*The Other Mothers Have Left*

Dear Ma,

Before I tax you with more serious matters, remember that I miss you each day, and every part of me wants to return to our old house in Calcutta where I would sit by you and crush the chilies and hear you complain. But there is no you or old house or a Calcutta that feels the same here in Delhi. People are loud and round and quite rude to each other. No one writes anymore, and it feels strange to speak to you here, passively, it feels as though you live. This older way—bringing pen to paper, no deletion, only pure handwriting and spelling mistakes—relieves me tonight, it keeps you alive.

Till a certain age I believed that I understood this world. Every problem had a solution, you taught me, and this advice stayed with me since I was a little girl. I didn’t know much then, but I knew that things could be known, through diagrams, through art, through questions. What is the problem*,* I’d ask, and I’d act upon the solution to fix it. I never understood why Dev continued to drink to death in *Devdas*, or why he never ran away with the prostitute. But then I’d ask myself, what does the author *really* mean to say, and the complex romance would sing to me. I’d draw the diagram of a Rankine cycle to remind me that a perfect engine could never be made, and that it meant that the universe was expanding. I drew, I questioned, and it made sense.

Some days there were only answers and no questions. I would be responding to emails at work and realize how fifty-two years of life resulted in that moment in my office, how the alignment of stars governed my fate that day. I do ask myself who will cry the most when I die, I think papa would’ve, if he were alive. You were always more composed and economical with tears.

Till a certain age I did believe that I understood everything. Till Hafiz told me he would like to die. In the beginning I thought of it as an innocuous confession. Why, even I have said it so many times when my boss yells or Suleiman gets cranky or literally any man opens his mouth for more than a minute. Why wouldn’t anyone want to die on those terrible days when one should feel like dying? Remember how one night you cried to me and told me you’d die if it wasn’t for me. But you stayed. You put on your headscarf and returned to work. To medicate our wounds, we often harbor extreme language. I mean, even I have often said that the prime minister was mad and I’d like to kill the bureaucrat babusin the government offices who made my life miserable while filing my taxes. But of course the prime minister isn’t mad. He would be, in asylum or prison or somewhere except his office, if he was. I wouldn’t really kill the babu behind the desk who takes forever to finish his lunch before he collects my documents. Extreme happened in books that we read for a quick glimpse of what our lives were not. All of us have at least one defect that bothers us forever, and when Hafiz came to us, complaining, awake for days, we thought of his confessions as those ignorable defects.

The basics of life aren’t difficult at all. Whenever I notice my mouth getting dry, I drink more water. Whenever I notice I was putting on weight, I skip the biscuits with the chai, and I’d feel slimmer within weeks. Suleiman and I couldn’t get as wealthy as you and papa, but we manage to travel sometimes. Our home is quite decent. Suleiman hates that we are tenants even in our fifties—practically homeless the moment we stop paying—but he doesn’t realize that we haven’t loaned anything. You and papa were always busy seeking tenants, or repairing the seepages in your walls, or looking to dispose of things. Each time you found that hourglass from Jerusalem, you planned to dispose of it. But then the memories came to you and you put it out in your drawing room. I still have that damned hourglass. On the other hand, Suleiman and I will leave as we came, smiling in the memories of those few people we’ve met. Another Bengali family, Mr. and Mrs. Sen, moved next to us, and we have become quite close. Mrs. Sen finds a reason to show up every evening. Mrs. Sen is more convenient to have than any object in this world. Friends don’t need to be dusted or passed on when you die.

You equipped me to be an engineer when no woman chose this path in life. All my college friends got married and fry kebabs in pans, but you equipped me to make cars. Arabian women couldn’t drive them until recently, and I was a Muslim woman designing them. You used to sway your hair in the wind when papa went away, no headscarf, no burka, only you and the sun and your shimmering black hair, and I felt the same joy riding in my own designs, as I felt the wind outside as I drove the car. They laughed at me for praying at work, pulling a mat in the corner by the bathroom that faced Mecca. They thought I prayed to the bathroom god. But your resilience stays with me to this day.

But now I’m tired of the tick-tock guinea pig lifestyle. I have decided, Ma, to quit work. So much has changed that I don’t have the energy to do it anymore. Now I’ll sit at home and read, knit perhaps. Mrs. Sen never stepped foot in an office, but says she kept busy for all these years. How, I do not know, but it is possible.

Miss you more each passing day,

Nafisa

Dear Ma,

To every mother her child is the most beautiful, wondrous thing. It is her own clockwork: each needle and gear placed precisely where it should be to create a body capable of crying and loving and smiling. Hafiz came to me twenty-three years ago but I am still startled by his hair’s alignment and the tip of his nose. Suleiman thinks he gave him the hair and I gave him the nose. But Suleiman is bald and I find it rather rude of him to celebrate his foreboding genes for our son who is so young. He’s gotten into this baldness oil called *Hims* which makes him feel more him than him before. I, on the other hand, don’t have to worry about the baldness. Hair or no hair my head will be covered. Just like yours, Ma.

I wonder what you thought of me when you saw me sleeping. There is no way to find out but I will speculate tonight.

Love,

Nafisa

Dearest Ma,

You are no longer with us. I can recite the gloomy aspects of my life to you without depressing you. It is a fine arrangement. I never told you about Hafiz when you lived because of how proud you were of him. You felt accomplished as his grandmother. You fed him like a prince. How could I tell you?

But Hafiz. I was waiting outside his psychiatrist’s door after two years of him hinting at us that he wasn’t just more sensitive, weirder, or as I began to believe more *defected*, more reclusive, more moody than other people. The door had a tiny board with the picture of a distressed white man holding his head, and a white woman consoling him. “Don’t Ignore the Signs”, it said below the picture. I felt attacked, for the first time in a hospital, to be educated yet wronged. Hafiz was behind that door, confessing to a stranger the things he couldn’t tell me.

I wonder if psychiatrists can empathize. Even at my company, they’d report a statistic of defective engines in the cars we produced, and we’d try to reduce the number. But it never occurred to me to visit the factory and befriend each and every defected engine, and ask it, *my dear piece of carbon-steel, can you tell me what went wrong? What is the problem? Here is the solution.* When one’s mental defects become public—commodified, plastic, like a fat Ganesha idol seated for purchase—how is one suicidal person different from the other? Can the psychiatrist understand that he is not just a boy, but *my* son?

Love,

Nafisa

When I met the psychiatrist in person, he asked me not to leave him alone for how severe his condition had become. “But what is it, I mean, the diagnosis?”

“He hasn’t told you?”

“Well, since he knows that I’m meeting you, he’d hope you’d be the one to tell me. I can’t go to him and ask—so, son, what is it?”

“The first time I met him I thought he was obsessive compulsive. But it is beginning to look like—don’t be too alarmed—schizophrenia to me. I can’t say without speaking to him more. There are more tests. The diagnosis is a long process but the treatment is even longer. He thinks, I mean, he’s convinced that someone is following him from his office to his house.”

“He did mention that.”

“And that he could be the tenth avatar of Vishnu. That’s not normal or natural. It is also a little unnatural that he would say that being, ugh, I’m assuming, you’re Muslims.”

“*Very* proud Muslims. Don’t say that my son is unnatural.”

“He isn’t unnatural. He is lost inside a labyrinth of thoughts and images and questions. Be with him as much as you can.”

“I will leave everything to be by his side, but is he willing?” Why would a twenty-three year old be willing to live with his mother?

“He has to be willing, so as to say, if he does something unforeseen, he has you to take care of the matter. Convince him. He will not stop you. He understands that he needs attention.”

Dearest Ma,

Sometimes I wish I could stay at home to do nothing and finish all the books that papa inherited from grandfather. Some of them are signed in the ‘30s and smell of a time when India was a British colony. But I return to work like a donkey that doesn’t question its master. I understood that like the hands of a clock that pass by the same numbers several times, I will pass by the same people and do the same work for years. If you are happy on day one, happy on day two, happy on day three, and go on like an infinite mathematical series, x1, x2, x3, dot dot dot dot, then you will end up with a sum of happy. I seek amusement in the drudgery that comes from working on a laptop. It is always low on battery, and I know that. Still, each time when it sends that error message, I rummage through my bag for the charger in absolute horror that I’ve have left it at home. It is amusing in retrospect, to keep things alive.

There wasn’t much to understand till a certain age. Money came and went, Suleiman picked me up from work, the food I made pleased us more often than not. There wasn’t much to question. I have around 300 friends on Facebook and I’ve started meeting some old college friends. It is hard to look for them since they’ve married and changed their last names. Do you remember Anjali from college? She now lives in Seattle and sells saris, and visits Delhi only in the winters to seen her parents. Her son is as old as Hafiz. Still, I don’t regret losing my friends as I know they don’t regret losing me. People leak into your lives every now and then. There wasn’t much to hold on to, and there isn’t much holding me. I don’t care twopence for taking a break from work for a few months. I know that someone else will pick it up and my departure won’t stir much. Hafiz is a junior level analyst in Bombay and returns from work in the evening. I don’t even care twopence for waiting in his office’s reception, if it comes to that, so he is happy to see me. Why, I can pick up a book and finish it. I want to read *Wuthering Heights* again. It seemed dippy in school but I knew I wasn’t ready then. I got lost between the many Catherines and the sir-madam formalities, but now I’ll keep track.

Will a tigress hunt for her cub after he learns to hunt himself? He is old enough to be embarrassed of me waiting outside his office, so I wouldn’t do it regularly, but I am prepared. Once the cub learns how to hunt, the tigress leaves him alone to let him find his own territory. The tiger, no more a cub, sometimes returns to his mother, old enough to be her new boyfriend. But what if the tiger returned to his mother with a fractured leg? Would the old tigress hunt for him and lick his wounds or would she shun him? Will she remember her baby? I don’t know if I wanted to be with my son for the rest of his life.

When I took him swimming and waited with the other mothers behind the life-guards—he was, I think, ten or eleven then—he used to swim to the pool’s edge to wave hello and I sprang from my seat to meet him. I squatted and we chatted about nothing in particular. He said I looked taller when he was in the pool below my level. Sometimes he would squint as the evening sun was right behind my head. But I could see him, like a little dolphin with his skin glistening with the thin layer of water that sparkled in the sun. He splashed water on my face and I scolded him for wetting my sari—sweetly—my son had done nothing wrong. My Hafiz hasn’t done anything wrong! Then he swam away without saying goodbye, as if to show me how his legs undulated like a sting ray. I returned smiling to the other mothers who were also smiling to watch us. The other mothers, it appears, have now left.

Nafisa

Dear Ma,

When he is away, I think of ways to surprise him. I have, for the first time, immersed myself in the thrills of a housewife, inspecting his things to know him and not bust him. I am too old to bust him, I forget that I am *his* guest now. Is it old-fashioned of me to expect a diary hidden from the rest of the world? It would make things so simple, to hear him raw, to let him speak to speak and not be heard. I try new recipes— curries, pastas, cakes—but he thinks that I cook them for me, using him as an excuse. His accusation may not be wrong. Suleiman’s mother loved cooking and made extravagant meals when we visited her, perhaps so that she didn’t seem like a widow cooking a five-course meal for herself.

Suleiman has also learned to manage alone. Can you imagine papa in the kitchen for more than two minutes? He didn’t even go buy the vegetables because it looked too feminine on him. But Suleiman isn’t as cross as papa. It would be easier if we could all live together in Delhi, or if he could move to Bombay and live with Hafiz, but he can’t afford to lose his job, especially when it gets so hard at our age to find jobs.

“How is he?” he asked me when I went to Delhi for a weekend.

“I mean there’s nothing wrong, *physically,* there was never anything wrong like that. He’s been working out. As long as he remains like this.”

“Why doesn’t he come meet me? I am his father.”

“He will, he will, give him time. I’ll discuss it. Maybe the three of us could do something together. Bombay is so close to Goa.”

“Goa? In the off-season?”

“Better off-season than another time. If you want to go watch other people then why even leave Delhi?”

Sometimes I watch Hafiz sleep and forget that he is large and muscular. I still think he can wrap himself into a cocoon and fit into my womb again. I peep closely to check if his hairline has receded. It hasn’t. Since he has expressed his desire to die, I have learned that I do not understand everything. To me he seemed happy, happier than *me* in fact, with solutions for things even I couldn’t solve. It didn’t surprise me when the doctor said he thinks faster than me and Suleiman combined. After I see him sleeping, I usually return to the other room to try and sleep myself if I’m not watching the TV. He gets up around twelve to get a glass of water sometimes. I like meeting him in the dark. He is uninhibited by pretense. Once I sat him down and asked him how he was doing. He is doing much better.

Love,

Nafisa

“I’m half asleep, mummy, can we do this some other time?”

“No, no, no, let’s do this now.” I told him. “Don’t go to work tomorrow if you’re tired. But talk to me.” I hugged him. He resisted but ultimately stayed, hugging me back, placing his chin next to my neck. He began to cry, softly before, sniffing, but then frowning to stop his tears from plummeting down his cheeks.

“It’s alright. It was always alright.” We were both looking at walls, holding each other, each hoping not to fail the other.

“I want to live, I really want to, but what for? It seems the same to me, every day.”

“You live for me and I’ll live for you. What’s so hard about that?”

“What happens when you go?”

“Have you thought about what happens to me if you go?”

I asked him if we could all go to Goa but he said he had work that weekend. But then on Friday morning while having tea, he told me he was going to Pune to visit his friend for a bachelor’s party. I knew he would enjoy the party—I wish he could party his entire life if that kept him happy—but it hurt me, at least for the while he was away, that he didn’t choose, didn’t even consider a holiday with us for that weekend. I felt bad for Suleiman and didn’t tell him about the party. He came back early that afternoon and began packing for the weekend, folding his expensive kurtas and swimming trunks. The party, it seemed, was at a place with a swimming pool.

“Remember when I used to take you swimming? Should I come with you to this ‘bachelor party’ as well?” I laughed. He didn’t.

“Oh yeah, why not? Why don’t you come with me to work as well?”

What if I told him I had considered that proposition at great length? He had told his friends at work that I was in Bombay in the search of an apartment for myself.

“Listen, I’ve served as the chief of operations for twenty years,” I reminded him. “I’m sure I can handle a junior analyst’s job.”

“Oh yes, *junior* analyst, mummy, thanks for reminding me, as if the Hindus don’t every day,” he said, zipping his little suitcase. “Sorry that I will never be you.”

“Shut up. You can’t be the CEO in your twenties. Do they call you things at work?”

“This one girl slides her hand in my beard and tells me her little brother can’t grow one as thick as mine because it’d make him look like a musalman. It’s not as bad as your times.”

He was a tall man but looked like a little penguin of a child with his multicolor schoolbag as he left, as if smiling for another happy day in kindergarten blowing bubbles with the other children. Thin air shrouded us as I waited alone at the door of his apartment with memories of when he was happy. Or was he a sad child, even when he didn’t know the difference? How could I reconcile with the fact that just as the brain senses pain but can’t feel it, the source of my happiness didn’t understand it himself?

Dear Ma,

He was gone this weekend and how still everything seemed. Everything remained where it was. In the mornings I’d see a spoon in the kitchen, so I’d know he made coffee before going to the gym. His comforters were crumpled up and a hair or two would show on his pillow. The bathroom floor had tiny hairs from his beard that he must’ve trimmed. I smelled the pillow, I opened the curtains in his room, I changed his bedsheet, and I slept on his bed in the afternoon. Everything appeared in two dimensions, each room, plane after plane, as if I were visiting his photographs and not him. As I slept, I felt the other rooms vibrating with his presence, often seeing an undulating outline, his shadow, passing by, running errands. I got up to check but there was no one, the floor had by then absorbed his shadow. I returned to his room, and then suddenly, while I was wrapped inside his comforter with my head on his pillow, thinking of him, it occurred to me that this afternoon was how my life would become if “something unforeseen” happened. His shadow would lurk in the other rooms, teasing me of the sweet memories of his defectless childhood. I ran from his room and didn’t fold his comforter, scared to be around his things. I felt that I was tampering with the dead that lived within him, why, I think I was haunted by him.

As I write to your ghost, mother, am I tampering with my reality or yours? I cried. I began eating from the tub of chocolate ice-cream and switched on the TV to watch the previous week’s episode of *Indian Idol.* They took in a blind contestant this year whose mother walks him to the stage each time he would sing. His songs didn’t move me, but I enjoyed his performance every week. He could not see any of the light that I could and I felt that the entire nation was spying on him. They showed his mother in the audience, proud of him, smiling, bobbing her head with the undulating rhythms of his song. The TV, the newspapers, the magazines, the articles, the internet, everyone was spying on the phenomenon of my pain. I wanted to die.

And then, after nearly two months of meeting him and his shadows, merging with his world, I decided to return home to Suleiman and go back to work. What was the purpose of *my* life, selfish of me to ask, other than following him and keeping him alive? The psychiatrist said the dose suited him, but his condition mimics diabetes. It is controllable but endless, progresses with age, and slowly depletes his body. I cleaned everything before I left. I washed his jeans and put them back in his drawer. I got him rice and boiled some for when he’d come. I found really cheap tickets back to Delhi for tomorrow. What if no one returns to this apartment, mummy? What if we are only the hallucinations in the next tenant’s wildest dreams?

Love,

Nafisa

*Deliver to Mrs. Nafisa Huq  
49 Raja Garden, Block 5  
New Delhi—110019*

Dear Ma,

I have chosen to write today because there is no silence known to me that comforts me more than the blankness of this page. Someone or the other wishes to speak to me and there is little respect left for my love for silence. Commotion stirs me. Every second I am asked if I need to do something, eat something, meet someone, not meet someone. Most of my time is also lost in translating my thoughts into words. I love to write but I can’t speak anymore, my own voice has become the greatest annoyance to me.

I must not waste your time and let you know, instantly, that I’m writing to let you know that I am suffering from a neurodegenerative disease that has already, in its subtle ways, begun troubling me. I do not want to share the name of this disease with you because you do not look beautiful when you are afraid. I have seen you strong going to work every morning and you must continue to be strong even in my absence. It is no more one of my mental games and emotions and mental health “crap”. I remember once right outside a restaurant, a peacock had caught my attention and I began running behind it. I fell and my leg bled profusely. Papa hastened for the orthopedic to see me. When my stomach misbehaved, he took me to a local doctor within minutes. Even one cough sufficed for him to shower ten bullet points about throat health from honey to gargling. But I do not understand why my mind lagged behind other organs. What is the dichotomy between the physical and the mental which makes the former so serious and the latter so frivolous? I do not know.

I do have news that would bridge the physical and the mental for you. Forks have started falling from my hands, cups are cracking every day, I am unable to type, I am stuttering and stammering in my words, I am generally confused and irritated by loud voices. I am unable to think right now. I can’t speak in English or in Hindi.

But more than all this, I have lost my will to live. There is no happiness left for me. I have loving friends and colleagues but I don’t think I deserve any love. I don’t have the capacity to reciprocate the love showered and wasted upon me. So many orphaned, poor, and lonely children will benefit from all that you have to offer. I have never understood why people loved me. I am not beautiful by any means. I am not smart. I don’t understand simple things. I am not physically fit. I am not mentally fit. I do not understand why anyone should love anyone so incapable. Yet, you have trusted me with your love and money, and I, not equipped to understand something as simple as love, fail to eat it even after being spoon-fed. Life is a privilege, and growing up between books gave me great potential to succeed in this privilege.

Mother, you must understand one thing. Of course with a ventilator a dead man can continue to live, but what is life when he is not conscious? Similarly, I experience so little happiness that never waking up is my most anticipated dream. I am ready to face the demons inside my head alone rather than the ten thousand things one has to deal with in life. Separating colored clothes from the whites. Throwing away trash. Paying bills on time. Not being allowed to shout when the person in front of you incessantly taps their feet. Going to bed with seventeen sources of sounds. The normalized slavery known to you as drudgery. I am, instead, intrigued by afterlife, and to know those answers, I have to leave.

I am not writing a letter of suicide—I am writing to you a letter of appeal so that after reading this a thousand times you can forgive me for leaving you alone.

I must go. There is no other enjoyment left for me than writing and today I don’t even have more to say. I love you very much, and if the supreme power chooses to make me human, although it shouldn’t because I never deserved it, I want to be born from your womb again, and watch the glimmer of the afternoon sun on your arm as you slept when I was a child. There is nothing more beautiful to me than watching you sleep.

Promise me a few things. Promise me that you will let my soul free. If you call me, you will captivate me in an ether between life and death. The nonlinearity of time is hard to grasp but I can summarize it for you: the past is the future, and the present is an illusion. I am more accustomed to this model of time than the drudgery that our world accepts. If you would remember me with focus, you will find me sitting in my bed drinking coffee even after my departure. If you convince yourself I live, then I will live, just as you saw me in the past. Past, present, and future form a trinity—the future is informed by memory, the memory is informed by prediction, and the present is a complex equation of the two. If I tell you that it will rain heavily tomorrow, you will carry your umbrella with you. Now, the presence of the umbrella in your hand is the result of a decision you made in the past that was informed by a future. I want you to forget me if it is at the cost of your happiness, if this non-linearity vexes you to cry. I do not understand interfaces and no-man’s-lands, so don’t captivate me there. Let me go. I am a golden peacock headed for the stars, always with you in whatever you do.

As we say in goodbye in other mother-tongue,

*Khuda Hafiz* mother,

Hafiz.