamed Bua Saheb. Bua Saheb was from Iran (at that time called Persia) and one of Baba's earliest disciples.

In Iran, donkeys are used more for riding on than they are in India. Here they are used mainly for carrying burdens. Bua Saheb, knowing all about riding donkeys, was therefore cock-sure that he would win. The others had no experience and were clumsy. When they tried to get on the donkeys, they would slip off the side and have to get back on again.

"This is child's play for me," Bua Saheb bragged. "I'll win by lengths. You'll see."

At last all the men were seated on the donkeys. There was a starting line and a finishing line. Each rider had a wisp of straw to urge his donkey on and make it go. Then Baba clapped His hands, the signal for the race to begin.

"Come on, come on," the men told the donkeys, making all sorts of encouraging noises. "Hoaa, chkhk, come on, come on," they called, waving their arms and prodding the donkeys with their heels. But no matter



how hard they tried to hurry the donkeys along, the animals paid little attention to them.

And what about Bua Saheb, the expert? He was briskly trotting ahead. The others were way behind. Bua Saheb was already nearing the finishing line. And then, just a few yards short of it his donkey stopped! It dug its hoofs into the earth and would not move.

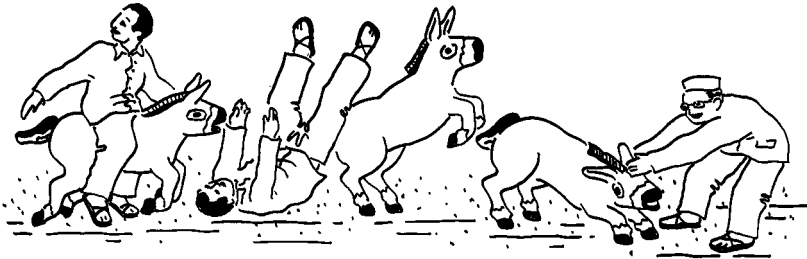
Bua Saheb tried every trick of the trade. He knew them all, but nothing doing. His donkey wasn't going to budge.

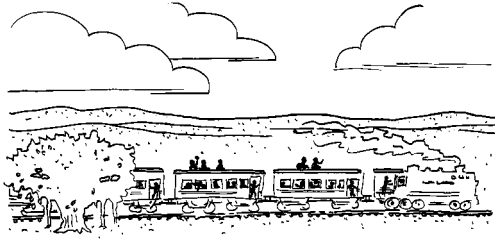
In the meantime, the straddlers and stragglers were still struggling along. "Come on now. Hi! Hoaa," they would shout, now and then slipping off their donkeys and getting back on again. "Go on now, go on."

Suddenly, Bua Saheb's donkey turned round and raced right back to the starting line! Nobody could believe it!

Baba was chuckling hard. "Well, how come?" He asked Bua Saheb. "What happened?"

Nobody knew who won. Of the remaining men, one or the other somehow crossed the finishing line. But we do know that Bua Saheb never again showed off his knowledge of donkeys.





Holidays with Baba

All the mandali had orders from Baba, “big” orders which were difficult to carry out. I was very proud that I too was given orders by Him, “little” orders which were very precious to His little sister.

What were these little orders? I must do my lessons. That was an order. I must write to Him once a week. That was an order. I must listen to Mother. That was an order. I must not run away from home to be with Baba but come with Mother only during school holidays. That was the most difficult order. It made me wish that my school gave twelve-month holidays!

I was educated in a Catholic school, the Convent of Jesus and Mary

in Poona. Our school gave us long holidays twice a year. One was in winter around Christmas, and one was in the middle of summer. And there were short ones in between, like Michaelmas holidays. I spent them all with Baba. Mother would take me by train from Poona to wherever Baba was at the time—Bombay, Meherabad, Toka, Nasik.

These holidays with Baba were heavenly days for me. I was up in the clouds long before Mother and I started from home. At last when our train chugged out of Poona station, my heart would burst into song. As we picked up speed, I could also hear the train wheels sing in exciting rhythm, “Ba-ba, Ba-ba, Me-her-Ba-ba. Ba-ba, Ba-ba....”

And long before our train arrived at Ahmednagar station, I was leaning all the way out of the window to catch the first sight of the station’s name. Ah, there it was, way up on that huge water tank, painted in large letters: A H M E D N A G A R. Oh the joy, the thrill of it! I would not have been surprised if they had painted P A R A D I S E instead, because that’s where I had come. Where Baba was, was Paradise for me.

Everyone knows (even before Einstein pointed it out) that when you’re very happy, time runs by fast. My holidays with God in that heaven called Meherabad ended too soon.

When the time was nearing for me to go home again and to school again, I would feel and look miserable. Baba would give me extra love

and would tell me to be happy for His sake. My efforts to do so must have been quite funny, but the ones looking on were very kind and kept their faces solemn.

Back on the train with Mother, I kept comparing that journey we had made to Him from Poona with this journey we were making back to Poona. And I would sigh, “Oh, the difference!” How different even the train wheels sounded now. And what was there to see out the window? Nothing was interesting. “Nothing is right,” I’d say, “nothing is happy,” and a waterfall of tears would pour down my cheeks. This would go on and on. I selfishly nursed my misery without thinking of Mother or the others in that crowded third-class compartment.

One time when it must have reached a limit, Mother put on a sweet smile and said to me in Dari (so that the passengers wouldn’t understand), “Stop it, Mani. All these people are not looking at you while you’re crying away, they are looking at me! They think maybe I’m your cruel stepmother, and they are wondering what I’ve done to you!”

I looked up and around. Sure enough, every one of the passengers was glaring daggers at my poor mother. “What has she done to that dear child to make her cry so much?” they seemed to say.

I wiped away my tears and brought out a shaky smile. I don’t remember, but I like to think that I was more considerate from that time on.



Baba in Disguise

*D*uring my winter holidays in 1925, the year I was seven, Mother arranged for my Navjote to be performed at the “agyari” (Zoroastrian fire-temple) in Ahmednagar.

“Navjote” (literally meaning “New Light”) is the Zoroastrian thread ceremony, akin to the Christian confirmation. Usually when you reach the age of seven or nine, the ceremony is performed at the agyari by as many “dastoor” (priests) as you can afford to engage. The priests invest you with the pure white muslin garment called “sadra,” and tie around your waist the symbolic thread called “kusti.” You are now officially ordained a Zoroastrian. Usually the ceremony is followed by a banquet, which makes it quite a jolly affair for all.

Mother and I were with Baba in Meherabad, and I had just had my

seventh birthday. Mother said, “Well, now it’s time for your Navjote.” She had it all fixed. There was this lacy white dress made for me, and on such and such a day of the week I was to be taken to the agyari for my Navjote ceremony.

I didn’t like the idea at all. “Whatever for?” I protested loudly, “Baba is God Himself. Why should a silly priest do my Navjote? Baba should do it.”

Mother said, “Don’t talk nonsense. Merog may be God, but He’s certainly not a priest. Only a priest can perform Navjote.”

I went in tears to Baba and complained, but Baba said, “Mother is right, you know. I am God, but I’m not a priest. As she says, only a priest can perform Navjote.” I must have looked very crestfallen because then Baba added, “Do you think I will allow any old priest to perform your Navjote? Don’t you worry. Go along with Mother. It won’t be the priest; it will be Me. *I’ll* be performing your Navjote.”

This of course changed the whole thing, and I gladly got into the spirit of it. I put on my beautiful dress and went along very happily with Mother and friends to the agyari.

Two dastoors performed my Navjote ceremony. I stood before them on a little platform while they chanted the prayers. One dastoor was plump and short with a black beard, beady eyes, and a bulbous nose which wiggled while he chanted. The other one was very thin and had a

wispy white beard that moved up and down while he singsonged the prayers.

To this day, all I remember of my Navjote is looking from one to the other of these two priests and wondering, “Which one is Baba? Can it be this one? Goodness, no, this one’s so ugly. Look at his eyes and that awful nose. Is it the other one? Oh no. Look at his beard going flap, flap. No, it couldn’t be.” I kept staring hard at them both in turn, but neither looked at all like Baba.

I was so very disappointed and a little angry. The next thing I remember is being back at Meherabad and having it out with Baba. “You promised me you were going to do my Navjote. You promised,” I cried, “and you didn’t do it. You lied to me!”

Baba calmed me down and said, “I did not lie to you. Of course it was Me. I told you I would do your Navjote, and I did.”

“But you weren’t there! There were only the priests. I looked and looked, but I couldn’t see You.”

Baba said, “Naturally you couldn’t see Me. How could you, when I had a mask on?”

Ah! Everything fell into place, and my doubts vanished. I recalled how at Christmas time there would be someone in our neighbourhood dressed up as Father Christmas and we would wonder whose uncle was

playing the part. We didn't know, because he wore a mask.

Once again Baba had totally satisfied His kid sister. I went about happily telling everybody, "Baba did my Navjote you know, but He had on a mask." And to this day I wonder which of the two priests was Baba in disguise.

Of course now I realise that Baba's words weren't only to satisfy a child. They were the truth. After all, Baba is in everyone, but we don't recognize Him in all the masks He wears, do we?



God's Tiny Clothes

Around the time I was seven, I had my first dream of God. Although I knew my brother was God, I didn't really know what "Avatar" meant. This dream helped me to understand.

I dreamt that I was way up in the sky, sitting on a big, fluffy white cloud. I was sitting on the edge of this cloud, my legs dangling over the side.

Seated before me was this enormous Man, a tremendous Being. He didn't have a stitch of clothing on, but He didn't seem naked in the way that a human would. I knew this Being was God.

I was dressed in a lovely white lacy dress with a full skirt, and wore a pink bow in my hair. "I hope He notices my dress," I thought as I straightened the folds of my skirt.

He seemed friendly, so I asked Him, “Why haven’t You got any clothes on?”



He smiled and pointed over the edge of the cloud. I looked down. Stretched below us in space was a clothes-line. And on it, fastened with pegs, were tiny baby clothes. Diapers and smocks, little bonnets and socks, were hanging on that line in space.

I looked at them and knew that these were His clothes. There was

nobody else up here. This was God's place. This was God's clothes-line. So these baby clothes belonged to God.

I said to myself, "My goodness. He is so terribly big. How can He fit into these tiny little clothes? It must be so very uncomfortable for Him to get into them!"

As I thought this, I looked up at Him and saw that He was looking at me and nodding in agreement!

Then I heard a very clear voice in my head. It said, "Yes, I wear these clothes from time to time. I put them on when I come among you as man, in the guise of the smallest of the small."

And then there arose in me a wave of happy understanding. I sighed the deepest of sighs, so real that I actually heard the tail-end of the sigh as I woke up.



Memo and Bobo

Baba's Parents

As you know, Baba's parents are my parents. What you wouldn't know is what Sheriar and Shireen were like as persons, this man and this woman who were chosen to be the Avatar's parents. Here I will give you a few glimpses of their image, reflected through memories of my childhood with them. I wish my brothers Jal, Beheram, and Adi could have done the same.

As a rule, my brothers Merwan, Jamshed, Jal, Beheram, and Adi conversed with my parents in Dari. I did sometimes, more so with my father. Father knew little Gujarati, the language spoken by the Zoroastrians in India, and spoke it with an Irani accent. Mother spoke Gujarati fluently,

and when she recounted a story or a film she would enthrall her audience.

It was natural for my parents to address their children by Dari endearments: Merwan was Merog, Beheram was Vorom, and so on. In the same way, my parents were Shorog and Shireenog to each other. For us children, our mother was Memo and father was Bobo.

Memo and Bobo were very different from each other in every way. In age they were twenty-five years apart, and in temperament and outlook they were poles apart. But they made a perfect pair as parents for God on earth in this Advent.

Referring to His father, Baba said to us on several occasions, “There is no match for My father, no match for him in the whole wide world. That is why I chose to be born to him.”

The last time Baba said this was in 1968 at Guruprasad. Baba’s hand gestures were swift and His eyes were soft with love, as He spoke thus of Sheriar, His Bobo.

I was told that Sheriar left his home and family in Persia, at the age of ten, to look for God. The boy’s search for God brought him to India, and here he wandered for many years as a dervish (ascetic). He wandered on foot all over India, crossing mountains, fording rivers, nearly dying

while tramping across a desert. He went through great adventures and experiences until, at the age of thirty, his wanderings came to an end by the Command of God.

In the midst of his wanderings, one day Sheriar heard a Voice telling him to go back into the world and await Him. In response to this highest Command, Sheriar turned back, married, got a job as a gardener, started a tea-restaurant, and finally had a toddy business. In the world, Sheriar carried out every duty and responsibility, but at all times he remained unattached to the results. So here was Baba's father, a living example of what Baba wants us to be: "In the world, but not of it."

This was evident to us in the daily instances of domestic life and in any trials suffered by the family. Whatever befell him or his family, Sheriar accepted as "God's Will."

My ancestors were Zoroastrians in Persia. When a fresh wave of religious persecution broke out there, my mother's family migrated to India. Such migrants were called Iranis and were absorbed by the Parsi community of Zoroastrians who had left Persia centuries ago. These Parsis in India helped their fellow Zoroastrians who escaped from Persia, giving them jobs in their households, in their shops, and in their gardens.

After he gave up his wandering, the first job my father got was that of a gardener, working for a rich Parsi family in Poona. And what an

incredible gardener Sheriar proved to be! Anything he touched in that spacious garden blossomed and flourished with ease. Perhaps this was because while his hands worked in the soil, God's name worked in his soul continually.

Some time later, my father left that job to start a tea-restaurant. At parting, his Parsi employer said, "Please, Sheriarji, please come once in a while and look at my garden. You don't have to do anything. Just let your gaze fall on the trees and the flowers, and they will flourish."

"Also," he added, "whenever you come, please take home any potted plant you fancy."

For years Father continued to visit the gardens. I was delighted every time I saw him walking down Dastur Meher Road, followed by a servant carrying a potted flower plant on his head. My favourite memory is of a little rose-bush with a single red rose bobbing up and down on the servant's head. It seemed to me that the rose was happy it was coming to Father's home, where Father would tend to it along with the other potted flowers circling the well in Baba-House.

I also loved walking with Father along that road, clutching the little finger of his hand. We would stop at the grocer's to buy me candy. What a sight we must have been, this stocky sixty-nine-year-old man with his baby girl out for a walk on a quiet street in Poona!



This is a studio picture of Memo and Bobo—and me. You can't see me? That's because I'm hiding in my mother's womb before making my appearance in a few weeks' time.

It's a happy occasion for the family, so why are my parents looking so serious? Well, in those days picture-taking was a serious business, and the photographer commanded you to be unblinking and unsmiling and unmoving until the camera was clicked.

I made my appearance in the family twenty-four years after Baba. By the time I was born, Father was like a grandfather to me. He was apt to spoil me, which made Mother exert her sense of discipline all the more. Mother was a wonderful cook, and Father was equally good in the kitchen when Mother wasn't well. Like all the family, in fact like all the Iranis I've known, my parents shared a marked sense of humour. Moreover, there was Father's incredible kindness which extended to all, friend and foe. And above all, it was Father's quality of stillness within him which I could feel even as a child. Many a family friend or acquaintance has come into our home to sit for hours beside him in total silence. "Just for the peace of mind we get," they would say.

I too loved sitting beside Father, on that low bed of his. While we sat side by side, I would look up to catch a glimpse of the tip of his tongue moving up and down as he silently repeated God's name, "Yezdan, Yezdan."

Father was a gentle companion and a special friend to me. We had secrets that Mother didn't share. Here's an instance: Water chestnuts are considered a wonderful tonic, and Mother would grind them fine with sugar for Father to have between meals. Father kept that delicious chestnut powder all for me. Whenever Mother was very busy or away from home, he would bring down the jar from the shelf and give me big helpings of it. I must add that I, too, brought him little presents from school.

The brown-sugar toffee was one of his favourites.

My respect for Father was special. I hated to displease him, but when I was arguing with Mother it couldn't be helped! Such as, when I pestered Mother for a pleated satin skirt that went "whoosh, whoosh" as you walked—I'd seen one and heard it on an older girl in school. And Mother would tell me, "No, Mani, you can't have it. I told you once, I told you twice, you can't have it. Not until you're much older."

"But I *want* it," I'd wail, "I want it NOW! So-and-so has it. Why can't I?"

Then Father would say in his imperfect Gujarati, "Mani, stop pestering Memo!" And I'd know I was displeasing him. But when he was really displeased, he would add, "Mani, may God be good to you." ("Mani, Khodai tara bhala karay.") Even his scolding was a blessing!

I would stop immediately. I never overstepped Father's blessing.

Mother was really an excellent mother. She maintained and managed the house and family with much care, and possessed great intelligence and wit. Mother was the practical one. I guess she had to be, with a husband who was too generous with his worldly goods, giving money and things away to anyone he felt was in need. This would disturb my mother because she would have to penny-pinch on the household budget.

I would often find my parents looking at the same object from two

different angles. Mother saw a thing from the material angle. Father looked at it only from the spiritual angle.

Mother always discussed everything with Father at the end of the day. While playing “trains” by myself (making a train out of empty match-boxes), I would hear her say, “Shorog, such and such a thing happened this morning,” or “I heard so and so saying this and that about us.”

As she went on and on, I would be struck by her logic. Not a single false note fell on my ears, and I would say to myself, “Memo is right. What she says is so true.”

But after she finished, Father would gently explain from a spiritual angle: “No, Shireenog, it is not as you see it. It is really like this...” and so on. Hearing him I would find myself saying in wonder, “But of course, Bobo is right. What he says is so true!”

And so as a child I learnt much from the daily interactions between my parents. It was like watching the two pans of a hand-scale going up and down, with an issue being weighed till balance was gained. Amazingly, the little that Father said calmed and satisfied Mother every time.

Father taught Mother to read and write Persian, and before long she knew much of Hafiz by heart. I loved to see my parents sit together in the evening, reading the *Shahnama* (Persian history). And I would faintly

wonder how Father knew to read and write so well. I was told he had never gone to school; he had left home as a boy to look for God.

Later my wonder grew. I would hear Father converse in Hebrew with a charming old Jewish lady who wore dozens of bangles. I would also see him help a well-known professor to correct some manuscript in Arabic. How was it that Father was so well-versed in these languages when he hadn't gone to school?

When I questioned Father about it, he simply answered, "Well, child, it all came to me suddenly, in a moment."

Years later I asked Baba how such a thing could be possible. And Baba asked me why I was so surprised. He explained, "Knowledge is all inside, hidden behind a curtain. And doesn't it take only a moment to push aside a curtain and reveal what is hidden behind it?"

"However," Baba added, "this pushing aside the curtain is a gift from God. It is given only to the very rare ones who have given up everything for Me, as My father did."

Yes, Father was matchless.

But my heart would often go out to Mother. She had endured a lot for the sake of her Son whom she loved above all, the Son she referred to as "my most beautiful child." Being God's mother is no joke. By her Son's grace, Mother played her role well.

And what did Baba say about Mother? Although in their human relationship of mother and son there were sometimes arguments between them, Baba was never pleased when others were critical of her. One time when someone spoke unkindly about Mother, Baba turned to us and said sadly, "This person doesn't know who My mother is—she is purest crystal!"

I'll end with a little incident you'll enjoy:

Years ago I met a man who remembered playing as a child outside my father's toddy shop in Poona. And he especially recalled "Merwanji," as Baba was politely addressed by outsiders.

"What was Merwanji doing in the toddy shop?" I asked him.

"Merwanji was sitting behind the cash box," he replied. "In the afternoons all these fakirs would come round. Then Merwanji would put his hand in the cash box and bring out fistfuls of silver coins. He'd fling the coins far out onto the road, and all the fakirs would run after them."

"Oh, my poor mother!" I groaned, "having a dervish for a husband and God for a son—*and* having to raise a big family!"



His Lotus Feet

When you are looking at a lotus flower, you are looking at a beauty and a purity which remind you of angels. Floating on the surface of a pond or lake, the lotus stands pure and untouched by its surroundings. It is for this supreme quality that in India the lotus is chosen to describe the feet of God in human form. Mehera always referred to Beloved Baba's feet as His lotus feet.

Down the centuries, great lovers of God have sung of their Beloved's lotus feet. In poetry and in prayer, all worship and surrender to the Lord are directed to His lotus feet. Whatever is placed on His lotus feet becomes purified. When people touch a Perfect Master's feet with their forehead, they lay upon Him the burden of their sanskaras—the impressions of thought, emotion, and action which bind the individual. Having

the Avatar's darshan, laying your head on His lotus feet or on His eternal Samadhi, is the highest blessing.

Milk and honey also represent sanskaras, hence the old tradition of washing the Master's feet with milk and honey. Beloved Baba's feet were washed with a mixture of water and milk and honey during His birthday celebration at Nasik in 1937. The water, milk, and honey which has washed the Avatar's feet becomes supreme "holy water," and to drink even a drop of it is a rare blessing.

So just imagine how lucky this little girl was when she swallowed glassfuls of such holy water! Yes, the little girl was me, and the place was Meherabad. The occasion was "Sol-e-noo," the Persian New Year which falls always on 21st March and which is celebrated for a number of days in every Irani home. Families load their tables with all kinds of fruit and sweets for friends and relatives who drop in all day.

The most delicious part of the Sol-e-noo tradition is a milkshake know as "falooda." To swirl in your hand a glass of this Persian drink, all pink and sweet and rose-flavoured, is pure joy.

So, you can imagine how everyone around Baba looked forward to this New Year treat from Him. On 21st March, Baba had Masaji make a large quantity of falooda which He personally served to all. The men were assembled in the open, filing past Baba while He filled each glass held out to Him.

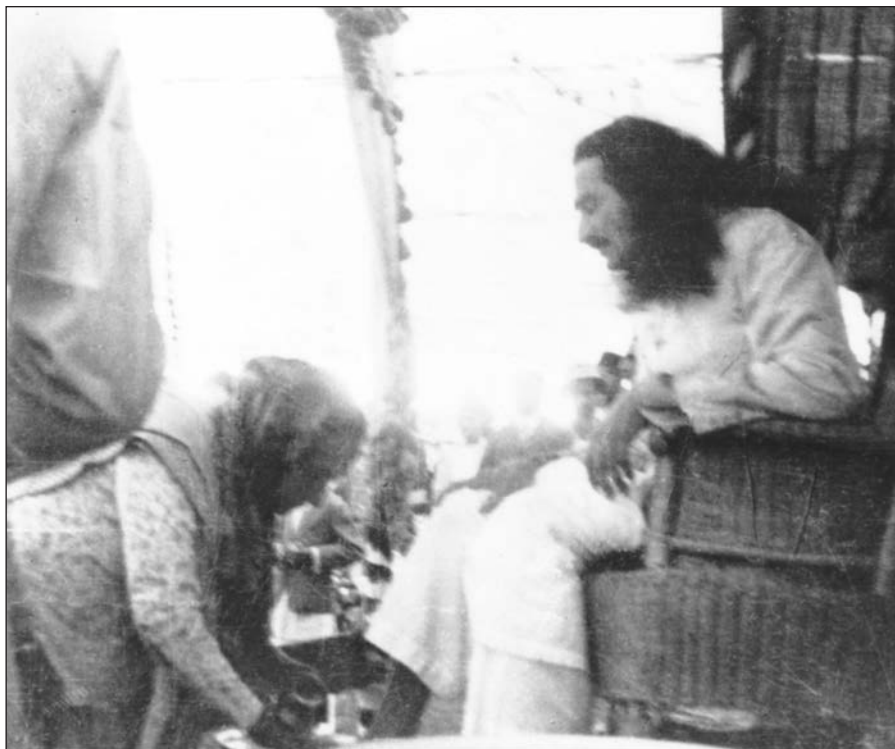
You know me by now, and you know I wouldn't miss this for anything! So there I was, a six-year-old girl standing amidst that long queue of men. With empty glass in hand, I too was awaiting my turn to receive the cold drink from Baba.

Baba was sitting astride a wooden box, in front of an enormous vat (vessel) full of falooda, holding in His hand an aluminum mug with a handle. As the men walked by, Baba bent down and dipped the mug into the vat, filled it, and poured the falooda into each glass. My turn came, and I got my glassful.

I stood at a distance sipping it, watching Baba's swift and graceful movements while He continued giving out falooda without a moment's respite. As the level of the falooda in the vat kept going down, Baba had to bend lower and lower and stretch further forward in order to fill the mug.

I could see it was becoming a problem, and I felt sure only Baba could solve it. He did. Baba stepped right into the vat, if you please! I saw Him pull up His sadra above His knees and put His legs into that huge vessel. This made it easier for Him to scoop up the remaining falooda. I squeaked with delight.

But then I felt extremely dismayed because I had missed having the falooda in which His feet were immersed! I had to do something about it. So, although I had already received my share from Baba, I went back and



Mother was the first one to wash her beloved Son's feet on the occasion of His birthday celebration at Nasik in 1937. I wish she could have seen the glow of love on Baba's face as He accepted His mother's homage.

joined the queue to get another glassful, a glassful of the falooda which had bathed His lotus feet.

When I approached Baba this second time, He stopped and looked at me for a moment before filling my glass. While walking away, I gulped down this nectar (alias falooda) and found that it definitely tasted much sweeter than the first glassful. Emboldened, I did it once more. I stood before Him a third time, with my empty glass. He filled it again, but this time He gestured firmly, “No more!” And the twinkle in His eyes clearly said, “You’ve had enough!”

Can one really? Can one really have enough gifts from Baba? The grace to spend a lifetime in His company was His biggest gift to me. Is that enough? No, it is not. One can never have enough of Baba’s love and company!



The Slap

When I spent my holidays with Baba, I got so much cuddling and hugging from Him that I took it as my natural right—until I had my first lesson that where courtesy and discipline were concerned, I was no exception.

It took place at Meherabad, when I was about seven and a half years of age—or “half past seven,” as we say in Gujarati. The occasion was a happy one where Baba’s men and women mandali were gathered before Him. Perhaps it was for a singing programme—I don’t remember.

Always in our life with Baba the men and women were segregated,

even from sight. So the men were sitting on one side of the hall, and the women on the other side. Between them was a screen, just high enough so that the women didn't see the men and the men didn't see the women. A clear passage or aisle down the middle led to where Baba was seated on the gaadi at the far end of the hall.

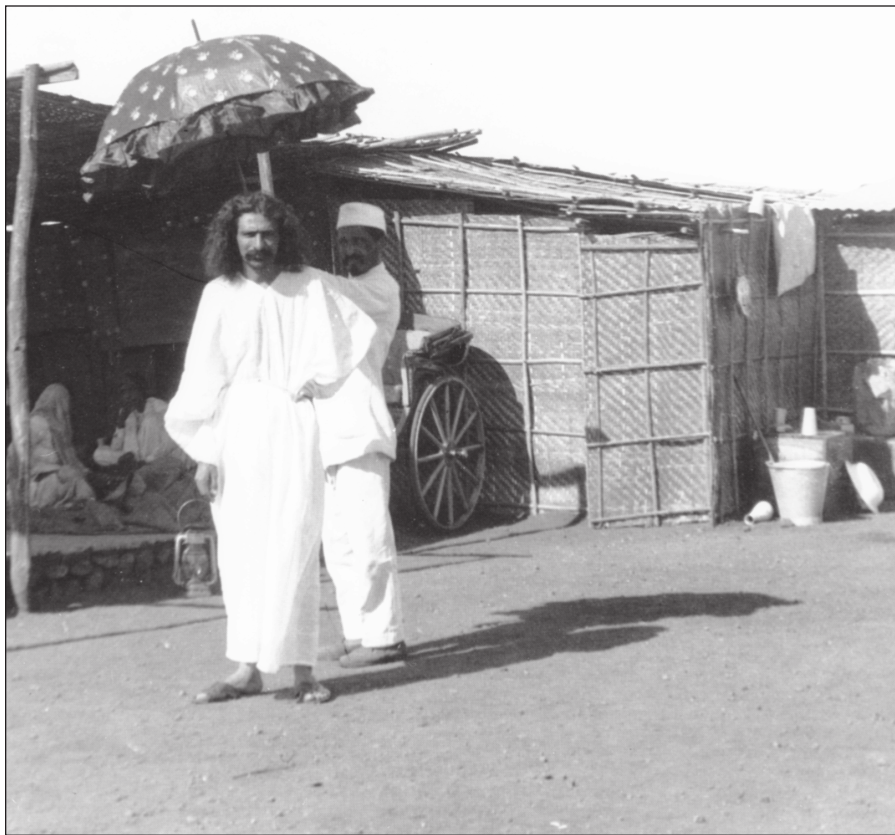
When I came in on this assembly, very self-confident and happy, Baba and His mandali were already seated. In a hurry to get to Baba, I crossed over all the slippers and sandals lying outside the entrance, and went straight up to Him. I expected a welcome smile and all the loving which I usually got.

Instead, I found Baba looking hard at me. He had a heavy frown on His face, and His eyes were flashing fire. Before I knew it, He pulled His hand back and gave me a resounding slap on the cheek.

There was a stunned silence. No one could believe what had just happened! I didn't make a sound. I just stood before Him like a statue.

Baba gestured fiercely, "Look at everyone here. All of them have removed their sandals outside before coming in." He pointed at my feet. "And you, you still have your slippers on! Who do you think you are? Go! Go right out and remove them at once!"

All eyes were on me, and you could have heard a pin drop. I had to walk back all that distance down the aisle. It seemed the longest walk I'd



I've chosen this picture of Baba for this story because it was taken in the same year and shows Baba in a fiery mood.

It also shows the big umbrella under which I've walked with Baba as a child. Mehera had made it more sunproof by stitching on layers of lovely printed material and a frilled border.

ever had. Straight as a rod, I went out and took off my little slippers. But instead of coming back to Baba, I slipped into the women's side and sat among them, hiding myself as much as I could.

As soon as I sat down, there was a clap, a loud clap from Baba, and one of the men's voices, "Mani! Baba wants you."

I wasn't moving. I just burrowed myself deeper among the women.

Immediately there was another clap. And again a more insistent clap and a more insistent voice. "Mani, Baba is calling you."

The women said, "Go, Mani, go! Baba is calling you. What are you doing here?"

It was unbelievable. I wasn't obeying Baba! Baba was calling me, and I wasn't going to move.

Another clap. A louder voice. "Mani is wanted at once!"

The women kept pushing me from behind till I was forced to stand up. Once I was up, my head was visible above the screen, and I saw that all eyes were fixed on me. There was nothing I could do except walk to Baba.

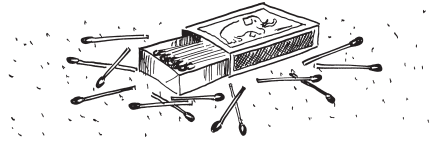
As straight and proud as I had walked out, I walked up that aisle back to Baba. I stood next to Him, head high, without shedding a tear.

Baba had a twinkle in His eyes. He put out His arms and lovingly gathered me to Him. That's when the dam broke. That's when I bawled,

“You hit me! You hit me!” I hadn’t cried when I was slapped, but when I was embraced, “Boo-hoo....”

Baba petted me and kissed my tears away. The more He kissed me, the more I bawled. The more I bawled, the more He hugged me. At last I was comforted and went and sat down among the women mandali. Now my world was rosy again.

It turned out to be one of those occasions which ended with my feeling happy that something unhappy had happened, because I got a double dose of all this loving from Baba. But I never forgot my lesson and never again forgot to remove my slippers.



Santa Cruz Memories

When Mother and I came to visit Baba in Santa Cruz, a suburb of Bombay, I was almost eight years old. And yet, my memory of this visit is limited to a kaleidoscope of scenes stored in my mind.

You'll see what I mean. Just hold my hand and come with me into this beautiful home in Santa Cruz. It belongs to a rich man who has invited Baba to please stay there. Baba has accepted.

You'll agree that it is a magical place, with mirrors everywhere, mirrors in golden frames. When we step into the large hall, we see that the floor is of rich marble. There are also marble statues in the corners. Then there's this gorgeous crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. And

spread in the centre of the hall is a thick and beautiful carpet, no doubt Persian.

We don't enter the other rooms, so we don't know what they are like. But as we step out onto one of the balconies upstairs, I hear one of you say, "Why, this is just like a royal box at the London opera!" Yes, dear, I agree.

As we look down, I tell you how Mother and I stood on this balcony sixty-five years ago, watching the horse carriages and people go by on the streets below. It must have been a festive occasion for the Catholics, because the ladies walking by to church were obviously dressed in brand new shoes and dresses and hats. Mother was very interested.

All very nice, you say, but what's the point of my story? Well, what I really want to share with you is the most precious diamond among my Santa Cruz memories. All I've described above serves only as a setting for this central gem.

With sparkling clarity I remember Baba squatting on that carpet in the hall of His rich devotee's home. A couple of His disciples sat nearby—I don't remember who they were. All I remember is me, squatting beside Him, helping Him make matchboxes. Yes, matchboxes! There was a pile of unfinished matchboxes before Him, next to a little hill of loose matchsticks—thousands and thousands of matchsticks from what I could see!

I helped Baba paste picture-labels onto the empty matchboxes and then helped Him fill them with matchsticks. You had to do it just so—pack them tight and evenly, with the match-heads all on one side. You had to really concentrate, and the work was slow going for the ones around Him. Not for Baba! His slim and beautiful fingers moved swiftly like butterfly wings, as He worked with those matches.

I didn't know why they were being made, these matchboxes, or for whom. But, in the course of time, I was to get two insights that explained certain things in my life.

Firstly, as to why I developed a sudden passion for collecting empty matchboxes in later years at school. It dawned on me that making matchboxes with Baba in Santa Cruz as a child had given birth to this passion of mine for collecting matchboxes later on.

I collected hundreds of them, their labels bearing all kinds of pictures: Radha-Krishna, Sita-Ram, a red rose, a cock, a bullock cart, a white horse, and lots more. I swapped popular film posters with my friends for used matchboxes from their kitchens.

Secondly, I was able to see Baba's act of filling those empty boxes with matches in quite a different light. From Baba's casual remarks over the years we had come to know that every act of His, however small, produced a universal effect. Being universal, whatever Baba did was universal

and unlimited. So, while Baba was packing those thousands of matchsticks into empty matchboxes, was it a symbolic act? Was He passing on the light of His Love to thousands of hearts chosen to be His candles? Knowing some of the ways of His working, my answer is “Yes!”



Tiny Crown and Sandals

I don't remember having said "Anything you can do, I can do better," but as a child I have been known to show off. "Anything you can do for Baba, I can do it too!"

And I did. Look how I made a crown and sandals for Baba, just as Mehera and her companions had done. You've seen the beautiful crown and sandals and robe and garland in the Museum Room on Meherabad Hill? Well, Mehera and her companions made them, with gold threads and silks from the rich saris they had brought with them from home when they joined Baba.

There were also crowns and sandals made with flowers. I helped by going around picking flowers from the milkweed bushes growing wild at Meherabad. Mehera would spend an hour crafting a crown of flowers which her Beloved would wear for a minute.

I was about eight years old. Sitting beside Mehera, I'd watch her fingers deftly stitch a design she had drawn for a crown or sandals. And I would feel her total absorption in Baba while she worked. I have felt this same absorption in everything she did for Baba. Whether she was preparing a glass of water for Baba to drink or making a crown for Baba to wear, her heart's total absorption in Baba made her every act a meditation.

While Mehera worked on a crown, I'd hand her the scissors or join in looking for a lost needle, and she'd let me believe I was really helping her.

But helping wasn't enough. I was going to make my very own crown and sandals for Baba, all by myself. And I did.

I kept thinking of how I was going to do it. As soon as I got back to Poona, I took all the pocket money I had been saving and went to a little shop run by a Parsi family named Khambatta. They sold golden threads and sequins and all kinds of shiny stuff for embroidering sari borders and purses and things.

In that narrow shop there were two rows of showcases. With my nose pressed against the glass, I glided past each one, inspecting every little item in there. I stopped when I came to some fancy canvas strips, adorned with sequins and flowers and attached to bands of elastic. I was told they were for a lady's garter. This was the answer. I took the prettiest one home, along with some spare sequins, and set to work.



For the crown, all I did was cut off the elastic and sew the ends together to form a circle. The sandals were more difficult. It took me a long time to cut some cardboard in the shape of soles, on which I sewed strips of shiny sequins.

There! It was done. Baba's kid sister had made Him a crown and a pair of sandals. Even if they were so very small, it didn't seem odd to me—in a child's dream, a pebble is a castle. I felt so pleased and proud of my achievement that I could hardly bear to wait for my holidays when I'd be with Him again.

At last the time came. I was at Meherabad. As soon as Baba was seated among His women mandali, I brought out my creation and offered it to Him, trying not to look excited. Baba held the crown and sandals in His palms, and stretched out His hands for Mehera and all to behold. His face was alight with joy and wonderment at this incredible work of art I had

presented to Him! He lifted that tiny crown and placed it on His head. Then He put on the sandals, which could only fit on His littlest toes. There were gasps of admiration from everyone. Just imagine, the King of Kings with a child-made crown on His head and child-made sandals on His little toes, reclining on the gaadi with His legs stretched out.

He called me over and hugged me. Once again He made me feel great. He had accepted my gift in the way only He could. Only Baba's universal heart could have accepted the imperfect gift of a child as totally and perfectly as He did!



These are my hands holding the tiny crown and sandals. But when I close my eyes, I can see them on the palms of Baba's beautiful hands, as He held them and admired them many decades ago.



May It Be Known

If you open a big dictionary to look for a word and discover a little leaf in there, a leaf you had pressed in its pages a long, long time ago, how would you feel? I'm sure you'd be absolutely delighted, as I was when it happened to me.

And if you pull out a cheap office file from old forgotten records and open it to find precious childhood memories pressed between its yellowed pages, what would it be like?

It happened to me not long ago, and I can tell you what it's like. Finding that file was like finding a treasure chest which had lain buried deep in the wrinkles of time. And what were the "gems" in that old musty

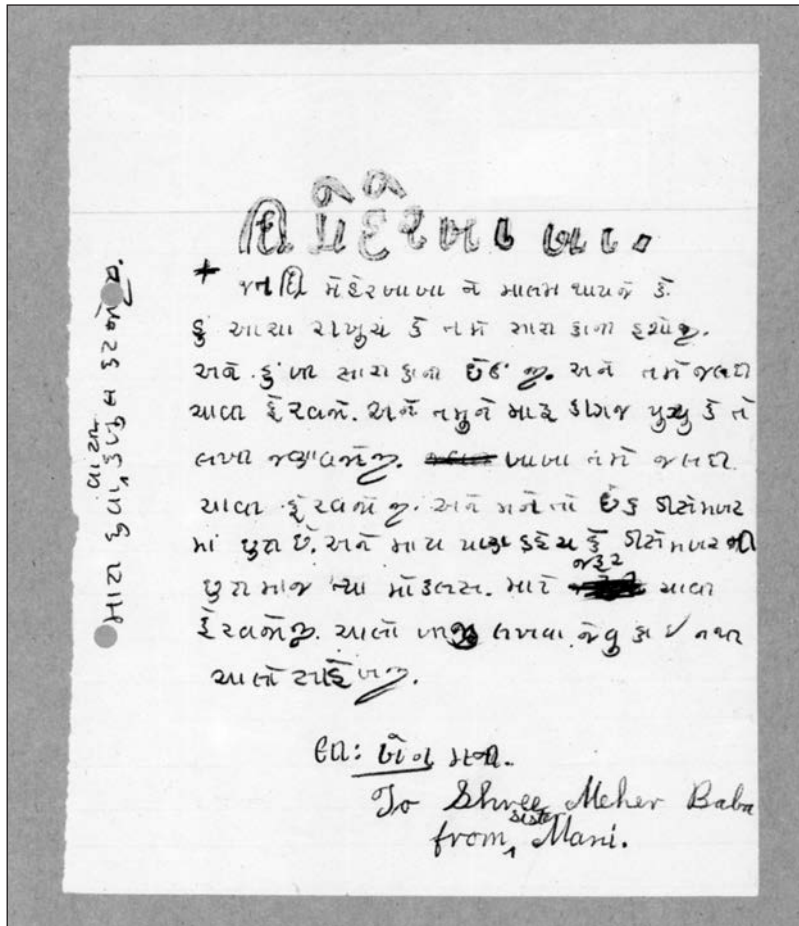
file? Letters, letters to Baba from His family. Among the most precious were letters from Mother to her beloved Son. And, of course, from kid sister to her beloved Brother! These letters were written in Gujarati and dated 1926–1928. They open a creaky door to forgotten memories and light up facets of what it meant to be His family.

I shall touch only on my letters which I wrote to Baba from Poona when I was seven to nine years old. They were written in Gujarati, and the quotes I give here are an informal translation.

How did I address Baba in these letters? Did I begin with “Dear Brother,” “Darling Brother,” or some such personal greeting? Oh no. When I was little I had to be very “grown-up” for Baba, to keep up with all the learned grown-ups around. I knew the formal way in which one addressed a high-up person in society, like a baronet or a barrister or suchlike. Would I do less for Baba? He who was the very topmost?

So, after formally heading my letter with “Shree Meher Baba” in red ink and flourishing strokes, I would usually begin my letter with “May it be known to Shree Meher Baba that I hope You are well....” After a couple of lines I would lapse into being the little sister imploring Him, “Please turn the key and quickly call me to You.” There were PS’s all over—“Turn the key. Please hurry up and turn the key.”

What did it mean? Well, when a key is turned, a door is unlocked.



One of the letters I wrote in Gujarati to “Shree Meher Baba” when I was seven years old.

With Baba holding the Key to all doors, He had only to turn it and open the way for me to be with Him again!

There were other demands: “Come daily in my dreams.” And when He did, I would write and tell Him, “I am very, very, and very happy that You came in my dream.”

When I wanted to emphasize a feeling, I was inclined to write the word a number of times. When I was sick and couldn’t write to Him, I’d ask His forgiveness: “Definitely, definitely, and definitely forgive me.”

I couldn’t help being rather possessive about Baba and kept an eye on Him all the way from Poona. In those days the women mandali were referred to as the “under-nah,” meaning “insiders,” because they were never seen outside of their cloistered quarters. So, in 1927 I wrote to Baba, “Do write and let me know whether the Insiders are taking good care of You. Otherwise I won’t talk to them!”

I would also make sure that Baba didn’t ever forget me and I would use every little excuse to remind Him of me. Once it happened that I was being Mother’s scribe, writing down a letter to Baba which she dictated while she was cleaning the vegetables. She ended it with, “Your father, as well as Mani, send lots of regards to You.”

Ah! My name in that sentence was all I needed to draw Baba’s attention to me. I wrote my name clearer and bigger than the rest of the words

in that letter, used red ink to highlight it, underlined it to make it stand out, and put it in quotes to be sure He didn't miss it! It seemed to blink and beep out a clear message: "Hello Baba, this is me, remember? Me, MANI, your kid sister—here I am, see?"

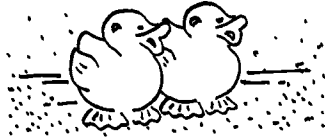
But there is one gem in all of this unearthed treasure which I claim as mine, and mine alone.

It is a gem which lights up my heart and fades all other desires.

What is this gem?

Just a line, a line in a letter my mother wrote to Baba when I was seven years old:

"Night and day, Mani remembers You."



Lucky Ducks

I had a little old tin trunk which always accompanied me to Meherabad. It was dear to me, and I was possessive about it. At home I would tell Mother, “Don’t touch this. It is mine.”

She would point to it and say, “*That* thing? I wouldn’t touch it with a broom.”

That was fine with me.

I would keep my most precious things in it. It became a safe for presents I bought with my pocket money for Baba and the women. Immediately after Mother and I returned to Poona, I would start looking for the right presents to take back to Meherabad. This daily occupation

was a link which kept alive my hope and joy of returning to Him.

Once I remember buying pretty little presents for Mehera, Naja, and the two Khorsheds. That was not difficult. The great question was, what shall I buy for Baba? It should be something so very special. This kept me occupied all day, every day. Nothing that caught my eye was right enough for Baba.

One morning from my pocket money I bought one paisa's (one penny's) worth of peanuts and munched away on my way to school. Suddenly I saw a peddler with a handcart filled with things made of glazed crockery. I stood there admiring the articles, wondering if there was something here I could buy for Baba. There were dolls, there were animals, and there were birds. The dolls varied in price with the size and were named accordingly. The peddler's song told us that the littlest doll was daughter. The next size was daughter-in-law, and bigger still was mother or aunt. The biggest was mother-in-law.

But I wasn't interested in dolls. I suddenly spotted a beautiful pair of ducks with yellow wings that glowed. They had soft golden beaks and holes in their heads. I didn't know at the time that one was for salt and the other was for pepper. All I knew was that they were beautiful. There was something about them that set them apart from all the rest of the things in that handcart. Oh yes, these ducks were for Baba. I knew!

So I asked the man, “How much?” When he told me the price, I found I was short by one paisa—that one paisa of peanuts which I’d had. Oh, did I regret my greedy time with those peanuts!

“Please,” I said, “can you make it one paisa less?”

He said, “No, this is the price. You take it. If you don’t have the money, don’t take it. Go!”

“But I must have it,” I said. “Please, please, can’t you make it *one* paisa less? Only one paisa less?” But then in those days one paisa wasn’t so little, you see.

He said, “No, no, no. One paisa only is my profit. Go. Don’t trouble me.” And he started off.

I was desperate and kept after the handcart as he wheeled it away. My little hands were trying to hold it back while I continued to plead. My pleas did not seem to move him at all. Then I had a brainwave. “Wait,” I cried, “please wait. My house is not so far away. Will you come with me to my house? Then I’ll get you the one paisa and make up the price.”

When I said that, the man looked at me as if he saw me for the first time. Something in my eyes must have reached him because suddenly he said brusquely, “All right, all right. Have it for one paisa less.” I have never doubted that the peddler had a share in the gift I gave to Baba.



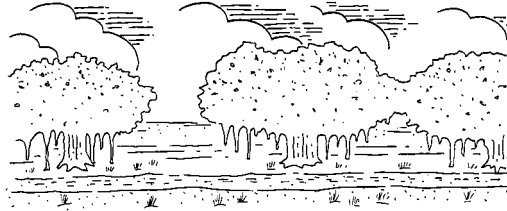
I took that pair of ducks and carried them home as if they were alive. I put them away, and every morning before going to school, I opened my little tin trunk to see if they were still there. And when I came home from school, the first thing I would do is look inside to see if they were all right. I would do this until the day came when Mother and I were once again on the train to Meherabad.

On my joyous journey back to Him, the wheels of the train sang “Ba-ba, Ba-ba, Ba-ba, Ba-ba.”

When I got to Meherabad, I gave everybody their little presents, and

then I went to Baba with the ducks. And you would have thought, from the radiant glow on Baba's face when He got that pair of ducks with holes in their heads, that this was the one thing He had been waiting for. He made me feel that although the whole universe belonged to Him, He had been waiting all these years for just that one pair of ducks. He told Mehera and Naja that every day when they prepared His food tray those two little ducks had to be by His plate, filled with salt and pepper.

Oh, how thankful I felt that I hadn't missed those ducks in the hand-cart that fateful morning on my way to school!



The Long Road Home

Sometimes things happened which shattered my heaven. One time when I was about eight, Mother and I were once again at Meherabad with Baba, during one of my holidays. I don't remember what the occasion was, but I do remember Baba was seated before a gathering of His mandali and followers. I was so involved in just being there that I didn't observe what was happening around me.

Suddenly I realised that something had gone wrong. A spark had ignited. What had caused it I didn't know. But I saw that Baba's eyes were flashing fire, and Mother was looking hurt and proud. Everyone was

silent. There was not a sound from anyone, not a whisper.

In that silence, I saw Mother standing up, very straight and calm, saying, “Well, Merog, if that’s the way it is, I leave!”

And Baba, His eyes still flashing, said, “All right, leave!”

Mother walked a few steps. Then she turned round and said, “And I’m taking my daughter with me!” And Baba said, “Take your daughter with you!”

I just couldn’t believe it. Whatever had happened? Baba telling us to leave? My whole world crumbled at my feet.

When Mother said, “Come, Mani,” I naturally turned to Baba. But Baba looked at me and said, “You heard. Go!”

So I turned and followed Mother out of Meherabad onto that long road to the Ahmednagar railway station. In those days the surrounding countryside was desolate. There were few huts and no houses to be seen. Traffic was mainly a bullock cart or bicycle, and pedestrians were scarce except for some farmer or villager on his way to work. What I liked most was stormy weather when the trees along the road assumed weird shapes. As for Mother, when we would come in a tonga from the railway station to Meherabad, she would feel scared and kept praying. She had heard all kinds of stories about dacoits and robbers looting travellers.

Anyway here we were, Mother and I, walking along that lonely

stretch of road. I was following close behind her and continually grumbling, “Mother, whatever happened? What did you say to make Him upset? Why do we have to go home? This is terrible. We’ve only just come....”

On and on and on. My poor mother didn’t say a word. She just kept walking. We must surely have walked miles before Mother grew tired and sat down under a big banyan tree.

I was still nagging her. “What did you say? What did He say? Whatever it is, it couldn’t be that bad. Let’s go back. You know Baba will make it all right. He always does.”

At last Mother looked up, exasperated. She said, “Look, Mani. For God’s sake, if you want to go and be with Merog, go! But please leave me alone.”

That was all I needed. Baba had told me to listen to Mother. And here Mother herself was telling me to go to Him. So now I could go back. I turned round and started walking towards Meherabad. My heart was still heavy, but my legs were not tired any more. I had a mission. I would get to Baba and tell Him to make everything all right.

On and on I walked, down that long lonely road. Suddenly, way in the distance I saw a figure, an ethereal vision in white, gliding towards me. Soon I realised it was Baba! Oh how beautiful He looked, His sadra and hair flowing with the rhythm of His walk. He was alone, which was

incredible because one of the mandali always accompanied Him wherever He went.

I started running towards Him as fast as I'd ever done. When I was a few feet away, Baba bent down, and I flung myself into His arms. Baba gathered me up, quieted my sobs, and said, "Why are you crying? Everything will be all right. Come, let's go to Mother."

So here I was once again walking all that distance to the banyan tree where Mother sat alone. I was holding Baba's little finger—I usually did as a child—and had to trot fast to keep up with Him.

To avoid stepping on His feet, I kept my eyes all the time on His sandals—the same heavy, patched sandals which are now in the Museum in Meherabad. Baba walked so gracefully, as though the heavy sandals were no weight at all on His slim and beautiful feet. To me, He appeared to be walking on clouds.

We walked on and on, Baba and I, until we reached Mother, still sitting sadly under the tree. What happened next was a silent drama unfolding before me. Baba walked up to Mother and put out both His hands. Mother looked up into His eyes and placed her hands in His. Baba helped her up and embraced her. Not a word was said. There was no need.

Then the three of us turned round and walked back together

to Meherabad. This time the road didn't seem long enough. I was walking on air.

Later I learned that when the mandali had gotten up to accompany Baba, He had said, "Nobody's to come with Me. I'm going alone."

I never found out what the conflict was about. It didn't matter. Whenever Baba made an end to a thing, it no longer existed. It just evaporated and disappeared.

Many a time I have witnessed His oceanic love and forgiveness pour over a loved one like a huge wave that rolls onto the beach and washes the shore clean, wiping away all tracks and traces in the sand.



Baba Alone Is

*H*ave you ever enjoyed being scared? I bet every one has, at one time or another. Scaring myself was a game I enjoyed.

One way was to talk about ghosts. Some evenings when my friend Mary and I would sit conversing on the porch of my home in Poona, we would tell chilly ghost stories. We would pretend we weren't scared, but after a while we couldn't hide the fact. We *were*, very scared.

When the evening got dark, we wanted to get up to press on the light switch. But we were too scared to move. Then suddenly, as if at an unseen signal, we would jump up together and rush into the house, where Mother was laying the table for supper.

“What on earth’s the matter?” she’d say.

How could we reveal our unearthly scare? I would only shake my head and smile at Baba’s picture on my desk.

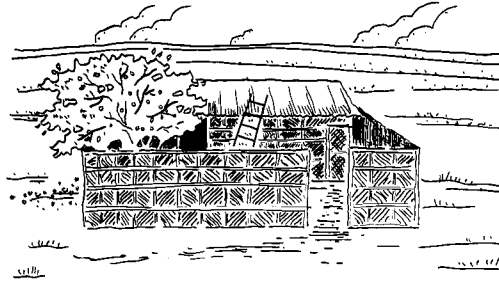


My most favourite scare concerned Baba personally. How old was I? Perhaps nine. Old enough to catch what I heard others say about reality and illusion: “Only Baba is Real. Nothing else exists.”

I liked that. I couldn’t take it any other way. It had to be only Baba.

So then I would scare myself by imagining otherwise. I would think, “Supposing, just supposing, it isn’t Baba who is the Only One. Supposing it is someone else who is the Only One, like for instance my horrible history teacher! Or the mad old man in the lane who stares at you forever without blinking! Or, oh horrors, the Goanese woman who is always scolding her children!”

On and on, I’d work myself up, imagining this one or that one as the Only One who existed—until I couldn’t take it any more. “Waaagh!” I’d drop out of the game, feeling so very relieved and happy that Baba was the Only One. I’d skip around the well yelling, “Baba alone is Real!”



Wishes Granted

I was nine years old, spending another summer holiday at Meherabad. That's when Baba decided to move with His mandali to Toka some thirty-five miles from Ahmednagar. It was one of those snap decisions His mandali were familiar with. I travelled with the women in the tightly packed bus. Among us was also the daughter of Sadashiv Patel, one of Baba's oldest disciples. Her name was Myna, and a visit to Baba was a rare occasion for her. Myna was a few years older than me.

In Toka we were to stay in little huts of "tatta" (bamboo matting). Workers were at it night and day in order to complete them within the



deadline given by Baba. Even so, our huts weren't quite ready when we reached Toka. After we got down from the bus, we had to wait outside for a while until the cow-dung flooring had dried. As some last-minute touches were also being given to the roof, there was a bamboo ladder leaning against one of the huts.

The women's quarters always had a closed-in courtyard in the front. Made of *tatta*, it served to give privacy to the cloistered women *mandali*. Here in the courtyard the women could step out

from their huts without seeing men or being seen by them. Here they would sit to clean the vegetables and grains, and here is where they would keep their rolled-up beddings during the day. Excitement was when it would start to rain and everyone ran out to gather up their things. I loved joining in the squeals and the scamper.

As soon as we could enter the huts, Mehera, Naja, and the other women began setting up things which would be needed for Baba's care and comfort when He came over from the men's side.

Being children, Myna and I ran out to play in the courtyard. In one corner of the courtyard was a large tamarind tree. Tamarind is a very sour and tart fruit that grown-ups forbid children to eat because it is "bad for the throat." So children are always stealing tamarind from other people's trees, just as my schoolfriends and I did many a time.

Of course if Baba ever ordered me not to eat tamarind, I would be bound forever by His order. Therefore, Baba must not see me picking up or eating a tamarind. Which is why, as we stood in the courtyard looking at the tempting tamarinds lying under the tree, I looked around carefully to see if Baba was in sight. He was not there. Nobody was there. We were free to gather up the fruit.

But just as I bent down to pick up a tamarind, Myna and I were startled by a clap, loud and clear, coming from behind us!

We turned round sharply and couldn't believe our eyes! There was Baba, sitting on the bamboo ladder which the workmen had left standing against the hut. Baba was sitting on an upper rung of the ladder as naturally and gracefully as though He were in the most comfortable chair. Not an easy thing to do. I know, I have tried it.

We stared. Baba looked very beautiful with His flowing hair and long sadra. He held out both hands and gestured to us, "Come to Me." We ran over and stood on either side of Him.

Baba looked at us lovingly, and turning to Myna His hands gestured, "Ask, ask for anything you want. Ask right now, and I will give it to you."

I stood transfixed. This was truly like a fairy tale where the good fairy waves her wand and says: "Make a wish, I will grant it."

"But here is no fairy," I said to myself. "Here is God Himself saying 'Ask Me for anything you want, and I will give it to you!'"

There was no time to think it over. Myna was taken totally by surprise and was unprepared for making a wish. She said what any Hindu girl of her age might say, especially a girl whose marriage was soon to be arranged by her family. She said, "Baba, I want a very handsome husband and a very grand wedding."

Baba smiled at her and gestured, "Granted." Then He turned to me and His fingers moved swiftly, saying, "Ask. What is it you want? Ask

quick!” It was like Baba was saying, “Right now I’m in the mood to give. Ask, and I’ll give you whatever you want.”

I looked at Baba and said, “I want to be with You, always.”

Baba looked very happy with my reply. “Granted!” He said and hugged me.

This “Make a Wish” game was forgotten after a while. Some years later Myna got married to the most handsome man you can imagine. Wedding guests would ask in wonder, “Where did Patel find such a handsome son-in-law?”

And the wedding was the grandest Poona had seen in years. Baba personally attended it. The celebrations lasted four days. Coloured lights were everywhere. The food was lavish. The “shamiana” (colourful tent) was large enough to seat over a thousand. At the far end of it was Baba’s gaadi, covered with silks. Seated on it, Baba looked like an Emperor. Patel had draped a very expensive and beautiful Kashmiri shawl round Baba’s shoulders.

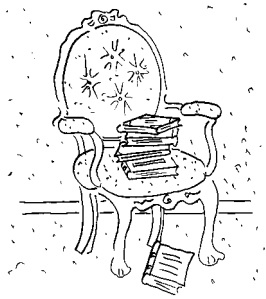
Old Patel had also arranged special entertainments for Baba. There were groups of qawalli singers singing Baba’s favourite ghazals way into the night, there was flute-playing and fireworks, and there was a brilliant display of mimicry which drew a lot of praise. At one point the mimic imitated the sound of two cats fighting together. Baba was so delighted with

the man's performance, He removed the shawl from His shoulders in one sweep and flung it to the man, telling him to keep it.

So Myna got exactly what she had asked for. She got a very handsome husband and a very grand wedding. I was witness to it. But it didn't last long. In a year's time Myna died while delivering her first child. The baby did not survive either.

And my wish was granted too. I shall be for ever and ever thankful that I added the word "always" at the end of my wish, "I want to be with You—*always*."

As you can see, you have to be a bit of a lawyer when asking God for a boon. You have to make sure that you don't leave out any clause in your favour.



One More Year

I had a happy childhood. I loved my parents and my home. It is just that from the very first, my one ambition in life was to go and live with Baba for all time.

Being with Baba for several months in the year during school holidays wasn't enough for me. I had to be with Him for good, and when I was about ten years of age I made it very clear to Him.

"Yes, yes," Baba agreed, adding, "but for now you have to study and secure top grades in class. If you come first in your exams at year-end, then from next year you will be with Me for good."

I took Him at His word. I didn't know then how tricky our Avatar could be.

I was confident of securing top grades. By Baba's grace, I was equipped with brains. But by nature I was playful and lazy at studies. When other children came home from school, they'd sit at their desks and do their homework. I'd toss my books on the chair and run out to play.

My mother's voice would follow me. "Mani," she'd call out.

"What?" I'd shout.

"All the children are doing their homework."

"All the children are crazy," I'd reply. "Home's not for studies. You send me to school to learn. That's where I do my learning. Not at home."

I'd see my friend Mary pore over a poem for hours, repeating it again and again till she memorized it. I could read a poem once, from an open book in my hand on the way to school, and know it by heart.

That's how I ran into a lamp post once, not looking where I was going. I wasn't hurt but the front of my solar topee* became pulp. After that I had to wear the topee frontside back because of Mother's rule to make my topee last for a year. Her maxim was: If you break it, all right, you wear the broken topee till year-end. If you lose it, all right, you do without the topee for the rest of the year.

When exams approached, I got scared. I hadn't really studied. I wasn't prepared. All the time when Mother thought I was doing my home-

*Pith helmet worn by the British to ward off the tropical sun.

work, I had been reading *School Girl* magazines.

I'd groan, "Oh my goodness. What to do? I've got to come out first, absolutely at the top of my class. If I don't, I can't be with Baba."

Frantically I'd begin to study for my finals. But exams were too close, and I needed help. I couldn't pray to Baba because I hadn't done my best. So I'd run to my father and beg, "Please, Bobo, pray for me. Pray that I come first in class."

And my father would look at me gently and say, "But child, it is you who should pray."

Looking very surprised, I'd say, "What! Me, pray?"

"Where have I got the time to pray? Look, Bobo, you pray and I'll study. And between us we'll make it."

And we did, every time. It would make me so happy, I'd forget the part he had played in it.

Exams over, holidays began. "Now that I've come out first in my class, I'm going to be with Baba for ever and ever—just as He had promised," I'd repeat to myself.

Baba would look at my report card. He'd look at the school prizes. He'd make a big deal of it all. He'd look so pleased and proud, I never felt the need to bring up the subject of my permanent stay. I was quite sure about it.

Then just a few days before it would be time for Mother and me to leave for home, Baba would call me to Him. Caressing my cheeks, He'd ask, "Do you love Me?"

"Yes, Baba."

"More than Mother?"

"Oh, yes."

"More than Father?"

"Oh, yes."

Baba would look extremely pleased, and would shake His head in wonderment, as if saying, "Well, well, just look at that!" Then He'd ask me, "That means you'd do anything for Me?"

"Oh, yes, Baba."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Really!" Baba would say, looking incredibly amazed. "You mean, if I asked you to go back home and go to school for another year, you'd even do that?!"

My heart would groan. I knew I'd been tricked. How could I back out now? I would nod silently. I couldn't speak.

And so another year would go by, and another—until at last the time came when He invited me to be with Him for always.



Water-Buffalo

*F*rom 1929, when Baba moved His headquarters to Nasik, I spent my holidays there in Nasik. I stayed with the women mandali in their small old rented house, which had big grounds and some lovely trees. Soona-masi, one of the oldest women mandali, was also there along with her daughter Khorshed.

Soona-masi's husband had a fine jewelry business in Bombay. Later when it was dissolved, a number of high-society customers owed him money, which they would not pay. He was too gentle and loving to force the payments, and the money was never returned. But Soona-masi kept writing to the debtors trying to recover the money for Baba. There was no response.

At last one debtor wrote from Bombay saying she didn't have the money, but would a water-buffalo do instead? "She gives a lot of milk," the lady added. Soonamasi was shocked by the proposal and even more

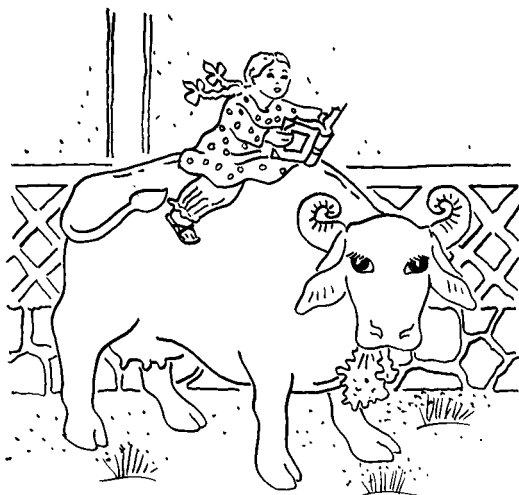
surprised at Baba's response when she took the letter to Him.

Baba beamed. "Get the buffalo!" He ordered. "A buffalo is better than nothing. At least the buffalo will be a good source of milk for us all."*

And so the buffalo joined our ashram in Nasik. She walked all the way from the suburb in Bombay, hoofing it

for days with the old man who escorted her to the house of God. A water-buffalo's unique pilgrimage!

Our water-buffalo was beautiful, very big and very black, with lovely



*As you may know, buffalo milk is commonly used in most Indian homes.

curly horns. I called her Curly. She had the sad and placid look of a school teacher who was being very patient and wanted everyone to know it. And she gave a lot of milk. She did, really.

Milking a buffalo requires much art and strength. Our Valu, petite and gentle, had both. Morning and evening, I'd stand by watching Curly munch her bovine lunch while her milk was expertly squeezed into the big brass pot held between Valu's knees.

Baba had given me the order that whenever I was away from school, I must do my homework every day for one hour. Lessons during holidays? Wasn't that boring? Yes, but obedience to Baba came first, and my friend Curly saved me from the boredom.

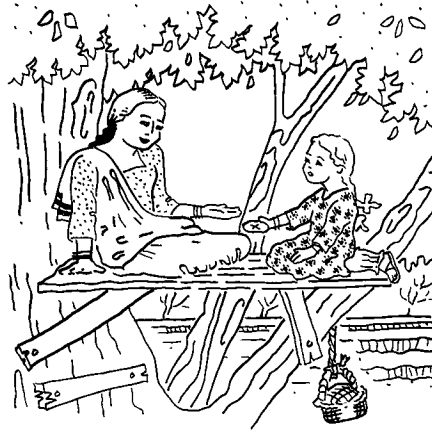
Curly used to be tied to the railing of our little porch. And I decided to do my lessons while sitting atop her, straddling her broad back as best I could. It was most uncomfortable, but I continued to do it and would not let Naja or Khorshed dissuade me.

When Curly would lift a hind leg to flick off some insect from her belly, I'd nearly fall over her head, books and all. Moreover, when the one hour was over and I got down from Curly's back, it was rather painful. I was found to be walking like a jockey and smelling like a buffalo! This was the complaint of the women mandali, except Mehera.

Mehera was the one who'd take my side. She would tell her sister

companions, “But if Mani wants to sit on a buffalo to do her lessons, what harm is there? If that’s what she enjoys doing, let her!”

Mehera was a darling. Her gentle ways and her quick understanding of a child’s heart made me love her all the more. There are a number of such precious instances with Mehera that I carry from my childhood and hold tenderly in my heart.



Tree House

I'm happy to be hopping over from the previous page with another story of my holidays in Nasik. You already know that there were trees in the grounds of the house where the women mandali lived. But I haven't told you that there was one particular tree which was my favourite. That tree was like a friend you wanted to smile at, or a dear pet you wanted to caress. I did so, whenever I went by.

Gazing at the tree one day, I realised how perfectly shaped it was to

hold a tree house—something I had always dreamed of making. I saw that some branches higher up in the tree formed a perfect base for a platform.

I set to it immediately, with old boards of wood and with Mehera's encouragement at every step. When the tree house was ready, Mehera and I climbed up and sat on the "sitting room," waving to our sisters cheering from below. We were so comfortable up there, with the leafy branches overhead shading us from the sun, that we spent more time up there than planned. This required further thought for our comfort.

Nothing makes a chat between friends more enjoyable than something to munch, don't you think? At least that's what I've always believed. So I tied a rope to a basket and slung it over the branches in such a way that it could be lowered and pulled up when wanted—and I kept a little handbell ready. Then I arranged with cousin Naja, queen of our kitchen, that when she heard me ring the bell she had to put a couple of chapattis in the lowered basket. She promptly did so every time, bless her. I would then pull up the basket. While swapping stories, Mehera and I would nibble at the plain chapattis, which tasted sweeter than any chocolate cake. Now our tree house was a "dining room" as well!

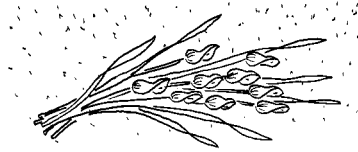
Seated up there, we would be talking of Baba and of our times at school, or Mehera would read me stories from *Shakespeare for Children* or recount a film she had seen. One such film story, recounted by Mehera



Who is this Arabian princess and this cabaret dancer with her? It is Mehera and me, dressed up for a play we performed for Baba's entertainment when He returned to Nasik after His first visit to the West.

That's fine. But why have I chosen this extraordinary picture for this story? First of all, it is the only picture I have of us taken in 1932. And secondly, it shows both of us wearing our special necklaces which Baba brought for us from England and told us to wear continually.

while we were perched atop that tree, touched me very deeply. It was a story of true love, which her glowing face reflected while Baba shone from her eyes!



A Real Nun

As I have said before, I was educated in the Convent of Jesus and Mary in Poona. Mehera, too, had attended the school before me. We were taught by the nuns, as well as by the regular teachers.

I loved the nuns, the habits they wore, and their gracious ways. They were always busy with their work and their prayers, and I marvelled at the time and care they devoted to the lilies in their garden. Whenever one of the nuns carried a long sheaf of pure white lilies into the church of the Convent, I would feel touched. “She’s offering it to Jesus,” I’d say to myself, “just like Mehera would offer it to Baba.”

Apart from giving piano lessons and moral lessons, the nuns also



Happiness is being with God in human form. Standing beside Him outside our water-tank quarters on Meherabad Hill, I am fifteen years old and totally committed to living a life of purity, poverty, and obedience to Baba—my God, my Brother, my All-in-All.

taught excellent needlework. However, what I'll never forget is the fudge the nuns used to make for school fairs—it was heavenly!

Two nuns I remember with special tenderness. One was the jolly Irish nun who was our Mother Superior when I was admitted into the school. The other was the very kind, soft-spoken Sister Matilde who taught us French. Although we did not learn much of French grammar from her, she gave us a true knowledge and love of France. I was to remember and thank her for this when we visited France with Baba in 1937. Whatever we saw there, I felt I had seen it before—through the eyes of gentle Soeur Matilde.

I had always wanted to be a nun—a nun for Baba, just like Mehera, Naja, and the other women who had given up everything to be with Baba, serving Him in total obedience and strictest discipline.

One morning during recess, one of my school friends was being catty and asked, “Mani Irani, do you know why the nuns are so good to you?”

“No,” I said. “Why?”

“Because you’re going to become a Catholic nun.”

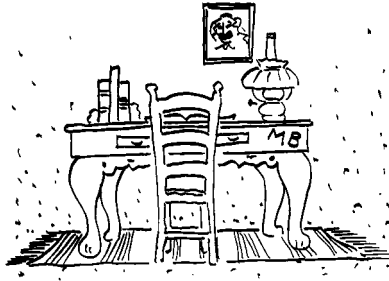
“But I’m not going to become a Catholic nun,” I replied.

“No? Then what kind of nun are you going to become?”

I don’t know what made me say, “I’m going to become a *real* nun!”

Years later, after joining Baba as a “real nun,” I realised the truth of

what I had uttered as a little girl. There was indeed no nunnery like ours, so cloistered and strict, and yet so alive and buoyant with the joy of God's personal presence and love. Yes, being Baba's nun was being a real nun in the deepest and truest sense of the word.



Big Orders

*B*y the time I was eleven, I was old enough (and certainly proud enough) to receive “big orders” from Baba. These “big” orders were based on my leading a pure life at all times, in all circumstances.

Actually this wasn't so difficult for me for two reasons: One, my absolute determination to obey Baba at all cost. Two, the fact that my generation was not a permissive one, and parental discipline was mostly an expected and accepted thing. Above all, Baba always helped me in my resolve to please Him in every little thing.

This incident will show you what I mean:

I was nearly twelve years old. I had a study desk at home, all my own. It was a Victorian piece with a tear-drop border. That's where I'd sit happily reading the weekly *School Girl* magazine in English, or the *Kabir Vani* (verses of Kabir) in Gujarati. And yes, once in a while I was compelled to catch up with my schoolwork and read English history, a subject I detested.

No matter what I was doing, my thoughts turned to Baba. So is it any wonder that I carved out Baba's initials "M B" in the centre of that tear-drop border of my desk? It took me hours to do this with my brother Beheram's penknife, but I was quite pleased with the result. And while I was reading, my eyes constantly travelled from Baba's picture on the top of my desk to His carved initials on the border.

As you know, my name begins with an "M." And it so happened that the name of this old friend of the family began with a "B." Once when this friend visited while my parents were out, he presented me with a *School Girl* magazine and asked me what the initials "M B" on my desk stood for.

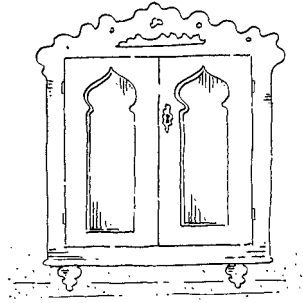
I said in fun, "You tell me." I was quite sure that he would say "Meher Baba."

Instead, I was shocked to hear him say that the initials "M B" stood for my name and his name! I was very angry. How dare this man link his initial with mine! I told him so, and he turned and left the house.

I immediately got out my brother's penknife and started scraping off the initials from that border of my desk. I was in such a hurry to remove the initials that I made a mess of it!

No wonder that my exasperated mother asked when she returned home, "For heaven's sake, Mani, will you tell me why you are chopping up our good furniture?"

I can't remember the excuse I gave her, but I felt ever so good after I had wiped away all trace of what that man had dared to suggest to me!



The Secret Cupboard

*I*ll always remember a very special moment in my life, a moment which touched me deep inside. It made me feel like I was given the sight to see something which cannot be seen. What I witnessed in that moment was an act of total surrender and sacrifice on the part of my mother—her acceptance of the fact that her Son was not just for her, but for the whole world.

My school wasn't far from home, so I used to walk to and from school every day. I even made an extra run home at lunchtime. Most of my friends stayed in school and munched on sandwiches and bananas

which they had brought from home. I was smarter—I ran home to enjoy a hot meal. When I reached home I would find Mother waiting for me, my plate laid ready on the table and my food kept warm on the stove.

As you must know, India was then under British rule, and whenever an important British personage died a holiday was declared in his honour. On this particular morning at school, the nun in charge declared that she had very sad news to give us and announced that Lord so-and-so had died. “Well, children,” she said, “in honour of Lord so-and-so, the school is observing a holiday.”

We felt jubilant but managed to look properly sad and pious as we filed out of class with bowed heads. Once we were outside the gates we threw our solar topees into the air and cheered loudly, “Hooray! Lord so-and-so is dead! Hip, hip, hooray!” And my heart said, “Thank you Baba, this is great,” as I ran all the way home.

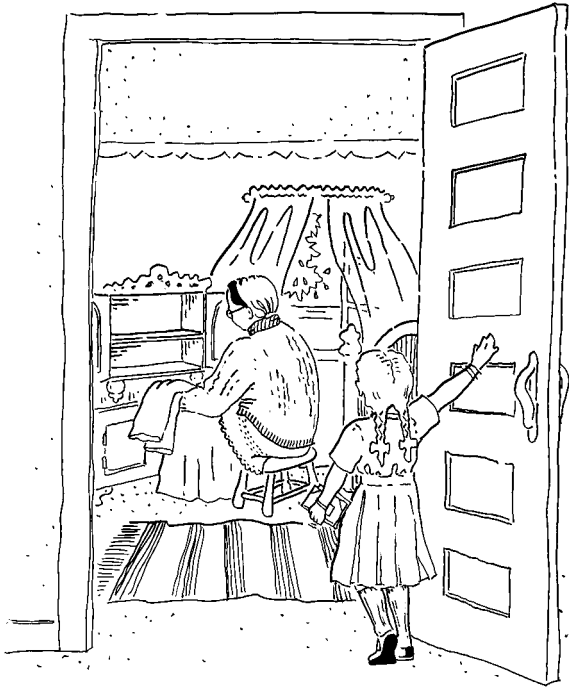
Mother wasn’t expecting me to be home so early. She thought she was by herself and that I wouldn’t be disturbing her privacy for another hour yet.

I’ve always been sensitive to atmosphere. And as I entered home, the atmosphere felt different. There was a still and solemn feeling, as though I were entering a church.

Walking softly to the threshold of her room, I found Mother seated

before the open panels of my favourite little cupboard, an ornate rose-wood piece. This particular cupboard in our home was smaller than the rest, and always locked. I'd never seen it open. It felt like there was a secret locked away inside.

Now, for the first time, I was seeing the cupboard with its panels



open! In front of it was Mother, seated on a low stool. She was sitting with a pair of trousers draped over her arms and across her lap, as though she were holding a child.* Tears, silent tears, were rolling down her cheeks, and I saw them fall onto the trousers in her lap. I couldn't move. I'd never seen Mother cry. I did not have to ask. I knew that the trousers

* Later in life I likened this scene to a picture I saw of the Pieta.

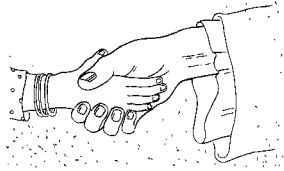
were Baba's, that in this cupboard Mother had stored clothes that her Son had worn at school and in college.

A timeless moment. And then Mother seemed suddenly aware of my presence. Brushing away her tears roughly, she pushed a pile of clothes into the cupboard and turned as though nothing unusual had happened.

"Why are you home so early from school?" she asked. "It's not yet lunchtime." I had to tell her the good news of the demise of Lord so-and-so, bless him.

Two days later when Mother wasn't around, I tried the cupboard door. It was unlocked. I opened it and found it empty. It was easy to guess that Mother had given away her Son's clothes, either to Gulmai, or Khorshed, or any of the others who were always asking Mother for Baba's personal belongings.

That moment when I had seen her weeping over His clothes was surely the moment when she gave up her personal claim to her beloved Son. It was her way of saying to the world, "I give Him to you. Have Him. He's yours."



Silence Unbroken

*E*very now and then we'd hear a mention about Baba planning to break His Silence. Of course, anything concerning Baba was my concern and I wanted to be in on it. So I went and took a special promise from Him.

I said, "Baba, when You break Your Silence, I want to be with You."

He said, "Of course you'll be with Me!"

I said, "Promise, promise!" So He did. He promised solemnly with His hand in mine. After I had Him do that again and again, I felt the matter was sealed. This happened some five years after Baba began His Silence.

My holidays over, I went back to school. But somewhere in the middle of my school term, I heard that Baba had sent out a circular saying He

was going to break His Silence soon. I was shocked. I couldn't believe it. Baba knew my next holidays wouldn't be till after November. And He knew He had forbidden me to go to Him during school. He had promised me most solemnly to have me with Him when He broke His Silence. And yet He had decided to break His Silence at this time!

I immediately sat down and wrote a letter to my dear Brother saying, "You promised me that I will be with You when You break Your Silence. I am most surprised to hear You're going to break Your Silence in two months when I am still at school. So, either You allow me to come and be with You when You break Your Silence, or You postpone the breaking of Your Silence."

I added a PS, "I can come right now." This must have scared Baba because His reply came back very fast.

"No, don't come," He wrote. "I've decided to postpone the breaking of My Silence."

Well, I took His decision for granted. After all, it was one of the two things I had asked Him to do. So, it seemed quite natural that Baba postponed the breaking of His Silence until the time when His kid sister could be with Him during her holidays!





Best Friends

*M*any of my classmates at the Convent School were Goanese Catholics. One of them was Mary de Sousa, who became my best friend. My reason for liking her so much was that she was very opposite to me. She was too serious, while I was too light-hearted. She was not just a staunch Catholic, she was also a very good girl and never told a lie. I admired her so much for it because telling a lie was easy as pie for me. I found it most natural to do so as a child, because I lied in order to avoid a scolding at school or a spanking at home.

Even if I was caught red-handed doing something I wasn't supposed

to do, I would look very innocent and firmly deny it, “No, I didn’t do it.”

But if Mary were asked by the teacher, “Mary de Sousa, did you do this?” she would promptly stand up and say, “Yes, Miss,” even if it meant taking punishment for it.

I’d look up at Mary with melting eyes and wonder to myself, “How, oh how does she do it?”*

I loved Mary’s love for Jesus. Whenever we were together, she would tell me stories of Jesus, Mother Mary, and the dear saints. For my birthday she would give me a beautiful little picture card of Saint Catherine or Saint Anne. On the back she would write, “To my friend Mani, from Mary.” Whereas when her birthday came round, I’d get her a bright balloon or something just as silly. But Mary was so good, she’d accept it as if it was exactly what she wanted.

I didn’t just love Jesus as someone long ago. For me, Jesus was alive and real and now. Jesus was here again, and His name was Meher Baba. So it was natural for me to say “Baba” instead of “Jesus,” as I sometimes did to myself.

In the Catholic churches, the suffering of Jesus is evident everywhere,

*It will be interesting for young readers, and surely a relief for their mothers, to know that when I grew older I didn’t lie any more—there was no need to. And, most important, I did not tell a lie to Baba at any time.

with the central figure of the Crucified Lord overseeing all. One seldom saw a picture of Jesus without the Cross. By always seeing Jesus on the Cross, one somehow got used to that aspect of His infinite suffering.

But one time, when I saw a portrait of Jesus with a crown of thorns on His head and blood dripping down His forehead, I sobbed. “How could they do that to Baba,” I kept saying over and over.

I loved going into the church which stood in the grounds of the Convent. I loved the atmosphere in there.

During our short morning recess, or “interval” as we called it, Mary and I often chose to be in the church instead of playing games in the school grounds. Before that, however, as soon as the recess bell rang, I would run to the big iron gate in back of the school, clutching my precious pocket money. Through the grill I’d buy baked grams (chick-peas) from the old woman selling her goodies outside the gate, and also some sticky brown-sugar toffee which I loved.

One day after coming out of the church Mary and I sat on its entrance steps, our backs to Lord Jesus on the Cross. I offered Mary some toffee and grams, but as usual she said, “No, thank you.” She was that good! I didn’t mind because then I had more for myself. Mary went on talking, telling stories of saints. I went on eating, the toffee leaving a

brown sticky circle around my mouth.

Suddenly I found a torrent of thoughts rushing into my mind. I thought, “Here’s Mary, and she’s my best friend. She loves Jesus so much. She’s so good. I know Jesus is right here on earth, and I haven’t told her! All this time I never told her? What kind of a friend am I?”

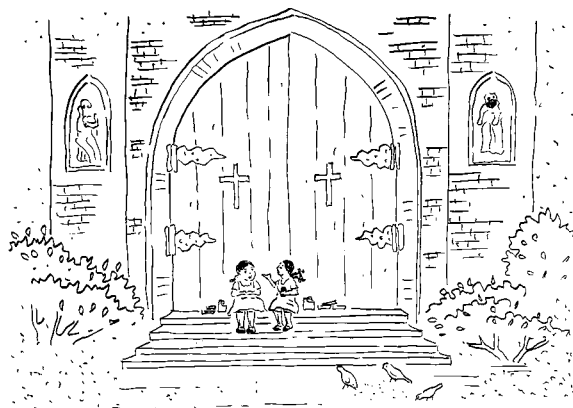
And then I imagined what she would do when I told her. She would jump up for joy and shout, “Jesus is here!” Or, she might even scold me for not having told her before.

So with the toffee still in my hands and my open mouth all brown and sticky, I had to stop her in the midst of what she was telling me.

“Mary!” I burst out.

She sensed the urgency in my voice and looked into my excited face. “Yes?” she said, looking surprised.

I told her. I said, “Do you know, my brother is Christ!” And then as I was about to tell her His address (He didn’t have a phone number, you see), I saw her face and knew that Mary wasn’t going to do any of the things I thought she would do. She didn’t say a word, but I could feel an



icy coldness coming from within her. It was as if the door of a frigidaire had opened. For some reason, there is one little detail that I remember distinctly. Mary got up and brushed off the back of her skirt as she walked away.

I sat dumbfounded. Here I had given her the best news in the world, and she just walked away!

I called out, “Mary! Oh Mary! Mary, listen!”

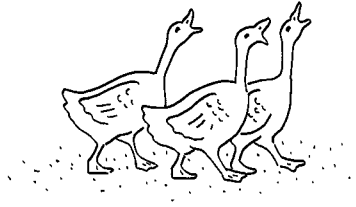
But she didn’t turn. She was so angry that she wouldn’t talk to me for a month. Trying to catch her eye, I would wait behind the Convent wall, but she never met my smile. Finally one morning our eyes met and she came over to talk to me, but it was not the same. It never was the same again.

When I told her what a bad Christian she’d been, she said, “Why?”

I said, “Would a good Christian act as you did? Supposing I was wrong—which I am NOT, by the way—but just supposing I was wrong, what about all that Christian charity? How could you not talk to me for weeks?”

No, our friendship was no longer the same. And anyway, some time after that I came to Baba for good and never saw Mary again, nor had any contact with her.

But I couldn’t help thinking to myself, “Well, Mani, you weren’t good, but you got God. Mary was so good, she missed Him.”



Thirteenth Birthday

*M*other was very particular that her children attend the agyari (fire-temple) on certain religious days to say prayers and offer the customary sandalwood, as any good Zoroastrian would do. And this applied very specially to birthdays. On my birthdays I had to get up very early in the morning, have a bath and wash my hair, and dress up in my birthday finery.

After that, even before I had tasted the special birthday breakfast I had been looking forward to, I had to march off to the agyari. Not without a protest, you can be sure.

I would remonstrate loudly: "My birthday should be *my* day," I would say. "At least on my birthday I should be free to do what I want. I should

get up late. If I don't want to have a bath, I shouldn't have a bath. If I want to play, I should play."

From Mother's point of view, that just wasn't done. You could do what you liked when you grew up. Now you had to listen to Mother. She knew what was good for you.

So, early on the morning of my thirteenth birthday there I was, all dressed up and walking to the agyari with the stubby little sticks of sandalwood clutched in my hand. Once I left the house, I walked happily to the tap-tap of my new shoes because actually I liked the agyari. It was a fine structure with marble steps and a very lovely atmosphere. Off to the side were a couple of little cottages where the dastoors (Zoroastrian priests) lived with their families. One of the dastoors even had some geese in a pen.

As I walked through the gate of the agyari, I heard loud honking and knew the geese had not been penned up as yet. I also knew how fiercely geese can chase and attack intruders. So, when I saw them aiming for me, I was so scared that I froze. But my thoughts raced. What was I to do? If I turned and ran off right now, my long legs could make it. I could escape the wretched geese. But then Mother would just send me right back with the sandalwood. At least I must offer the sandalwood to the dastoor.

Just then a dastoor appeared, a not-so-young, portly person with a

big stomach, coming down the marble steps. His wooden sandals made loud clickety sounds, and his beard wagged up and down as he muttered some prayer.

My heart had called out to Baba for help, and here was this God-sent priest. All this happened in seconds. I had no time to go over to the dastoor and politely offer him the sandalwood which must be given to him. I acted immediately.

From near the gate where I was standing, I flung the small but heavy sticks of sandalwood at him shouting “Catch, Dastoorji, catch!” Too late. As he looked up, the sandalwood sticks hit him squarely in the stomach. I did not wait to see more, but I heard the sound of “Ughh” that came from him when the sandalwood made contact with his venerable person.

Then I ran for home, ran as fast as my legs could carry me, with the chorus of geese-honks following me. I ran on and on, the length of the road. At last I stopped and turned. No geese in sight.

I went home, looking as if nothing had happened. Mother said, “Did everything go well at the agyari?”

I said, “Yes, Mother.”

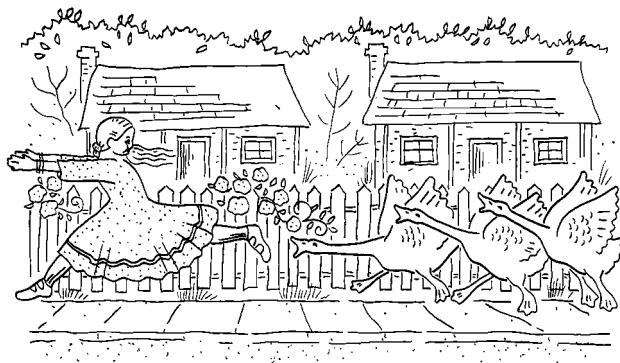
“Did you give the sandalwood to the Dastoorji?”

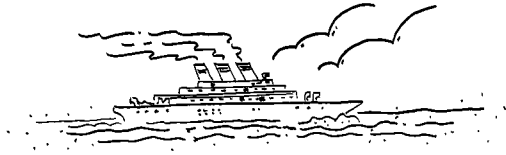
“Yes, Mother, I gave it to him.”

I was hungry. While eating the wonderful birthday breakfast Mother

served me, I thought, “What a relief! I won’t be going again to the agyari for some time.”

I did not know it would be for all time. On my fourteenth birthday I was in Nasik. I had left home to be with Baba forever, to be one of His “real nuns.”





Invitation from the Ocean

*T*he very first letter I received from overseas was a letter from Baba, in 1932. That's exciting enough for a thirteen-year-old girl. But the real thrill was in the contents, carried across the ocean by the waves of my good destiny. The letter was written on Lloyd Triestino Shipping Company's notepaper, and was dictated and signed by Baba on the ship *Ausonia*. I carried it about with me till I came to Baba for always, by the end of the same year.

Here's what He said to me:

Darling Mani,

... I would feel most pleased if you could stay with Mehera and Naja, leading the present pure life and obeying my usual orders.

But mother might object and not let you stay away from her.

But remember, once you are free from mother, join Mehera and stay with her.

But you must stay in a way that no big order is broken. You know how dear you are to me and how much I love my darling sister.

Be always thinking of me and remember my wishes and big orders.

M.S. Irani



The Skipping-Rope

I was not yet fourteen when at last I was allowed to join Baba for good. Although Mother had agreed for me to leave home and “be with Merog,” she was sad. I was aware of it and understood her feelings, but how could I help being selfish? To be with Baba forever had been my sole ambition all along.

So you can imagine how my heart skipped and hopped with joy as I packed for Nasik, where I would join Baba and His women mandali for ever and ever.

There was very little to pack, really. Baba told me to bring with me just a few clothes. Nothing else. So I left behind me all my favourite friends, like my matchbox collection and stack of *School Girl* magazines.

And how about my skipping-rope (jump-rope) with the pretty coloured handles? Well, that was different. As it had been my favourite companion throughout school, I felt it would miss me too much if I left it behind. Besides, it was such a small and trivial thing, I told myself. When Baba said not to bring anything besides the clothes, He surely did not mean this little skipping-rope! So, it got packed in my tin trunk, hidden way underneath my clothes.

My conscience, too, was hiding under my self-arguments, because deep down I really knew that what I was doing was not right, that maybe I was breaking an order by taking my skipping-rope to Nasik. But mistakes also serve, and this one served to teach me that no order from Baba is insignificant, ever. Small or big, His orders are always important.

On reaching my destination, I did not unpack the skipping-rope. I also didn't think it necessary to tell Baba about it, nor did He ask me. But see how beautifully He fished out my little secret!

Some children came to visit Baba during their holidays. Baba talked about their school, their studies, and their sports.

Baba asked, "What kind of games do you have in school?"

Their replies were animated. "Oh, we have hockey and cricket, badminton and swimming." Baba seemed full of admiration for their games.

After a while, feeling left out, I jumped into the conversation. "In the

Convent,” I said, “we didn’t have hockey or cricket, but we had plenty of skipping games. I was very good with my skipping-rope, very good!”

“Really?” Baba beamed, playing along beautifully. Looking around, He seemed to say, “What do you know! My kid sister, *so clever!*”

Now I was really opening up. “Oh, yes, Baba. I could easily do a hundred back-flips and over a hundred cross-overs and a double twelve both ways...” and on and on through the names for kinds of jumps we knew in school “...and I could do them better than anybody else.”

Baba couldn’t believe it. He was looking so proud of me that I wanted to demonstrate what I could do. I blurted out, “I can show You!”

“But how can you?” Baba said, looking disappointed. “You haven’t got a skipping-rope.”

“Yes I have,” I said brightly. Then my voice trailed off to “I ha-a-ve,” and my face dropped to zero. I realised I was caught in the trap. He had known all along that I had brought the skipping-rope from home. He had wanted me to tell Him.

There was nothing more to say. He called me over and asked gently, “Do you love Me?”

“Yes, Baba.”

“How much?”

“More than anything.”

“And you’d do anything for Me?”

“Anything.”

“Even if I told you to take that skipping-rope and throw it away forever, you would do it?”

“Yes, of course!”

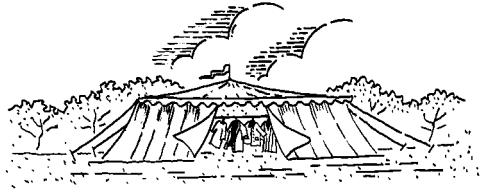
“All right,” said Baba. “Do it.”

So I took that skipping-rope to the farthest end of the compound and flung it away with all my might.

That was the end of the skipping-rope. I never saw it or thought of it again.

Throwing it away wasn’t hard. I was doing it for Baba.





God's Wardrobe

*I*n India it is common to refer to God as “the One Upstairs”—as if God stays way up there in heaven enjoying a permanent holiday after creating the world, now and then answering a prayer or two!

Lucky for us, this isn't the way it is. Luckily God loves His creation so much that now and then He dresses up as man and comes “downstairs” to be among His children on earth. In order to be seen by us, He puts on the cloak of Perfect Man. Thus for a while He stays with us and plays with us, laughs with us and suffers with us. But He keeps it all a secret. Only a few share this great divine secret of God's appearance while He is “downstairs” as man. He is called the Avatar, because being God + Man = Avatar.

After some time with us, God drops His cloak (human form), and leaves it behind for the world to have and to worship. Yes, God leaves His cloak with us, but He does not leave us! Although we cannot see Him any more, His Love and grace flow more powerfully than ever, available to everyone.

God is One, the One and Only. But God's cloaks are many. Each time God decides to come "downstairs," He chooses a different cloak from His beautiful wardrobe.

Through endless time, God has worn many cloaks for the sake of His children on earth. As we know, the cloaks of God have different names, like Zoroaster, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed. And now, as we know, it is Meher Baba.

Not very long ago I had a dream which illustrates what I've just been telling you. I'm sure you'll enjoy it.

In my dream I was driving with a friend in a small red car. It was a sports car with no top and a back seat just big enough for one person. When the car stopped at a traffic signal, I felt a presence behind me in the dusky light. Turning, I saw a figure dressed in Arabian clothes.

Instantly I knew, without a doubt, that it was the Prophet! He silently indicated that He wanted to hitch a ride in our car. As I nodded, He got into the small back seat, and we drove on. After a while, at a sign from

Him, we stopped. He got down and walked away.

Very curious to know where He was going and why, I got down from the car and quietly followed Him. Keeping some distance, I followed Him through a maze of tents of different sizes and shapes, like you see in the grounds of a large circus.

At last He stopped before a big tent with a flat top, and as He pushed open the entrance flap of the tent, I saw a long row of costumes hanging along its wall. As the Prophet walked by the row of costumes, fingering them lightly before picking one for His next Act, I woke up from my dream! I woke up and my heart cried out:

Dear God, I didn't have to see which garb You picked. I know. I know You picked the very most beautiful One named Meher Baba. I know because I have seen You in the garb of Meher Baba, loved You as naturally as a fish loves water, lived my life with You, which is all I have ever wanted to do!

Now there are many, many, many who have not seen You in Person but have received You in their hearts and follow You. Among them are those who walk the long path of surrender and dare to climb the mountain of obedience in order to reach You, some day, by Your grace.

O Beloved Avatar, Your lovers await You. No matter what costume You will wear for Your next Act, they will know You. Their hearts will recognize You and be ready to be received by You.

Yes, they will wait, sustained by their longing for You and Your promise to them:

“I will come again!”

When God came downstairs as Meher Baba.





The author, with two of the many children who visit Meherazad and enjoy her childhood stories.

There are many books by and about Meher Baba.

For further information contact:

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Myrtle Beach, SC 29572, USA.

www.sheriarbooks.org