

Up the Garden Path

This is a story about breaking apart and putting yourself back together again, only to let yourself be broken again.

Once again, I willingly handed over my glass ball of trust to the newest person to walk in. “Please take good care of this,” I whisper into your ear. It looks small and insignificant in your hands as you gently look over it.

“Well, of course but, why are you giving me this?”

I pull myself away from you, “Who else?”

I: Uprooting

I travelled back home 10 years after immigrating, by myself. It was considered to be a brave move; young women from our family do not tend to travel alone. I was proud to be the first person to have taken that step. I was paving the way for future Dhillon girls to stand out and stand up for themselves. I was a trailblazer.

Looking back through my travel journal, I can pinpoint the day I realized that I had trail blazed towards my own unhappiness.

July 30th, 2013

“Rajma (needs two whistles, until boiled)

-cut 2 to 3 onions and mix them with ginger, garlic, and 2 *mirch*

-take 3 to 4 tomatoes, blend and mix well until runny

-cook the onion mixture with oil on a *tawa*

-add the tomato mush in

-add this mixture to *rajma* after it is completely boiled

-add salt, *baladi*, *kashmiri mirch*, *chana masala*

-Boil everything together while mixing”

A few days prior, I was scribbling observations about how the household maids interacted with each other when they thought my grandma wasn't looking. Their internal quibbles over intimate moments were my window into an unknown world. My imagination churned out dream worlds where the housemaids played the protagonists, working out their personal issues while simultaneously helping my grandma with the housework.

It was more interesting, though, to jot down every precise movement of my grandma's wrist in the kitchen: the cut-slice-dice-put aside-clean-grab-cut motions played a unique symphony before every meal. Sweating profusely in a poorly ventilated kitchen, I quickly understood why everyone had been okay with letting me travel alone.

Dhillon girls don't travel by themselves. But sometimes, Dhillon girls need to independently make their way across the many borders and rivers so that a new relation may be forged.

August 5th, 2013

“We are on a continuous journey up and forward to meet God, to be one with God. The book says that we must keep going on and on and on until we reach our final goal. But why are we subjected to this path? Surely life was not invented simply for this journey from the basic animal instincts to the higher thought processes of our spiritual mind. Is the end goal of all things to become one with God? If so, then why? Why can – no, we are to walk on this path. Maybe the why will be shown later on? I am not against the journey – I am completely towards it. But I am curious as to why *Wabeguru* makes man learn the ways of life just to accept him into himself. Perhaps he was lonely when he made man. He made his son to love and care for him because he was lonely without the continuous back and forth with him. My train of thought is lost.”

It is hard to grasp the fact that I was once a person that willingly allowed myself to be subjected to such patriarchal nonsense. I let strangers tut at my misshapen body. I let them pinch the fat on my stomach as they giggled amongst themselves, “Canada turns them fat, it seems.” I let them measure my rolls and curves so that it could be stuffed into a flattering suit-salwar. I wore the flattering suit-salwar and walked into a strange house full of estranged relatives. I greeted them politely instead of rudely dismissing them. I sat quietly and only spoke when spoken to. I ate half of what I would usually eat to make it appear as if I am smaller. I did not look anyone in the eye. I shyly nodded

when his father asked to take a picture of me, “He’s very tall you know. We need to see just how short you would be standing next to him!” I did not protest when they happily hugged me and gave me Rs. 5000 *pyaar*, symbolically accepting me into their family.

I think my grandma must have noticed the effort I was putting into my Very Best Gender Performance because she gave me a painkiller and told me to go take a nap.

“You did really well, *beta*. They really liked you.”

II: Sowing the Seed

August 10, 2013

“-An ego is required no matter what. It is needed. It is necessary.

-You are not a body. The body is yours. It is a vessel to transport you, a soul, from one *janam* (birth) to another. One lesson to another. One class to the next.

-You have to pass this class in order to graduate to the next level. Do what is required.”

I wasn’t born in Canada. But there have been so many occasions where I wish that I was. It would allow me to shed the *chunni* of tradition that is seemingly stapled to my forehead. Every step, every breath, every decision is so heavily surveilled that my body doesn’t feel like my body.

When I returned from my independent trip across borders and rivers, I was expecting a break from the reality I had been thrust into. The entire trip felt like a bad dream, a nightmare that would be over the minute I got under my covers. But the haze continued and the *chunni* of tradition wrapped itself closer and closer.

I grew up watching people tend to gardens. The ritual of gardening is based in repeating tasks until every action flows into the next in a fluid motion. It is a seemingly simple task: weed and tend to the earth; water some plants more, others less; wait on the season to change; harvest and switch seeds accordingly; weed and tend to the earth again.

When I was ten, I watched my grandma wake up from the bed next to mine early in the morning and slink away into the dewy morning. Through a window, I watched her walk into the *veranda*, put on her gloves, and take a stroll through her garden. Occasionally, she would crouch next to a plant, add something to a basket, and keep walking. She walked with bare feet, later recounting to me the health benefits of walking on freshly dewed-upon grass.

She taught me the importance of tending to yourself. Her garden was an extension of her. Peeking through the curtains, I could see that her garden was nothing more than a collection of various overgrown shrubs and trees. In the early twilight, it looked like a forest where my mind planted terrifying ghouls and ferocious animals waiting to attack. But my grandma saw *neem*, *tulsi*, *kadipata*, “the mango tree your grandpa planted in 1960”, *poplar*, a lemon tree, *amrood*. For my grandma, it was a *bageecha* full of love, full of melodies from the nearby rushing river, the whistling wind through the green leaves, the cacophony of caws and squeaks early in the morning.

Unable to shed my suffocating *chunni* of tradition, I embraced it instead. I tried to see the *tulsi* where my mind saw terrifying ghouls. I tried to create my own garden.

III: Eventual Growth

August 15, 2013

“The lessons we learn from each pain and joy in life may not always make sense or occur to us in the moment we receive them. Sometimes the lessons have to be revised and reread and retaught for them to take its roots in our mind. Each new experience yields a new lesson provided we look with open eyes.”

So, I looked with open eyes for the new lesson this new experience would teach me. I asked questions of my new significant other: What do you think about this arrangement? How would you imagine a life with someone like me? Have you been able to follow your dreams so far? Do you have any dreams? Any ambitions? I asked questions with the same curiosity I observed the housemaids with.

He asked questions of me: Have you ever dated someone else? Have you ever drunk any alcohol? What about drugs? What do you think about my parents? Would you be willing to take care of them? My favorite food is *bhindi*. Would you learn how to make it? I love food, so it would be difficult if you didn't know how to make *bhindi*.

The lesson that I was learning in the first few meetings with this man did not click until much, much later. It did sow the first seeds of doubt in my earth, though. And we must be patient till its time to harvest, and so I remained complacent until my doubt yielded results.

August 20, 2013

“If you deconstruct a ship while it is on water, replacing one wood plank with a new one, all the while constructing a new ship with the removed planks, which ship is the original ship?”

After five months of this sudden change in reality, I felt something beginning to shift within me. The day after I had spied on my grandma's morning ritual, I decided to follow her. Shivering at the touch of dew between my toes, I felt a peace settle into my stomach. Somewhere deep within me, I felt my soul *ping* – I had achieved an equilibrium.

As I stood on the landing of stairs in my own home, lips inches apart from his, I felt the equilibrium unsettle itself. As his lips crashed into mine, I felt an angry shiver wrench my peace away from me. It was the beginning of the end.

Later in the week, he would expect me to put my lips elsewhere on his body as his hands greedily explored me. He would whisper “I can't believe you're letting me do this now!” as he broke off piece after piece, rebuilding a ship he could sail.

As I stood in the middle of my grandma's garden, whispers of cool wind snaked their way up my legs, wrapping their tendrils around my thighs. I could hear the early birds chirping, the trees swaying slightly in the wind, the soft grunts my grandma made as she crouched and got up, over and over again. I felt a connection to the land around me in a way that grounded me.

IV: Flowering Buds

Once, he grabbed me by the hand and led me to the nearby woods. “Let’s go for a walk before dinner. I found the perfect place to show you something.” But it was a sight I had already seen before. After being roughly pushed against a tree and then towards the ground, all I could feel was the forest floor digging into my knees.

I finally knew what it was like to be a gardener. Behind the fluidity of actions lies a relationship between living things. A silent conversation is had before every seed is placed into the ground and after every plant is harvested. As you sow the seeds, you are breathing life into the ground before you, allowing beings to bloom where before there was only dirt, stone, and weeds.

And sometimes, you need to patiently tend to your garden and wait for the right flower to grow.

On my birthday, he gave me flowers and cards purchased earlier that day by his niece. The card read: “In a world that can seem impossibly “blah,” you are a bright, beautiful splash of *fabulous*.
From: Manav.”

“Not even a love?” I jokingly asked as he loaded up a movie he would later ignore.

“No, that I’ll show you in person.”

Moments later, I tried to appreciate Chris Evans’s acting chops from the sliver of space between his arm and chest. He was too busy exploring the caverns of pain between my legs while my parents sat upstairs, sipping tea and exchanging jokes. He was more surprised by the subsequent blood than I was, confused that the pain he kept mistaking for pleasure was real.

I disguised my sobs as an emotional response to Captain America’s ultimate sacrifice. Later in the basement bathroom, I looked myself in the eye and made a promise.

August 31, 2013

“When I close my eyes now, all I can see is this: There’s a cottage by the river. Nestled among the yellow and green fields, it’s a cozy spot housing one (~~maybe two?~~). A nearby grove of trees serves a great inspiration to the tenant – it reminds me of back home. An old woman sits on a rock by the

river, her toes gently disturbing the peaceful flow. She's humming a very happy song. It's such a happy tune that even the birds are singing along."

V: Bloom

My grandma did not move with us to Canada. She still does not want to move – “There’s something about the air that is different there. I don’t trust it.” When I first took my first breath of Canadian air, it didn’t smell any different. But, it attacked my core, angry and hostile, snatching away precious warmth. After that, I didn’t think I could trust the air either.

It took three teary-eyed meetings with a professor, two quietly-whispered conversations with a good friend, and the continuous, overbearing encouragement and support from my best friend to convince me to embrace the truth. I had tended to the seeds he sowed within me for far too long – the weeds were beginning to suffocate me. He had replaced me from the inside out, taking pieces away that I didn’t even know existed and replaced them with the compromising sacrifice that every Dhillon girl is expected to make. He had left me a hollow shell of who I was, but I had been patiently waiting for the season to change.

On March 7th 2015, nearly two years after I was engaged and a mere seven months before my wedding, I told my parents that I did not wish to be married to the brute of the man being chosen for me. I had practiced the speech in my head hundreds of times.

“All he has ever given me is fear, uncertainty, and discomfort. And I have tried so hard to make something good out of it. I have been patient, I have talked things out, I have considered his perspective, your perspective, his mother’s perspective. But I am not happy. I will not be happy. I will die before I marry this man. Please don’t make me.”

The ground in Edmonton is a lot harder than the one in my grandma’s garden. It’s hard to tend to the earth when it closes itself off to communication for the majority of the year and there isn’t enough patience in my body to wait until the season warms up. It’s hard to grow when the air doesn’t feel trustworthy.

My parents didn't make me. My confession shattered all facades of niceties on both sides. Insults were flung without apologies to soften them. Fists were raised but they never made contact. A garbage bag filled with the presents I was given was dropped outside their mansion in Punjab. We never received such a garbage bag in return. I never talked to him or his family ever again, although, one message did end up making through before the mass block was put in place:

“Did you know my father is a heart patient?”

VI: Harvest

April 29th, 2015

“You are not born with a spiritual consciousness. You must experience something in your life to awaken it within you. And that unlocking opens a corridor full of doors, a corridor full of opportunities. But remember, like vapor rises off a teapot hot on the stove, similarly rises your thoughts. They linger in the air above and leave an imprint in the world around you.

Make sure they're good ones. Happy Birthday.”

I had outwitted my own destiny. I had found a way to grow my own garden in the hard, harsh ground. Using fear, uncertainty, and discomfort as my compass towards growth, I weeded and tended to my soul; watering certain ideas more, others less; waited on the season to change; harvested and switched ideas accordingly; weeded and tended to my soul again. I had created space for myself in a space that did want anything to do with me. The entire act gave me a surge of power that ran through my body like electricity. If I could stand up for myself in such a splendid fashion, what else could I accomplish?

I filled journals with my ideas and dreams. I decided to go back to continue my education, to turn my dreams into goals, and eventually, my goals into accomplishments. I pushed down the feeling of worthlessness that arose occasionally, deeming it a low priority. Standing on top of the stairs when I had my first kiss stolen, I could see depression trying to sneak up my arm. I shrugged it off. While playing video games again after a too-long sabbatical, I found myself sitting next to my own sadness. I ignored her too – I was living my life! I was finally free. I could breathe the untrustworthy air and make something good with the expirations.

But I had forgotten that the season would eventually change. I had ignored my now overgrown garden; I was too busy following the path I created for myself. I indirectly opened the gate for terrifying ghouls and ferocious animals to enter my garden. When I wasn't looking, they made it their home, sleeping amongst my rosebushes and mango trees. My *bageecha* was heavy with fruit and flowers with no gardener to harvest them. And when I did find the time to look back, the time for harvest had long gone. The season had changed.

July 22, 2015

“Meringue Cookies (best eaten the day of baking)

-2 egg whites, ½ cup caster sugar, ¼ tsp cream of tartar

-whip whites until fluffy

-sift in cream of tartar and fluff

-slowly add sugar and fluff

*should look glossy and form stiff peaks

-color and place in frosting bag

-make rose shapes

-Bake at 194 degrees for 45 minutes to an hour.

-Leave oven door open until tray cool to touch.”

I: Uprooting

I didn't need to travel back home this time. Someone's auntie had seen me dancing at a cousin's wedding. She whispered into the ear of the mother of my future significant other, who immediately deemed me to be too rambunctious for her wonderful son. Nevertheless, whispers led to conversations and phone numbers were exchanged; “rambunctious can be tamed.”

A terrible storm had destroyed everything in my garden. There was no other option except to uproot all my hard work and start over again. Fresh ground, with fresh seeds, with a routine to take care of them would ensure that I would bloom again. I had secret conversations, whispered under the dark of my covers, to make sure that the new garden would have fortifications; thorns on the rosebushes, a mango tree with fruit that grew far out of reach.

Rather than ignore them, I befriended the sadness on my couch and the depression on top of the stairs. I invited them to reside within me, to reside within the garden as deterrents to the terrifying ghouls and ferocious animals. I needed the garden to grow faster than before. Faster, stronger, better – Dhillon girls persevere, they don't give up, they do not quit.

August 1, 2015

“Gurudware *wali* dal (it's his favorite!)

-6 to 7 whistles; water, salt, and *baldi*

-garlic, thrown in

-2 chopped onions

-2 *mirchis*

-mix with *chana* masala, oil, and *kashmiri mirch*

-add 2 tomatoes and some cream

-mix altogether with the boiled dal until the water evaporates”