

# HOUSEDEER



Issue No. 6

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## Editor's Note

I am so happy to present this issue of Housedeer devoted to Mumtaz Manji, one of the best people I've been blessed to know. Before meeting her in New York at the home of her daughter Irshad, I had admired Mumtaz in *Faith Without Fear*, a PBS documentary which followed Irshad after the publication of her book, *The Trouble With Islam Today*. Mumtaz was captivating in the program and, not surprisingly, PBS awarded her a prize for her exemplary and inspiring contributions to it. So when I met her in person, along with her brother Massum and her oldest daughter Ish, all visiting from Canada, I already felt that I loved her. It was an evening spent laughing, mostly at/with Mumtaz, because not only is she extremely funny, but she has a very contagious laugh as well. Her brother Massum, whose manner of quietly smiling at her from across the table was no less contagious, called Peter Sellers to my mind, and also the French comedian Jean Rochefort, who does so much with the smallest movement of a whisker. Massum had been hoping to buy himself a pink suit on his visit to New York, and he was disappointed that he hadn't found one. Irshad and Ish were relieved that he hadn't. They thought a pink suit was a terrible idea. I thought he would look very good in a pink suit and I said so. That's when Ish and Irshad threatened to send me to the moon if I kept encouraging him, while as far as Mumtaz was concerned, if a pink suit would make Massum happy, then why not? By the evening's end, I loved her more. I remember walking home that night thinking: *What wonderful, funny people*, and suddenly noticing the Empire State Building, lighted entirely in pink, to cheer on Massum.

Over the months of our on-going conversation recorded herein, Mumtaz spoke of Massum a lot, as he is a very important character in the story of her extraordinary life. While Mumtaz is before all else a loving mother and grandmother, she is also a very appreciative sister. Mumtaz is many things. She's a devout Muslim, she's always been a hard worker, she's smart, resourceful, kind, funny, irreverent at just the right moments (she favors the label of *jackass* for anyone who isn't very nice), she's elegant, beautiful, and very generous. She balances her religion with thinking for herself. She has no patience for people who take it upon themselves to pass judgment. I once sat and watched her have a very respectful difference of opinion with Irshad, and I saw them each acknowledge understanding of the other's position. Neither changed the other's mind about their respective opinions, nor did they seem to want to, but they were both able to say to each other, "Aha, okay, I understand what you are saying, and I had not thought of that." It was remarkable to see. Mumtaz is capable of truly listening to other opinions, an ability that I've come to recognize as an uncommon gift. I came away thinking, *So that's where she gets her dexterity for this*, about Irshad, who is famous for that very artistry. The source of Irshad's rare ability to engage the mechanism of reason is Mumtaz. Doing this interview with this remarkable lady has been a privilege and a joy. I hope that you will enjoy it.

Romy Ashby

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# MUMTAZ MANJI

*Okay, Mumtaz. Why don't you just start at the beginning. Where were you born?*

I was the first-born child in my family (seven in all) and the custom then was for the first baby to be born where the mother came from. So I was born in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania—where my mother Leila was born and her father too—on October 6th 1944. My brother Massum—the second child—was born in Kenya, where my father was born, and where we lived until 1951. My father's name was Gulam Mohammed, and his father also was born in Kenya. When it was under British rule, people from India came to build the railroad, and that is what brought my father's family there.



*Mumtaz, November, 1968, after Irshad was born*

After Massum was born, my mother wasn't well looked after by my grandmother in Kenya, so my brothers who came after him, Mustafa and Murtaza, were born in Tanzania, too.

The thing is, my mother didn't get along with her stepmother so her father was the one who actually looked after her when she had her babies, and then a month or so after giving birth she would go back to our own house in Kenya by bus. I couldn't tell you how many hours the journey was, but it was far.

*Do you have memories of Tanzania?*

Well, I never actually lived there as a little child, except for the times when my mom had to be there to give birth and brought me—and then much later when we went in 1960—but from when I was little I remember being on the second floor of a house with a long staircase to the rooftop. In desperation to get out of there my mom would go and say her prayers on the rooftop under the open sky so God would hear her better. I thought it was so nice up there. I had my first doll in Tanzania too. She was one inch tall. One inch. She was made out of rubber, very flexible and soft like a baby. I would always put her to sleep on the shelf somewhere where I could see her in the middle of the night, and in the morning I would wake up and take her in my hand, my one-inch tall doll. I remember palm trees and lots of fruit. Every three months would come a different fruit season and I remember people coming with mangos on their heads to sell, big, very juicy mangos. Once I became very sick while we were in Tanzania. I was small, maybe two and a half or so, and I don't remember what the sickness was, but it was some kind of deadly thing and there was no remedy for it. I remember not being allowed to eat anything, and the doctor came and told my mother that I would probably die. There was no phone so my mother wrote a letter to my father in Kenya, saying, "*Mumtaz is very sick and she might die.*" And my dad replied, "*Okay, let her die then.*" At the time, he just didn't seem to care.

*Because of not having enough money to try and help?*

That, plus I was a girl. My dad's sister had gray eyes—so did he and his younger brother—but when his sister got married her in-laws called her a cat, in a very insulting way. It was not complimentary, and she was mistreated so badly. So my dad didn't want a daughter because he was sure that she would be mistreated like his sister was, and when I was born he was very disappointed.

*Was he kind to you later on?*

He was always kind. But people then didn't hug their children or tell them "I love you." Later when any of us asked him about his early life, he would say, "I do not want to talk about my past." So I am assuming that he was not happy in his life and neither was my mom. I feel very sad when I think of my parents. But my father was never, ever abusive, he was never insulting. He was a very kind man. And I think sometimes, in a little bit of my nature when I do certain things, I see my dad there, and I can feel that I am my dad.

*For example?*

Well, there are a few things; he liked to talk and so do I, he used to swear at people, and so do I, hahaha, and I like to know if anybody is talking about me behind my back and so did my dad. He was also very funny and would make everybody laugh, and I think—but you can be the judge—that I am that way too. You remember how much we all laughed when we got together for the first time? Just a lot of little resemblances here and there, if you know what I mean, and sometimes I see my mom in myself too. I remember as a little girl seeing my dad going off on his bike to go to work in Mombasa. He was working in a pencil factory and by the time he came back he was drenched in sweat, his shirt would be all wet all over. When I was five years old my father's sister came to visit my grandmother, who was living with us in Mombasa. When she was ready to leave, she asked my mother if she could take me to stay with her for a while, and my mother agreed. So off we went. This aunt lived in Kampala, Uganda, with her husband and children, who were a teenage son

and a twenty-year-old daughter. I was so unhappy there. They were not kind to me and I remember dinnertime, when everyone would sit at the table and my aunt would ask me to sit on the floor to eat. She would make egg pudding for dessert and serve everybody and then she would give me the empty plate and tell me to lick it. And her daughter would hit me for not brushing my teeth properly. Looking back on it I think, *what was I doing there?* Eventually another aunt came, the wife of my dad's older brother, on her way to visit my mom and my grandma in Mombasa. She saw all the abuse I was getting, so she decided to take me with her. When we got there she told my mother what she saw. I remember her saying, "You shouldn't just send your children anywhere with whoever asks you!" That aunt from Kampala is dead now, and you know, I think she was actually a nice person. I think she probably thought that was all okay, the way she treated me, she just didn't realize how I felt. I still loved her, even after that.

When I was six years old, we emigrated from Mombasa to Belgian Congo. Life was much better there than it was in Kenya in the 1950s. My father had some family in the Congo, and he was already there when I went with my mother and the rest of the family who was going. A few days before we left Mombasa, my mother said, "Oh, I hope we see some elephants! I want to see how they look!" I remember driving through the jungle at night, real *jungle*, really pitch black with no lights except from the car. We had a hired driver, and it was my mom, my grandmother and four kids, including my older cousin Sultan. Suddenly we saw something yellow up ahead. Something really big and flashing yellow, like two eyes. Well, here was an elephant, a very *big* elephant, with big long tusks, right in front of us! We slowed down and stopped, and the driver turned the motor off but the lights were still on. We didn't know what to do. The elephant was really irritated by the headlights, so he came and put his trunk underneath the car and lifted it right off the road! The back tires were still on the ground, but he lifted the front and let it drop. We were all screaming! The driver was so afraid he got out of the car and ran away! We rolled the windows up so the elephant couldn't put his trunk inside the car, but he did the same thing a second time: he lifted the car at the front, and let it drop. My cousin turned off the lights, thinking that maybe the elephant would go away. But by that time, he was already on his third time, lifting the car and just dropping it down again! And then, finally, he went away, back into the jungle.

*Did the driver come back to the car?*

No! The driver was gone! So my cousin Sultan—who didn't know how to drive—managed to turn on the motor and drive the car a little ways, until we saw a tiny house made of mud. We knocked on the door and a very old black woman answered, wearing nothing but a piece of cloth over her privates, and with droopy breasts.

*She must have been so shocked to see all of you.*

Oh, she was! But she let us in and that's where we all stayed the night. I remember that she just had a little lantern on the floor. We didn't get any sleep, and in the morning we were completely covered with mosquito bites. Big lumps everywhere! That poor lady! I don't know how she could live with it, but I guess people who lived in the jungle were used to it. Then the driver showed up and knocked. I don't remember hearing where he had been all night, but the front of the car was wrecked.

*Was your mother glad to have seen an elephant?*

No, she wasn't! And I remember while the elephant was on his mission, my mother was praying out loud, "Oh, God, save my children! If you want to kill us, kill me but save my children!" And I was saying, "*Mom!* What are we going to do without you in this *jungle*? Where are we going to go?" Can you imagine? That *big elephant*, walking in the jungle, and we happened to come along *just* as he came out onto the road! Oh, my lordy! I will never forget that night!

*So then what happened?*

So we drove on, and finally we got to our relatives' house in Punia. I still remember all the food they had prepared for us. That was where I first saw jam. I remember asking, "What is this red stuff?" and asking how to eat it, and my aunt saying, "You put it on bread." Oh, I loved it, it was *so* delicious!

*Did you get a house of your own there?*

No, my mom went to live in a tiny jungle village named Kasese where my dad was a merchant, selling soap and little things, and she took my younger brothers with her. I stayed in Punia with my dad's younger brother and his wife so that I could go to school. My aunt and uncle had a big brick house, all of the houses around us were brick, I remember, and there were kerosene lanterns in every room. In Gujarati the name for each aunt is different depending on whether she's from your mom's or your dad's side, so I called my aunt Chachi. She and my mom loved and respected each other very much, and I learned a lot from her. She taught me how to sew when I was just a kid, and sewing would be a way I could earn money later.

*And did your aunt and uncle have children of their own?*

My aunt and uncle had six children. The oldest was three years younger than I was, but we would play together and didn't think about who was older or younger. There were also neighbors who had four children, and we would all play with them too. There were so many kids to play with, it was just, '*Do you want to play? Okay! What do you want to play?*' I remember playing House with one of my cousins who would have to be the man and pretend to go to the office and work and I would be looking after the babies and having to cook for my husband, oh, it was so innocent! Oh, my Lord, innocent, innocent, innocent! We were so naïve, hahaha. But honestly, we had no worries, we just played and had fun. We had lots of things to do. We played lots of marbles, and we'd play hopscotch and jump rope and hide and seek. Hide and seek we called *Santa Kookri*. Santa means 'hiding' and kookri is a little chicken. I don't know why it was called 'hiding the chicken,' but it was.

*Did you have real chickens as well?*

Oh, we had chickens and we took eggs from under the chickens. They taste so much better right from the chicken. But poor things, you're taking their babies! They're thinking, "Why are you taking my babies? I have to *sit* on these!"

*And were you awakened by the rooster every day?*

We would hear him; we'd hear the rooster saying, "kokori-ko," you know, but they start very early. The rooster would start at 4:00 or 4:30, and we didn't get up that early. My grandmother lived with us there too, she had also lived with us in Kenya, and I loved her so much. Her name was Fatima—she was born in India—and she was such a loving person toward us, but she did not like my mother. She called me Mumli. I was skinny like a toothpick, and she'd say, "Mumli, I can see every bone in your body! You have to eat!" And I would say, "But I *am* eating! Leave me alone!"

For some reason that I don't know, my aunt and uncle didn't put me in school right away. They just didn't put me in, even though that was supposed to be why I was living with them. And then one day they decided I should go. Most children started school at age five or six, but I started school very, very late, at twelve years old, and because of my age they put me in grade three. I didn't know anything—no math, no French—I could read but I don't remember who taught me. Very early on I went for a very short time to a missionary school, but I don't remember anything about it. So when I started in grade three, honestly,

I didn't know *anything!* You have to remember, a girl—or any child coming from a poor family—never had an opportunity to work their brains, or to explore, or do things with their parents.

*Did you enjoy school once you started?*

Oh, I did! It made me feel so proud. I'm in school! I'm just like regular people! Nothing was free, of course, you had to pay fees, and people were paying taxes—but the school was good and very close by, so I could walk from my aunt's house. The classes weren't very big and we had grades four, five, and six together in one class. My brothers attended the same school as I did every day, but they came by bus from a boarding house where they stayed. We would see each other before class and at recess time we would all play together. And so many times Massum wouldn't wear any underwear. I don't know why! He must have been about ten at the time, and he would just wear his shorts without any underwear and it didn't look right—the way his shorts looked—even when he was just standing there. All his shebang would be on one side—hahaha—but he wouldn't realize it. I would say, "Massum. You're not wearing underwear, are you." And he would say, "How do you know?" And I would be too embarrassed to tell him! We laugh about that to this day. He says, "She always knew that I was not wearing underwear and I would wonder, *how does she know?*"

Sometimes on a Sunday morning my uncle would go pick up my brothers at the boarding house and we would spend the day playing together and have supper, and then on the way back to the boarding house my uncle would stop at a hotel where you could buy all kinds of sweets. He'd say, "Okay, you can each choose one thing, whatever you want." And he would treat all of us. I would usually choose something my brothers would like: Chiclets, or a bar of *Jacques* chocolate, which had when you opened the wrapper a little picture card of an antique car. If I kept the chocolate for myself, which I almost never did, I would wait to accumulate three cards and then give them to my brothers later. That is something they all still remember. And I also remember the way my brothers would build toy cars out of matchboxes with wheels made out of Coca Cola bottle caps. The bottle caps would be all bent so my brothers would try to straighten them out with a stone.

Recently Massum reminded me of something, which was that my uncle also used to stop at a club where there were all kinds of games and swings for children to play on, and it was after we finished playing that we would go for the sweets. And one day, while we were there, a swing came crashing down onto a little girl and she died on the spot. She was the daughter of the hotel owner and her name was Marie-Thérèse. She was in the same school as we were, and a little younger than I was. She was ten or eleven years old, and a very nice girl. She had a sister called Françoise. That was so sad. At the end of the school year in June we put on big dramas and all of the parents would come see the performances. One of the boys from my class was in a play with Marie-Thérèse. I was in another play. When Marie-Thérèse died, her mother went crazy, honestly, and after that tragedy they all moved back to Belgium and never wanted to return to Congo again. Marie-Thérèse was buried with her doll at her shoulder.

I only had three years of school in all, the first two in Punia, and then later at the French-speaking school in Stanleyville when I lived with my parents. The teachers were all very kind people who came from Belgium to teach. They weren't missionaries, so we didn't have religion class. I'm not sure why, but in Belgian Congo people just weren't very religious.

*How did you learn about religion?*

From my mother. I learned by doing what she did. There was a very small mosque in Stanleyville where we would go, just two rooms with one side for men and one for women, but no madrasa for children. And of course, girls are supposed to start praying five times a day at age nine but boys don't have to until age fifteen. But I did not grow up in a religious

household in Congo. The religion for me really came later. I think I was seventeen or eighteen when I started praying. I was so unhappy to be engaged and the only avenue I knew was to turn myself to Allah and ask him for all the help I could get. But it was as I grew a bit older—in my later twenties, with the ongoing problems with my husband—that I really turned to religion. I could cry as much as I wanted and talk to God, to ask him to help me out, to ask him, what should I do? My husband, who I would prefer to call ‘my ex’ when I talk about him, was not religious at all.

*I understand. From here on we can refer to him as your ‘ex’ rather than your ‘husband.’*

I want to talk a little bit about my mother here, because she really meant well, but she wasn’t stable. So I had to grow up fast to look after my siblings. She had an anger problem, and we always had to walk on eggshells with her. It didn’t matter what you said, she would always take things the wrong way, always. It was always negative. We really suffered a lot, growing up, my brothers and me, because she was abusive both mentally and physically. Her moods could change from minute to minute, and she would threaten to commit suicide and that would scare us.

*Did she have a very difficult upbringing herself?*

Yes. When she was one and a half, her mother passed away. And then her father married her mother’s younger sister—and then she too passed away while giving birth, to a baby boy, and the baby passed away as well. After that, my mother’s father waited nine years before he remarried. And that woman had eleven children with him.

*Was that the stepmother you mentioned before?*

Yes. My grandfather was the postmaster in Dar es Salaam, and he worked in the office all day. When he would come home, all he would hear was complaining from his wife about my mother; *Leila did this, Leila did that. She doesn’t do this or that.* So he would give my mother lessons. He’d say, “Go to your room and write from 1 to 100.” He didn’t want conflict with his wife, so after a time, in the morning before he went to work, my mother would be tied to her bedpost.

*Her father himself would tie her to the bedpost?*

Yes. I never asked my mom how she would go to the bathroom, or if her stepmother would bring her food to eat. And we children, we loved her to death, but our mother always felt that nobody loved her. With her, you would never know what kind of reaction you would get. But I feel so sad for her. She would always tell me, “Look how nicely you can talk to people, Mumtaz. Look how much you are laughing. And look at me, I am so dumb I don’t even know how to talk to people.” And she *didn’t* know how to talk to people. Because she never had the opportunity to go out and learn! She never got to go to school at all. I always pray for her, twice a day, and I always talk to God about how she never saw anything good in this life and ask him, please God, provide her whatever she needs, and give her the best place in Heaven!

In 1960, when Congo was getting its independence, there was a big war and we had to leave everything behind and just go. We went back to Tanzania and stayed with my maternal grandfather and step-grandmother. My grandfather had a farm with a lot of cows about an hour’s drive away where the cows would graze and look after themselves. He had a little van and he would wake Massum at four o’clock every morning to go milk the cows and then deliver the milk. He earned a living that way, but just barely. They would bring home milk for us too, and whenever a cow had given birth, the first milk that came out of the cow was so delicious to make dessert with! I probably just had one taste of it, though, because usually my aunt would make dessert only for my grandfather and nobody else. Men are the rulers.

*Was your grandfather good to you?*

Well, comme si comme ça. When we came I had a really nice ponytail. And my grandfather didn't like me wearing my hair in a ponytail. He wanted me to braid my hair. I remember he said, "You know, that ponytail is going to hell first." Where I had come from in Belgian Congo it was very liberal. You could do what you wanted to do, and the people were very open-minded. But Tanzania was so backwards! Honestly, it was like, *cut my throat now!* After the independence in Congo, when we finally returned to Stanleyville after being at my grandfather's place for seven months, I lived with my mom and dad and my siblings there from age from fifteen to eighteen, when I got married.

*I was reading about Stanleyville recently in a book by Katherine Hepburn about making the movie The African Queen, with Humphrey Bogart, which came out in 1951. They stayed in Stanleyville for a while in a hotel called the Pourquoi Pas. Do you remember that hotel?*

No, I don't remember the Pourquoi Pas, but I remember a very fancy and expensive hotel called Hotel Apollo Six. I never saw the inside. And we didn't know anything about American actors and actresses at all. Once in a blue moon a Hindi movie would come to Stanleyville and we would run to see it in one of the little movie theaters, but that was a real luxury. We really didn't have any money, but oh, I loved the movies so much, *so much!* I don't remember when I saw my first television, but I do remember that we had a small radio. I didn't listen to it as a kid, though. I wasn't interested. My uncle would listen to football and I just didn't understand that at all. All the cheering, *Yay! Yay!* And I'd think, *big whoop-di-doo.*

*And what was it like, where you and your family lived in Stanleyville?*

It was a little second floor apartment above a dried fish seller, which of course smelled. We were nine people in two and a half bedrooms, seven children and my mom and dad, and we were the poorest in our community. People would drop a bag of rice or a bag of sugar in front of our door without leaving their name. We would have bread and tea in the morning with nothing to put on the bread, we would just dip it in our tea, and at midday we had the biggest meal of the day, and that was rice and potatoes. But my mom would cook them with spices and turn it into a good lunch. There was oil for white people and oil for black people, and we used the black oil. We used black people's margarine too, *Blue Band*, it was called. Every day it would be 100 degrees in Stanleyville and I always had a runny nose because of the heat. At night it would calm down a little. Nearby lived a cousin of ours with his wife and their five children. Massum, Mustafa, and Murtaza used to get up in the morning and go knock at their door to ask his children to come out and play. My cousin's wife would say to them, "Okay, wait outside until they have finished their breakfast." So they would wait, and they could smell the omelets cooking and the bread toasting from the open windows, but nobody ever invited them to come in and have breakfast with the other children. To this day I can cry, thinking of them, just little boys, not invited in and smelling that delicious breakfast. But you know, it was okay. We had a roof over our heads and some food in our bellies, and that was enough.

I remember begging God to give me a sister, because I was the only girl with four brothers, and finally he did, Rosemine, born in 1957. There was a thirteen-year age difference between us, and it was as if God had given me a living doll. She was my baby and I would cut her hair and make her dresses. I was so happy when she was born, but of course she was still very little when I left to get married. She lives in Toronto now.

*How did you come to get married?*

My marriage was arranged, the old way.



*Mumtaz between Mustafa and Massum, holding Rosemine. Mother holding Roshan, beside Nawshad, father, and Murtaza, taken in the villag of Kasese, Congo, 1959*

*How was your husband chosen?*

In 1962 I went to my cousin's wedding in Uganda, where my "future ex" lived. That is when his family first saw me. My aunt knew him because his family was part of her in-laws as well, and he had a very fine shop, selling fabric and all kinds of very high-quality goods. He sold baby buggies and Ladybird brand baby clothes imported from England. While I was there I went to his shop to buy some material. I didn't notice him at all, but after my cousin's wedding he asked my aunt if he could ask for my hand.

*Did you have any say in it?*

No. But I did try to say no, and eventually I tried to break off my engagement because I didn't want to get married. I had fallen in love with someone in Stanleyville. His name was Oscar, and he was a friend of my brother Massum. I remember the day when I first saw him. My mom and I were coming down the stairs on our way to go and visit someone, and Oscar just happened to stop his car right in front of us, just at that moment. He was coming to pick up Massum. Oscar was about five years older than Massum, but they were

good friends. He did a lot for Massum, too. One of the things he did was to teach Massum how to drive. We were much too poor to have a car, of course—wherever we had to go, we walked—but he had a car, and that day when he drove up was the first time I saw him. He had broad shoulders and curly hair, oh, my goodness, I thought he was so handsome. I didn't ask Massum about him, but after a while he said to Massum, "I know that your sister is already engaged, but I really, really like her. Is there any way that anything can happen? Is there any way that she would break her engagement with this guy in Uganda?" Massum said, "I don't know, but I can ask her."



*With Massum and Roshan, Mumtaz's engagement day, April 1964*

At the time Massum and I had a little shop in Stanleyville where we sold things like soap and cigarettes and candies and matches, things we'd go buy from the wholesaler to sell to people passing by. I also worked from home as a seamstress—I did that from when I was thirteen—so I was making quite a bit of money to help support the family. I made half of our household expenses from sewing. I had a sewing machine and in 1960 and 1961 I did a lot of sewing jobs. I would get jobs from women from our community, from mosque, and I would sew whatever they wanted. Usually women my mom's age would wear long dresses, so I would make those. Women would give me a dress that fit them well and I would go by that for the size. At that time there were no ready-made dresses. You just bought fabric by the yard and made clothes. I had one very nice dress of my own, a yellow dress, for special occasions. My uncle and aunt had a tailor make it for me when they went to India, when I was sixteen. And oh, it fit me like a glove! The lining was satin and outside was lace, so it wasn't washable but I didn't wear it often.

Anyway, when Massum told me what Oscar said to him, I thought, Oh, my God. He likes me too! I wrote him a letter in French and I told him, "I find you very interesting as well," and I gave it to Massum to deliver. After that, Oscar decided to come and see me in our little shop, and when he did, he brought me an Omega watch as a gift.

*What did you do?*

I accepted it and wore it. When Oscar read my first letter, he asked Massum who had written it on my behalf. And Massum said, “She wrote it herself, my beloved sister.” Oscar could not believe that I spoke such good French. He was so happy to know that I did, and then we started writing to each other, back and forth. I would give the letters to Massum and he would give them to Oscar. We wrote letters to each other and I fell in love with him. I was seventeen and Oscar was twenty. Since he and Massum were friends he always had a good excuse to come to the shop. He would come every second day to visit, and I was very shy to see him. I didn’t know what to say and I felt so nervous. He would do most of the talking. He would say, “I’ve never seen a girl like you before. You’re so unique. I so want to marry you!” And I would say, “I like you, too.” My dad often used to come to the shop around ten o’clock or ten thirty, and as soon as I’d see him coming I’d say, “Okay, my dad is coming!” And then Oscar would say, “Is Massum here?” And I’d say, “No, he’s not,” and he would leave, hahaha. He knew that Massum would be out when he came to see me, busy with other things for the shop, but he would always ask me that silly question, “Is Massum here?”

*Did you and Oscar ever have a moment alone together outside the shop?*

Oh, no! It was all in our heads and in our hearts. But I was ready to spoil my reputation. Isn’t that something? The thing is, I had to push myself a little bit because I had a very good reputation. But I wanted so much to get out of my engagement that I tried to spoil my reputation, hoping that maybe my fiancé would decide, “Okay, I don’t want this girl because she’s going behind my back.” That’s what I wanted him to think so that he would break up with me.

*So you chose to deliberately risk your good reputation to make yourself undesirable to your fiancé?*

Yes. I knew that I would not be able to break up with him because of my aunts and uncles and cousins, all saying that his was such a good family, such a good reputable family, and oh they were so very, very nice, and this and that and *patati* and *patata*, you know? But he never broke off the engagement. Massum of course knew how I felt, and that I wasn’t happy to be engaged. To this day my brothers all say how sorry they are that I was forced to get married. They all knew I didn’t want to but they were too young to say anything. It was forced because the man I was supposed to marry came from a good family and he was rich. Oscar was rich too—he was a merchant and worked very hard with his brother, and they made very good money—but Oscar drank, and drinking alcohol was a total no-no in our community in the Sixties. And it wasn’t as if he was getting drunk and falling in a ditch. He just liked to have a fun drink, you know? I couldn’t speak up for myself, but to myself I thought, *who doesn’t drink right now in Congo? Everybody drinks!* People were so civilized they would drink right out in the open! At that time the family—not my parents, but part of the family who ruled us—they were such narrow-minded people. We were so poor and supported by so many family members, my dad’s brothers and others, and they wouldn’t let me marry Oscar. They said he was not from a good, upstanding family, and he drank alcohol. So no. I could not marry him.

*How long were you engaged before you were married?*

Six months.

*And every day were you thinking of the wedding and dreading it?*

Yes, I was. I would cry, and my mom would say, “This girl is not happy,” but she didn’t have any say in it at all, and my dad didn’t have the backbone to say, *Okay, my daughter doesn’t want to marry this guy, why is everybody forcing this? Let me step in.*

Meanwhile, letters through the post wouldn't be delivered to houses in Stanleyville, you'd go to the post office to get your letters. Oscar paid bribes to be given the keys to the post office. He would go and check every day to see if I got any letters, and if I did he would open them and read them. We were so much in love with each other and we wanted each other so badly. One day a letter was there for me from my fiancé in Uganda, sending me a picture of himself lying in the grass and asking me what kind of furniture I would like to have in our bedroom. And Oscar intercepted the letter and answered it himself! The letter was in English, my fiancé didn't speak French, but Oscar's sister-in-law Nellie was from Uganda and spoke English, so he asked her to write a letter for him, and told her what he wanted it to say.

*And what happened?*

Well, when my fiancé got the letter he went to my aunt (she was his aunt too, by marriage on his mother's side) and said, "Look at what I just got! Some guy named Oscar answered my letter to Mumtaz! Who is Oscar? Why is he answering and not Mumtaz?" My aunt wrote a letter to my mother asking her what was happening—and of course letters took a long time to go back and forth between Uganda and Congo, so in the meantime two months had passed since that first letter—and my mom finally let my aunt know, "My daughter is not happy about this engagement. She wants to break the engagement." But it didn't help.

So then my father's mother found out, my grandmother who I loved so much, and when she heard that I wanted to break the engagement, she came and she cried and cried and cried. I remember that she used a Gujarati proverb: "You are throwing sand in my gray hair." She was so upset with me. She said, "Mumtaz, I have loved you so much"—and she did—"I have loved you so much! What are you doing to my reputation?" She said, "In an upstanding family like ours, we don't do this. You shouldn't be breaking the engagement. People will talk, this is not a good thing that you are doing, please don't do this." And it really was a big thing back then. My grandmother was so upset with me. So finally I said, "Okay. Okay."

And the thing is, my reputation had always been so good up until then, when this little thing started going on with Oscar. And people were saying, "Oh, my God, can you believe Mumtaz is *doing* this?" So I told my grandmother that I would not break the engagement. I said I'd just take their prayers and go with it. I had tried so hard to stop my engagement, but there was just no way.

*It sounds like Romeo and Juliet.*

Oh, I know! And the thing is, Oscar kept on writing letters to my fiancé. In 1964 he wrote a letter saying that I was his and he would kill him if he tried to come to Stanleyville. He wrote, "If you step one foot into Belgian Congo you'll be dead." (My fiancé kept that letter and I stole it from him later, which he didn't know, and I still have it.) The usual custom is that the groom comes to marry the bride where she lives, but because of Oscar saying he would shoot him if he came—and he was very capable of doing what he said—they had to bring me to Uganda to get married.

*What about Oscar's watch?*

I left it behind. I told my mom that the next time I came to visit I would take it. But I never went back because of the political war that broke out in the Belgian Congo in December 1964. I got married in April of that year, and when the war broke out the rest of my family had to flee the country. Everybody had to flee, and everything left behind was stolen by the military.

*Do you remember the wedding or did you blank it out?*

No, I do remember the wedding. It was big, and it took place in a small town so everyone was invited. I was so unhappy and scared. I got married in my white sari.

Now, the custom was that on the wedding night, the husband, before he takes the veil from his bride's face, has to give her a present, like a gold bracelet or a watch or a ring. So what did my husband do? He gave me a watch. But after three days he came and asked me to give it back. I said, "What do you mean? It's mine, isn't it?" He said, "No, I borrowed it from my sister-in-law. It's hers." I thought, *Oh, my God*. I asked my sister-in-law why she had even given it to him, and she said, "I couldn't say no because I was afraid of him." In the first week of my marriage he beat me up. In the very first week. I hated him. But I couldn't leave. Where was I going to go? And my aunt's family thought the world of him, because he had money.



*Wedding Day, April 1964. Grandmother Fatima giving Mumtaz the traditional last cup of milk to say goodbye, before she leaves her home to join her new family as a bride.*

The only nice thing I remember from that time is finding out that when my mother went back home to Congo after the wedding, people would say, "So is Mumtaz gone now?" and she'd say, "Yes, my whole set of keys is gone." I was her "set of keys", meaning that I was precious to her, that everything would open up for her when I was there. So I saw that she did love me, even if she didn't know how to express it.

And you know, I have to say that after I got married, Oscar always treated Massum very well. He stayed by. He and Massum stayed friends until the end of Oscar's life. And he loved and respected my mom, but he totally disliked my dad because my dad's family had said he was bad and that I couldn't marry him. By the time I saw him next, when I had returned to Belgian Congo to visit after seven years, I had two children and he had married a woman

named Françoise. Seeing him again revived all of my feelings and emotions. All I did for the whole six-week visit was cry. I told Massum, “My God, I’m missing him so much.” And Massum would tell me, “It’s too late for any of that. Don’t think about it.” And I would say, “But I can’t help myself.” Oscar wouldn’t even speak to me, and I only saw him from a distance. The whole town knew what we had gone through, so I would not have been able to talk to him privately, and I couldn’t go behind my husband’s back, that would not have been right. When I went back to Kampala after my visit, I had to make myself try to forget him and get on with my life, but of course I never forgot him, I still think of him today. Oscar sent his wife and children to Belgium for the children’s education, and he sent money every month. But eventually Françoise took the money and ran off with a man who spent it all, and then when it was gone that was it. Poor Oscar.

*After you were married, where did you live?*

I moved in with my in-laws in Fort Portal, which was a small town two hundred miles from Kampala, the kind of town where everybody knows everybody. It was my husband and me, his parents, his two brothers and my two sisters-in-law in the house. I was so miserable. My husband had his shop, and every day after he closed the shop—and also on Saturday and Sunday—he went to play volleyball. My two sisters-in-law would go with their husbands to the movies every weekend, not as a foursome, but each couple would go out, and I would sit at home with my mother-in-law. She was very kind to me and she knew how unhappy her son was making me. She knew that he was beating me up and she was always very sympathetic because when she married his father she was just as unhappy as I was. But the thing is, she never got beatings from my father-in-law, never. She would say, “As unhappy as I was, I’ve never gotten a beating from your father-in-law. So my son is making him look good now.”

*Did she actually see him in the act of beating you, or just bruises?*

Oh, no, she saw, but there was nothing she could do. And his father didn’t say anything. After a year my husband moved us to an apartment of our own, and I had my first two children, Ish and Irshad, there in Fort Portal. It was depressing and I didn’t like it, but I made my life there.

In 1970 we moved to Kampala, and my husband sold Suzuki motorcycles. Then he was an agent for BMW and Peugeot. He had his own dealership. He must have made money, but he didn’t ever tell me anything about how much he made, and he was so stingy. When I would ask him for grocery money he would take a five-shilling bill and throw it on the floor right at his feet. He’d tell me to pick it up if I wanted it, and he would be watching me, so I did not have any choice but to pick it up. He would always watch me pick up the money that he threw there, and call me *bhikhari*, which means “beggar,” in Gujarati, and he would always call me *malaya*, which is the Swahili word for “prostitute.”

When I would go out, wherever I had to go, I would always be carrying Ish with me and when I came back he would say, “where did you go, you malaya?” Finally one day when he called me malaya I had the guts to say, “Why? Did you see me sleeping with your father?” And he slapped my face so hard. But I’d had enough of that and I had to say it. He never stopped calling me that until the end. Oh, my lordy! That man, honestly, he made me feel bitter about every man on this earth. I think if my first baby hadn’t been born, and if I could have, I would have left him. But because of the laws of the Muslim religion, if I had left he would have taken Ish away. And I knew that I would never be able to live without my daughter. I would never have been able to live without her. So I didn’t leave. Where would I go? My parents were all the way in Belgian Congo and I was in Uganda. How would I get there without any money? Who was going to give me a ticket? I had no choice but to stay.

One night when I was expecting Irshad, I had just put Ish down to sleep, I was already in my nightgown, and we were arguing. I don't know what we were arguing about but it escalated. He was going crazy and I got really scared that he was going to beat me again. It was getting very heated and I thought, *I'd better get out of this room because he's going to hit me.* I ran into the hallway and he came behind me and threw a wooden chair at me. The chair missed me, thank God, I was four months pregnant. I could have lost the child. I could have lost my brain! The following week some neighbors of ours said to my ex's sister, "Did you know that your brother is throwing chairs at your sister-in-law? We were upstairs and we heard it, we heard her screaming." And my sister-in-law said, "Oh." And nothing was done about it. She just said, "Oh." That was her reaction.

But I remember my mother-in-law saying to my ex, "I'm touching your feet, and I am begging you not to treat her the way you do. There is nothing wrong with her. The world is watching you, and I can't even keep my nose up. I'm so ashamed of the way you treat her."

*So your mother-in-law at least made an effort for you.*

Yes, she did. She really did. But nothing worked.

*Did you have any friends or social life?*

Music parties were very common in our community, where everybody would be invited to someone's house and musicians would come with guitars and drums and there would be lots of food. But when we would get home from a party, my ex would ask me, "Why was that man looking at you?" I would say, "Why are you asking me? Why don't you ask him?" And then he would beat me. He would beat me if a man had just looked at me. What an ass! So he stopped allowing me to go to the parties.

When we were living in the apartment in Kampala sometimes I would join the women standing around talking outside when the weather was nice, and that would be my social life. That, and I'd go to mosque. That was it. But I never had time to get bored. Even with one servant, I was so busy with my children, cooking, housework, and sewing for other people to make money. In the nine years that I lived in Uganda I had three different servants, one at a time. I treated them so well, I bought powdered soap to be easy on their hands, and an electric iron—not a coal iron like everybody else—to make their work easier.

*How would you find your servants?*

People would knock at the door and ask if you had any work. They were all Ugandans. And the thing is, in Uganda people would hire servants, but usually the servants only stayed a few days because they would not be happy or because the employer would let them go. I kept my three servants for much longer. First was Pawro, who was with me for three years, and then I had Francis, also for three years. Francis was a wonderful cook and I liked him very much. But when Irshad was born, he told me he did not want to wash the diapers, which were heavy cloth-towel diapers, so I had to let him go. After that was Thomasi, who I had with me for five years. Thomasi had worked for my sister-in-law for just a few days, and she didn't like him. I needed a servant and she said, "I can send you a boy, but he's not very good." That is what people would say then, "Boy." Oh, my Lord. I said, "Okay, send him because I really need some help." So Thomasi came, and I liked him very much. And he was very good. One day, after Thomasi had already been with us for two and a half years or so, Francis saw me coming out of mosque in Kampala, and he was looking for a job. He greeted me and said, "Mama, you know, I want to come back and work for you again." I had to tell him that I was sorry, but no, because I didn't need two servants, and I was happy with Thomasi. I remember him walking away looking very sad, but there was nothing I could do. I still think of him, though, and I think of all my three servants. I remember all three of them in my prayers every day.

Thomasi was about thirty when I hired him, and he had a wife and seven children of his own there in Fort Portal. He washed the dishes, he did the laundry and ironing, he swept the floor. Irshad used to ride on his back while he was sweeping. We didn't have a vacuum cleaner or washing machine or anything like that, of course. What we had were old-fashioned sweepers, so Thomasi would be on his knees to sweep and Irshad would run and jump on him. She would wrap her arms around his neck and just hang there, and he would just keep sweeping as if nothing was happening. He was really good with the kids. He was such a sweet person, and very laid back, and he would never say no to my kids. I would cook and look after the children myself, and every day he would go to the market to buy fresh vegetables and fruit and meat. There was no freezer or fridge, so everything had to be bought fresh every day. He would come every morning and leave at five in the evening. When we moved to Kampala, two and a half years before we left the country, he came too. He had a little room where he would sleep, and he would work during the day, but around four or five, after bathing Ish and Irshad, I would tell Thomasi he could go out, and whatever dishes there were in the sink at night could wait until the next morning. His family stayed in Fort Portal, and once in a while he would go back to visit for the weekend.

*Did you ever meet his family?*

No. And I don't know what we were thinking back home, honestly I don't. We didn't even think about it, that they were human beings who needed their family too. It was so inhuman! I treated my servants well, and I was so fond of Thomasi. But this is fifty years ago, a long time ago. If I could go back, I would treat everyone even better. He used to sit down to eat after we had our dinner at 12:30 in the afternoon, and Irshad would sit on the floor with him and eat from his dish. That was something that was never done in Uganda, but I never minded my little daughter eating with my servant, never. She was so close to him, and we all are God's children. We all are the same.

I did a lot of sewing work to pay Thomasi's wages. I was sewing right up until the day Fatima was born, my third daughter. One thing I did with the sewing money I earned was to buy Heinz baby food. To feed a baby Heinz food was a really big thing. Most children were fed home-made food, like rice and potatoes—everybody fed their six-month or eight-month-old baby with that—and I spent so much money on Heinz food in Uganda. All my girls were beautiful babies! And what a gorgeous girl Ish was! Healthy, happy, oh, my goodness! She was the only one to eat Heinz, though. Irshad, no matter what you fed her, she would gag, and by the time Fatima was old enough to eat, we were already in Canada, but I fed her home-made food.

In 1968, my grandmother Fatima died. She was 78. But before she died she showed me how to massage babies. She knew how to make them so happy. She would heat some oil with seeds of some kind, I don't remember what they were, and when the oil cooled down she used it to massage the baby. She would massage the baby all over, arms, legs, face—and bum, hahaha—and the baby would be *so* happy. She would say, "You have to massage their bums, and then they'll have good bums." And my kids all do! Ish was so sweet, even as a baby. When I was sad, when I was crying, Ish would look at me and turn my face towards hers with her tiny hand, when she was only eight or ten months old, and she would say, "Hah? Hah?" like, "Why are you crying, Mama?"

*Bless her sweet little heart. She's still just like that, it seems to me.*

I know! She still is.

While I was expecting my third child in Uganda in 1972, we thought the baby would be a boy. I was in the hospital for three days trying to give birth. I don't know why it took so long, maybe because I sat at the machine sewing until the last day. Too much sitting when you are expecting is not good.

*Was it a painful labor?*

Oh, at the end I could not hack it anymore. I told the nurse to just kill me. And my ex didn't come once during those three days. He was never there when I was giving birth to my children, ever. And when Fatima was finally born, my best friend Gulshan came to see me in the hospital, and my ex was there then. And he said to her, "If you want the baby you can take her. We have a machine that makes daughters here." This is not something to say, and right in front of me. My friend was so embarrassed by his comment. I didn't care what sex my baby was! Fatima was a gorgeous baby. She had beautiful almond-shaped eyes and I would hold her and look at her deep dimples and think, *how beautiful she is!*

I was in the hospital for seven days after having her, and while I was there, my ex came one day and said, "We have to leave the country." He was always talking nonsense and I didn't believe him. But it was true. Idi Amin Dada went on television and said, "All non blacks have to get out of my country. I want only black people to live in Uganda." When I came home from the hospital I found a whole bunch of people living in my house. All my inlaws had come from little towns to get a passport and try to get out because if you didn't leave by Idi Amin's expiry date, you were killed.

*Were you frightened?*

Oh, definitely. I didn't dare to go out. Idi Amin would kill people on the road, and there were dead bodies in garbage cans. And on my second day home, with my ten-day-old baby, my ex beat me and threw me from one room to the next, and against my sewing machine, and I had a bruised shoulder, arm, my waist, and both my legs. I was in so much pain, but I didn't show it to my little girls.

*Did you have any idea of what to do, given Idi Amin's dictate?*

At first we had no idea what to do, or where we would go. Then we heard that Prime Minister Pierre-Elliott Trudeau from Canada said that he would take in six thousand people from Uganda. He wanted young people with little children who could make future Canadians for him. He didn't want any old people. We were given numbers, like a lottery, and we were searching in the newspaper every day looking for our number to come up. And finally it did. We had to pass a medical test, and when we went to take the test they interviewed us, and asked us where in Canada we would want to go; to Montreal or Toronto or to Vancouver. And us not knowing anything about Canada, and I mean not *anything*, I said, "Okay, since my name starts with M, let's go to Montreal." We passed the medical test, and everything was looking good, when all of a sudden one day all these military people came into the house and started ransacking everything right before my eyes. They'd heard from somebody that my husband had foreign currency somewhere in the house, which he didn't,

and they yelled at us, “Tell us what kind of currency you have in the house!” They dumped my sacks of rice and sugar onto the floor to see if we had hidden anything there, which we hadn’t of course, and finally they left with my husband and put him in jail, for nothing. He stayed in jail for three days, and on the fourth day a friend he had through business went to the jail to see him, and he said, “Tell Mumtaz to give you the checkbook, bring it here, I’ll sign a check and you go and buy tickets for us to get out of here. So he did. The tickets for refugees were paid for by the government of Canada so we shouldn’t have had to buy the tickets, but because my husband was in jail we had to. All our money was staying behind anyway, so it didn’t really matter whether we spent it or not. After having the airline tickets he bribed the prison guard to get out, and that same night we just went. We left at three in the morning so nobody would see us leaving, taking the children, and went to Entebbe, the main international airport there, about twenty miles from Kampala. We didn’t have time to pack suitcases or anything. But we were lucky that my jewelry came with me. Many people had gold jewelry that was taken away from them.



*Mumtaz's passport photo, taken in Tanzania in 1969*

*When so many people left Uganda at once did it take away a lot of jobs from local people?*

Yes, many jobs were lost. And you know, I didn't blame them for wanting everyone to leave. The white people and the Asians both looked down on black people. It's terrible the way black people are treated. Even now. But it did take many jobs, and people died of starvation.

*Did you get to say goodbye to Thomasi?*

No. We never got to say goodbye to him. The night before we left he did not sleep in his room at home. I think of him often, but I have no way of knowing anything about him or where to find him. I especially felt for Irshad and Ish for not saying goodbye to Thomasi. We flew from Entebbe to Ethiopia, then from Ethiopia to Athens, where we stayed overnight. From Athens we went to England because my husband had \$20,000 accumulated there for the future education of the children. We took that out and flew to Canada, and arrived in Montreal on the 30th of October. My husband had been to England a couple of times, but I had never been to a Western country before so I was shocked at the airport in Montreal when I saw a white man sweeping the floor. I said to my husband, "Oh, my God! There's a white person sweeping the floor!" And he said, "Everyone has to do that here." I said, "What!?! Sweep the floor in front of everybody?" That was something I had never seen in my entire life, a white person sweeping the floor!

We had arrived in Montreal at around five o'clock PM with the clothes on our backs and the three children, age seven, four, and the two-month old baby. My little baby didn't even have socks or a sweater. A customs officer looked at us, both of my little girls holding onto my tunic and the baby in my arms, and she said, "Where are you going? Are you planning to stay here?" At that time I didn't speak English at all, and my husband said yes. Then she said, "You are coming from a tropical country. I don't think you should stay here with three little children. I think you should go straight to Vancouver, right now, and the government will pay your ticket. Leave today." So we took British Airways, at that time it was BOAC, having no idea, again, where we were going. I remember seeing all the lights of Vancouver as we were landing, such a beautiful city, and I thought, *Oh no! I have three children and no Thomasi! How am I going to do everything without any servants? How will I cook and look after the children and take them to school and bring them home and make all the clothes and do all the laundry?* Of course life is much easier here once you get used to it, and you can buy clothes readymade, but I didn't know that then.

We arrived around 11:30 at night in Vancouver, British Columbia, and two white men were waiting for us, one holding a sign with our name, MANJI. They took us to a motel where we lived for three months. Ish started in first grade at the elementary school, which was right beside the motel so she could walk to school every day. Thank goodness we came at the end of October, and school had started in September so she didn't miss out on too much.

*Did Ish speak any English?*

No, only Gujarati.

*She must have learned fast.*

She did. But the teacher would always say that she was very shy and quiet. (She was a very shy girl and I was very worried about her, but today she is a successful lady, just like her two sisters.) I was selfish enough to talk to my children in English only because I wanted to learn, but in the meantime I forgot that my children were losing my language. So it was partly my fault that they didn't learn my language, but back then every time you spoke any other language than English, people would tell you right to your face not to speak a foreign language. This is one of the biggest regrets that I've got, that my children lost the language

and can't speak it anymore. They all answer me in English when I speak Gujarati. I love my language, and French too.

*Did Canada feel terribly foreign to you?*

It did, it did. For the first two or three years it was very depressing but there was no way out. Whether you liked it or not you had to stay. It was the month of November when we first lived in the motel, and there was not a bird in the sky. I felt like someone had dropped me into a graveyard. When we got to Canada, because I did not speak English at all, I was hoping that people would speak French. But there was no chance for that in BC! And my ex did not speak to me for six months, because 1) I had given birth to a baby girl and 2) we had lost everything in moving to Canada. I hated him so much for punishing me for nothing that I did! I went through a depression at the time, with three young children, not knowing the language or anything about a Western country; not knowing where to go or what to do. I was so lost without the language. I had no one to ask about anything, and no support of any kind from my partner. When we went to bed at night, if my feet accidentally touched his feet, he would kick me so hard it would wake me up. Now, someone might ask why I did not sleep in another bed, but the reason I didn't is because if I tried that he would beat me, thinking that I was thinking too much of myself, so it was really darned if you do and darned if you don't. That was the hardest time in my life.

But one day I was carrying my little Fatima outside the motel, just walking back and forth so she could have some fresh air, and I saw white flakes falling all around. I thought there must be something burning somewhere and the ashes are falling. But then I thought, *ashes are brown. Why is this so white?* So I asked a neighbor, "What are these white flakes falling?" and she said, "Snow." I said, "What! Is it really? Oh, my God! Oh, my God, it's *snow!*" I was so happy to see snow! It didn't even click in my mind that it could be snow. But we were in Canada, right? Canada! This was November 1972, and I had never seen snow.

We had no winter clothes but the Canadian government took us all out shopping, to Eaton's, all the refugees. They would buy us each one coat, one umbrella and one pair of boots. Those three things everybody got. And they would pay for it. They took us to the best shops to buy these things.

*Would it just be a person who came and said, "Hello, I'm from the government"?*

Yes, exactly. A lady came and took us in the car, and Eaton's was a really beautiful store, just like Nordstrom's, at the time.

*And you could choose any coat you wanted?*

Yes! You could have what you wanted. Everybody got that (although we did not get the kind of services then that refugees get now, such as the opportunity to learn English). Then there were the church people, they were so nice, they would come and tell us to come on a certain date and there would be pots and pans and plates and whatever you needed for cooking. There was a kitchenette in the motel room, and every week we got twenty dollars from the government to buy food. Ish would come home for lunch from school, she was only seven, poor thing, and I would say, "Will you look after Fatima and Irshad so I can go around the corner and buy what we need for supper?" I didn't know what anything was called in English, and one day I wanted tomato paste. A Chinese lady was working in the corner store, and I said, "Cirio. Cirio." That was the brand name I knew. The lady says, "What?" So I said, "Tomate." I thought that everybody spoke French in Canada, but no. In Vancouver nobody spoke French. Oh, lordy! Eventually I found out that Cirio was called "tomato paste," and little by little by little, I learned what things were called.

Not knowing the language was hard, and then of course having a big jackass for a husband

didn't help. I didn't know where to go for the laundry. He would tell me, "You can take the laundry to the Laundromat." I said, "How will I get it there?" He said, "On your back." I said, "You're going to tell me that I am going to carry the laundry on my back and walk down the *street*? And how am I going to do it when I don't know how to run the laundry machine?" And he would say, "Ask people!" I would say, "If I ask them they'll tell me in English and I don't speak English!"

*So what did you do? Wash everything in the bathtub?*

That's exactly what I did! At least when we got our house it had a washing machine. But before that I had blisters from washing diapers and all the clothes by hand. My hands became full of fluid, and that was really rough.

One day I wrote a letter to my mother and I told her, "Mom, I'm just so afraid I will never see you again. What if something happens to you or Dad, or if something happens to me?" They were still in Belgian Congo at that time, but eventually they were all expelled from the country too and they went first to Belgium and then to Montreal.

My brother Murtaza still lives in Belgium. He lives in Mons, which is 60 kilometers from Brussels, in a house built in 1848. 1848! He has a good job with good pay and good benefits, working for the US Army as a translator with doctors. My younger brother Roshan was only four years old when I got married, and when my parents emigrated to Belgium I was in Vancouver. So I didn't see him grow up. He had very bad asthma and passed away young, at forty-one, in Quebec City.

*But you did get to see your parents again.*

Yes. They chose to come to Montreal in 1981 because they spoke French, and once they got there they never left. Massum looked after them, bless him. My mom could be so difficult. Whenever I went to visit her in Montreal, which I did on every vacation, the first day would be really, really nice. The second day she would have a long face and I would think, *Okay, why is she doing that? What is wrong?* I would never know what was wrong and by the fourth or fifth day, I would say, "OK. I am going now." She'd say, "No, no! Stay! Stay! Stay!"



In my mind I'd be saying, '*But you have such a long face. You're not even smiling! You are not even talking to me! So why am I staying?*' But something was wrong with her and it wasn't her fault. It's very sad to me. My dad died in 1997 and my mom in 2006. She was 80 years old.

*How long did you live in the motel when you first came to Vancouver?*

We stayed there from 30th of October, 1972 until January 27th, 1973, which was the day we bought our house for \$28,000. We lived there until 1979. Not long

*Mumtaz visiting her mother in Belgian Congo, 1970*

after we got the house, my husband's older brother and his wife came to stay with us for a while. They had come from Uganda too, on January 31st, and they stayed for about three months before they bought a house of their own. One day I took Fatima to the doctor and my sister-in-law came with me. Fatima was five or six months old and teething, and with each tooth she had fever. It was winter and we'd only been in the new house for ten or twelve days. I remember that we asked someone for directions to the doctor's office, and they said, "Down there." And to me that meant you had to go down somewhere. If someone said, "Up there," I'd think, *Okay, there's no hill here, where am I going to go up?* Anyway, we found the doctor's office but then coming back we got lost. And Fatima was a heavy baby. Everybody used to say, "What do you feed her? She is such a beautiful baby!"

We walked around and around in circles until a lady in one of the houses opened a window and asked a question. My sister-in-law told me the lady was asking if we were lost, and I said, "Well of course we're lost!" The lady invited us into her house. We took our shoes off and went upstairs into her living room and I burst into tears. It was everything, being lost, all the frustration piled up, everything. The lady made us tea and she gave us cookies, and then she said, "Do you have your home address?" Well, I didn't. My sister-in-law asked me if I did, and I said, "What address?" I was so ignorant, or innocent, I don't know which, but all I knew was the name of the street, I didn't know the house number. In Uganda the houses didn't have numbers, you just knew where your house was and you'd go to the post office for the mail. "Okay," the lady said, "Is your house in this area?" Since I couldn't speak English my sister-in-law was doing the talking for me. I said that it was, and that it was a yellow and white house.

After we had tea, the lady took us in her gigantic American car and she drove us all around the neighborhood looking at white and yellow houses. The first two she showed us were not our house, and I had to say, "No, this is not my house," but the third one was, thank God. She was so nice. I wish I knew who she was now, but she was an older lady then and that was forty-some years ago.

*She's probably told this same story herself a few times.*

She probably has, 'those damn immigrants!' hahaha! But it was so very nice of her to help us.

*At this point you sound so completely Canadian with your 'eh' this and 'eh' that, eh?*

And I feel completely Canadian—my favorite magazine is *Canadian Living*, haha—but I haven't forgotten where I come from. I call myself Indian Canadian. Sometimes people will ask me where I come from originally and if I say from Africa, they say, "But you're not black," and I'll think, *Oh, my God, do I have to tell you my whole story?* My background is South Indian. People to this day ask me where I come from because of my accent, and I do not like to be asked. And honestly, the only ones who are really Canadian are native Indians. I can get really bitchy about that!

*What about moose?*

Yes, hahaha, them too.

*So how did you learn English in the beginning? Did you take classes?*

No, I had no time for classes with the children, but I used to watch soap operas, like *Another World*. The best way to learn is by speaking, by talking. And I love to talk!

*Indeed! And soap operas you can understand even if you don't speak English.*

Exactly! In 1975, when Fatima was two, I got a job in the Flight Kitchen of Canadian Pacific Airlines. I was visiting my sister-in-law one day and she happened to mention to her husband that CP Air was hiring people. She had heard about it from a man in our community who worked as an airplane mechanic. I grabbed that idea and I went right away to apply. The very next day they called me to come in for an interview. The man wanted to know where I was from, and said they'd never had anyone from Uganda but he said he would be delighted to have me. He was very nice, and my first shift was at midnight, that night. I was so glad to have that job. It was kitchen work, preparing First Class meals and salads and special meals, and it was a good job. It paid \$6.50 an hour, which was wonderful! And all the benefits! The flying benefits, medical, dental! I was just laughing, I said, "Oh, thank you, God, I really appreciate your blessings!"

We were given some money from the government—they were encouraging people to go to work, so they were giving \$120 a month for childcare for low-wage earners. Fatima would go to a Chinese lady while I worked, and that check would go to the Chinese lady. Ish and Irshad were in school already fulltime. In the flight kitchen I started to learn more English. The cook would tell me to break two hundred eggs in a big bucket, and I remember him saying, "Okay, now dump it." I said, "*dumpi?* What is *dumpi?*" And then he would show me. There was one cook there called George who was gay, and he was so nice and fun. He would yell from far away, "Mumtaz! I love you so much!" and everybody would look at him, and I'd say, "I love you too, George!" And if somebody laughed at me for the way I spoke English at that time I would laugh with them. I would never get upset, because I think it's funny too when people are learning a language, and trying to speak. My neighbors or my children's friends from school would come and ask questions, how did we come here, and why, where we came from, things like that. Children always make such fun of my accent. All my three girls make fun of my accent too, haha, even now!

*Really?*

They do! And sometimes it upsets me! Just Eff off, all of you! Hahaha!

When Irshad was in grade one, the principal at the school called my husband and me to come and see him. He said, "We have a little problem on our hands," and I thought, *Oh!* My ex said, "What is it?" And the principal said, "Well, Irshad is way too smart for grade one. We would like to jump her into grade three instead of grade two next year." So my ex in Gujarati said to me, "What do you want to do, say yes or no?" I said I wanted to say no. I didn't want her to jump ahead, she was just a little girl and I didn't want to put extra pressure on her. So I said no, grade two is fine for next year. Irshad was a go-getter, even as a little girl, and so sweet and loving.

*Did you have much free time to play with your kids, or were you always having to work?*

Always work. Clean the house, cook, work, and I regret a lot that I didn't spend more time with my kids, but now I can and I do.

Something that I want to tell here is that in 1975, I became pregnant. And my husband said the child was not his. I said, "Whose do you think it is?" He threatened to divorce me if I didn't have an abortion, and I was so afraid of a divorce. What would I do, where would I go with my three girls? So at four and a half months, when the baby was already roaming inside my tummy, he made me have an abortion. And in my mind, a mother is killing a child when she has an abortion. I didn't want to do it. I had it at the general hospital, and while I was in the waiting room, there were three other women who were there to have abortions as well. We were talking and I told them that I had three daughters and one of the women said, "Why don't you see, and if it is a girl you can have an abortion and if it's a boy you can keep him." I said, "Never! I would never do that!" I didn't care if it was a boy or a girl, I would never make a decision like that. I couldn't protect it, so I didn't need to know. I didn't want to know.



*Irshad & Mumtaz's father, Stanleyville Airport, 1970*

*How terribly painful!*

Afterwards the doctor told me that I cried in my sleep during the abortion, and I told him it was because I had not wanted to do it. He said, "Then you shouldn't have!" I wish I could have been stronger and said, "I'm going to keep it." If my child was alive right now, he or she would be past forty years old. I wonder what he or she would be like, and it makes me cry to this day. I am always asking forgiveness from God. In our religion we say if you have an abortion, on the day of judgment that baby is going to come and ask you, "Mom, what did I do to make you not let me live?" It brings tears to my eyes even now.

*I wish you had known some of the women standing up for women's rights in 1975, if only for moral support.*

Believe me, I would have run to them if I knew. There was so much that I didn't know, and I didn't speak English yet. I was barely getting used to being in this country, which was so different from where we'd come from. If I had been strong the way that I'm strong now, I would have just said I'm keeping the child.

Up to 1976 my ex was working for a cabinet factory, and then on the weekends he was working for a guy, and sometimes they came home to work. He was working under the table at the time and it was paying really well. So this man asked my ex if he would allow me to go with him for the weekend.

*For what?*

What do you think? That man had a girlfriend and he wanted to exchange us for the weekend! He was a very good-looking white guy, but I had never talked with him because I could not yet speak English, so I had *nothing* to do with this. And oh, boy. My ex left the job and never talked to that guy again.

*Well, that was the '70s: Swingers!*

And there are some places where people still do it! Where they are exchanging husbands and wives and all that for one night, hahaha, oh, my lord!

*So how long did you work in the Flight Kitchen?*

I worked there from 1975 to 1981, and then Flight Kitchen became CP Hotels and they

decided that whoever had started the job after a certain time wouldn't get the flying benefits, and that was me. My parents and all my siblings were in Montreal and Belgium, and I really needed the flight benefits. So in August of 1981 I got a job working at the airport, cleaning aircraft. That was hard work, but it had good benefits, and it was a very good job because at that time they paid \$16 an hour.

*Many people would consider \$16 an hour good money now!*

I know! It was very lucky, and I was so happy, and I was still able to fly wherever I needed to go. But it was a very tough job. I cleaned aircraft for 25 years. It was nine hours a day, and you'd have four days on and four days off. We'd do up to 32 aircraft a day. By the time I got home I would be half dead.

*Were there any airlines that were particularly bad or good, or were they all more or less the same?*

Cathay Pacific was the most disgusting. We used to call it Smithrite. Here in Vancouver, at least, garbage trucks were from a garbage disposal company called Smithrite. So whenever Cathay Pacific landed, they would say, "Okay, Smithrite is here." There would be food all over the floor, garbage everywhere, it was terrible. The cleanest was Lufthansa. That was a very nice, clean aircraft. With that job I had a good income, and finally in May 1986, I left my husband. Irshad was going to university and he didn't want to pay for it, or for anything for the kids. So I took him to court, to show him that he had the same responsibility as I had for our kids. The court decided that he had to give me a \$2500 check for the last five months right away and then every month a thousand dollars.

*And did he?*

No. After two months he had not yet paid me. He was working as a realtor and making bundles of money. He said that I had to go and pick up the check from his secretary. Finally I got the check. I wrote him a letter and told him, "This \$2500. You can put it where the sun never shines. I will do everything myself as a mother. I don't want your money. I was trying to open your eyes to your responsibility towards your children. Now I will do this job as a parent. And since you have never been there for them, when you get old, do not expect that the children will be there for you when you need them." I didn't take the money, and that was it.

I cried a lot on my mat while I was praying. I asked God to please help me to be able to make ends meet. It wasn't too bad, it's not like we slept hungry, ever, but I struggled for money with three daughters. I can remember when Irshad was at the University of British Columbia, she came home from school and opened the fridge and told me that there was no white bread left. And I told her that she had to wait until my payday, which was in two days, and then we would go buy some. I mean to say that money was tight. Massum asked me so many times if I needed anything, but I had too much pride to ask for any help, so I never did. Two years after leaving him, my ex came to me and said, "I'm going to put \$20,000 dollars in your account just for your safety, but I want you to come back." And after a lot of thinking, I decided to go back. I told my three girls and they all said, "Oh, no. Not again." I said, "Yes. Whether you like it or not, he's still your dad."

The day after I told them that, Irshad was at the university giving a lecture to 300 students. And she fainted. She fainted right there, giving the lecture. She broke her glasses and cut the back of her head wide open. They took her to the hospital. And she didn't tell me a thing about it. She came home, walking, without asking me to come give her a ride. She came into the house and threw her glasses on the table and said, "Can you fix these?" She was so angry, angry because of all the shebang that she had seen between her dad and me. I did not know what she had gone through that morning, and this was now the late afternoon, maybe six o'clock. So when she threw her glasses on the table, I said, "You know what? I'm

not your servant. If this is the way you're going to give me your glasses, I'm not going to fix anything!"

The next day her professor called me at home, and it was my day off, fortunately. I answered the phone and he said, "Are you Irshad Manji's mother?" I said yes, and he said, "How is she doing?" I said, "She's fine, why?" He was quiet, and then he said, "I guess you don't know." I said, "Don't know what?" And he said, "That she fainted in school while giving a lecture to the students. We took her to the hospital and she got stitches." She had gone to school already at that time, when the professor called me. Once I knew that all of that had happened, I took her glasses right away to be fixed. I said to myself, *This is a sign from God. God doesn't want me to go back to my husband.* If Irshad hadn't fainted in school that day I would have gone back, so stupid, just to try it again. But she fainted. And all that she'd gone through! So I did not go back. I made my decision and I haven't regretted it. On my visit to her in New York last year, I told her, "If you hadn't fainted we would have been back with Dad. But that gave me a sign from God. He said, *Your children are suffering.* My children come first, before anybody else. I told her so. She was a very angry girl back then, and she told me on that visit how sorry she was for ways that she behaved, and that she always loved me but that she was going through her own difficult thing. And I totally got that. What matters most to me is my children and their happiness. That is all I care about.

*Irshad wrote about some of the misery you suffered in her book, The Trouble with Islam Today. Did you read it before it was published?*

No, I didn't. I knew she was writing a book about the religion, and all I told her at the time was, "Write whatever you want to write, but I do not want you to make God angry. I don't want God to punish you later on in your life, so be careful. Be respectful to God." She said, "Okay, Mom, don't worry. I'm not going to be disrespectful to God. I promise you I won't." I kept reminding her all the time, and she kept telling me, "Mom, don't worry, I will not." After the book came out, a lady at work told me one day, "I read your life story." I said, "My life story? Where?" And she said, "In your daughter's book." I said, "Oh, my God. What did she write?" I had still not read the book. The lady said that Irshad wrote about the way my ex husband used to beat me up. I didn't know that she was going to write so much of my personal story in the book.

*Did you mind that she did?*

In the beginning I did, because I still felt it was a shameful thing that my ex husband beat me up. I was actually ashamed of that, and I worried people would look at me and say, "Why is her husband beating her up? There must be something wrong with her." I was very much ashamed that he beat me. But then the woman said, "You know what Mumtaz? You should be very proud of yourself. Look where you come from, and look at you now." And that's true. I know now that he was beating me up from his jealousy and from his lack of confidence, not because it was my fault or that I did something wrong. But even now I feel very ashamed about getting the slaps on my face.

*Were you surprised to see the book become so successful?*

No, it didn't surprise me at all because since the very beginning, from her early childhood, Irshad was a very smart girl, so nothing surprises me about her, nothing. But she got so many threats after the book came out that my heart was always in my throat. I would say to her, "It will only take one crazy person to kill you, you know? Only one crazy person." Oh, my God. She got so many threats.

On the last Sunday of the month of Ramadan at mosque, after breaking the fast, a lady came and told me that somebody had written a book about Islam and that a volunteer speaker was going to review it. He was not an imam, he was actually just some local dentist who

wanted to expose the book and shed light on “the writer” and criticize what she wrote. He didn’t say the name of the author, he called her “the writer.” The writer says this, the writer says that. And I knew right away whose book it was: my Irshad’s.

*Was his review positive or negative?*

Oh, negative! Negative! Completely negative! It was very, very painful. But I didn’t want to leave the mosque. I thought, no, I’m going to stay until the end. Afterwards two women came to me and said, “Mumtaz, you are one courageous woman to sit here and listen to the speaker talking about your daughter.” I said, “Well, I needed to know what he was going to say.” I wanted to face it.

*What did that feel like?*

It hurt like hell.

*I guess Irshad pissed a few people off.*

Yes, for telling the truth.

*A lot of clergy (and others, too) seem to think that they are God, or somehow on God’s special list.*

Exactly. I agree with that. And I am definitely proud of my daughter. There is no question about that. She has helped many people with that book, although it pissed many people off too. It has been translated into I don’t know how many languages all over the world. Everybody knows her. The thing is, we know that she is telling the truth, but people are afraid to say, “Oh, she’s so right! I agree with her!” They are so afraid to say that.

*What are they afraid of?*

Oh, of other people in their communities. Of other people who are going to talk about them! If people are talking about Irshad, they will talk about them as well!

*I remember her mentioning in the book that she was happy to find a translation of the Quran in the local bookstore so she could read it and understand what was in it.*

God wants you to have knowledge. Knowledge is a must in life. That’s what God says; it’s a must. The more you learn the better off you will be as a person.

*Do you think that modern mosques teach that, or is it still encouraged to just recite the scripture and shut up?*

Yes, it is kind of like that, but nowadays some of the younger preachers really try. Every preacher does things differently. And then what about ISIS? I’m sh#@ng my pants, pardon my language, but don’t they scare you?

*They do, because they seem to be getting so big.*

They’re killing so many people, all over the world. It’s brutal. At mosque they will say, let’s pray to God that something happens to stop them! I’ve got no words to describe how I feel about those assholes. Excuse my language, but I hate them like there is no tomorrow. All the people who have lost their lives! This is the way the world has turned out to be? Those jackasses! And you know, since ISIS is in Europe now, I feel like they will be coming here too, to Canada and the US. That will be coming along. After the bombing at the Brussels airport, I came home around two o’clock in the afternoon and my brother had left me a message saying, “I’m okay, don’t worry,” and I was glad. But then I talked to him on the

phone, and he said, “This is their home now, in Belgium. Everything is going to start in Belgium. I don’t know why, but honestly they are here and they are multiplying too, unfortunately.”

And it happens all over the world, every day. Count up how many people have been killed by these jackasses around the world, in Pakistan and Iraq and Afghanistan, let’s count them! And don’t take me wrong, don’t think I don’t feel sorry for Europe. I feel for all the people who have lost their lives, innocent people who haven’t done anything, all those poor people in the train in Brussels, going to work at eight o’clock in the morning. Why would you kill them? But the news makes such a bigger deal when it is Europe than when it happens in Pakistan or Afghanistan or Iraq, and it’s happening in those places all the time.

*It’s incredible to me when they go into mosques at prayer time and blow everything up. Do you think they really believe that God is going to congratulate them for that?*

Yeah! They think so! “Allah told me to do that,” they say. What the hell! I talk to Massum and he’ll say, “It’s happened again. And those are our people, Muslim people.” I say, “Yeah, a bunch of jackasses!” In the name of the Allah they do all those things that Allah has NEVER asked them to do. It’s totally against Allah to hurt another person, even with language. It’s against my religion to curse anybody, but honestly I hate them. Oh, my goodness, I’ve got no words for how much I hate them. And they are spoiling the names of all the Muslims like us, people who have not hurt even a fly! Why do we have to be the bad Muslims too, you know? You know what? On this earth you try to be the best that you can be, that’s all you can do. What else can I say? I have no words.

*I get very scared on airplanes, not so much because of terrorists but because the planes never stop flying. When do they have time to tighten all the screws and bolts?*

I know! I’m always afraid. Every time I enter the door of an airplane, I always ask myself, Okay, is this the ticket to my death?

*I do too!*

Honestly!

*Do you think that everybody thinks like that?*

No, some people think, *oh, nothing is going to happen*. Like Irshad. Irshad says, “Oh, who cares? If I’m gone, I’m gone! My day is up, so what?” And me, I think, *Oh, no!!!*

*Me too. And it’s not that I’m afraid of dying, it’s the idea of being trapped in a flying metal tube way up in the sky where we really shouldn’t be, with a lot of panicking strangers. That to me is horrible.*

To me, too.

*Whenever I have to fly I always make sure my house is clean before I go.*

Yeah! Just in case, right? If something happens you don’t want people to come in and say, “Oh, she was a dirty pig!” I do that too, I change my bed sheets, I leave the window open a little to let the fresh air in. I wouldn’t want it to be stinking, oh, boy.

*I clean very well too, so that if I die everything will be nice and clean for whoever has to come in, and then if I don’t die I get to come home to a nice clean house.*

Exactly! That is exactly what I think too, every time!

*I do think I'd rather die from a mechanical failure than terrorists, though, because at least that would be an accident and if it's terrorists doing it on purpose, it feels so mean on top of how awful it would be anyway.*

Yes, it is mean. It's heartless. I wonder, why are you picking on innocent people who have never done anything to you? And even if someone *has* done something wrong to you, just leave them alone! You go your way and they will go their way, that's it. Leave them alone. That's what I have done all my life!

*When you first came to Vancouver, was there any kind of Muslim population?*

No. There were only a few Muslim families here then, I could count them on my fingers. There were some people we met who had been here since 1960, and they would have prayers at their house. There was no imam, so somebody would just volunteer to read, and anybody who knew their prayers could lead the prayers. I think it was sometime in the late 1970s that we first got a very small mosque. My ex never stepped one foot in mosque then, he never went to prayers, and when I went he thought I was going there to talk behind his back. And of course I wasn't. I was working my fulltime job and I had three kids, I was cooking, sewing, cleaning my house, who would have the energy to go and gossip about anybody? It's not in me. The new mosque we have now is only about fifteen years old and it's beautiful. There are over a thousand people who go now. Our preacher here in British Columbia right now, he's young himself and he knows what young people are thinking. I just love him to death! After the service they always have tea and sometimes a nice dessert, and I look forward to that. Every Friday I drive to mosque to do my afternoon prayers.

*And the rest you do at home?*

Yes.

*What time is the first prayer?*

This summer I was getting up at 3:30 in the morning for the first one. It takes half an hour. But the time changes as the year goes on.

*So if it changes as the year goes, how do you know what time to get up?*

There's a chart. They give them at the mosque.

*Like a tide chart?*

Yes, but I wake up without it.

*Even as the time changes?*

Yes!

*You must have an extraordinary body clock. That's incredible!*

I know! My brothers also cannot believe it. They never miss their prayers, ever, and they have to use a clock to wake them up. This morning I missed my morning prayers, not because I couldn't wake up, I was just lazy. I woke up, I was awake in my bed, but I thought, *no, I don't want to wake up, I'm so tired!* I've been having lots of problems with sleep and I hadn't gone to sleep until 2:30 in the morning. So waking up, getting up out of bed at five was a little too much. So I said, "God, you know I love you, but you cannot nail me for this." He says, "Whatever you must do, you must do." And you know what? I cannot ask another Muslim woman, or a Muslim man, if they wake up in the morning to do their prayers. That



*Above: Fatima & Ish, August 2013,  
Below: Irshad & her two nieces, 2014*

is intruding into their spiritual life. For example, when Ramadan comes, I won't fast, but nobody will ask me if I fast or not. In our religion they say even if you don't fast, go ahead and break the fast with the people who are fasting. And if you don't fast, you can give a certain amount of rice to the poor, enough to feed sixty people a day for thirty days, and you will be forgiven.

*When you were raising your kids, did you all go to mosque?*

Yes, the kids grew up going all the time. Ish goes once in a while with me when I go now. I always say to her, "Please let's go together, oh, please, please, please, Ish? Oh, come on, please?" And she'll say, "Oh, okay, I'll go."

*Do you take your grandchildren to mosque when you visit them?*

No, because when I visit them it's in Seattle, and the mosque is quite far away. And Fatima says, "Oh, Mom, just do your prayers at home! You don't have to go to mosque to see God, God is everywhere." Which is true.



I wanted to talk a little bit now about Fatima, when she was diagnosed with cancer in 2010. She was pregnant when she was diagnosed. I remember the moment, in her house, when she told me. She said, "Mom, I've got something to tell you." I said, "Oh, my God. What is it?" She said, "Don't worry, I'm not getting divorced." I said, "Okay, what is it?" And she said, "I've got cancer." I started feeling dizzy. She said, "Mom, did you hear me?" I said, "Yes," but I couldn't say anything else. I was just numb. The next day, when I woke up in the morning to do my prayers, that's when I started throwing up. Fatima told me to have faith, that God is there and that she would be fine, but I was thinking, how can anybody be fine with cancer? Cancer is a thing that just robs you of life. She'd say, "Mom, please. Have

faith." And also, she warned me, "Don't cry in front of me. I don't want to look at your sad face, Mom, because that won't help me. What would help me is for you to be courageous. For you to be my backbone."

So I would go and help her out at home as much as possible. I would take the bus to

Washington State to help her, then come back home, stay here for two days and then get the bus again. And after the baby came, she could not breastfeed her because she'd had chemo. She had eight full doses of chemo when she was expecting her daughter, in the last four months. This was the end of June, 2010, and we worried about how the chemo was going to affect the baby. But when she was born she had two feet, two legs, two arms, two eyes, the doctor took her to look at her lungs and her kidneys, and finally he came and said the baby was fine. Thank you, God! Let's go home, the baby is fine! We were so happy. I'm so thankful to God that he gave me the blessing to have children, and that Fatima has made



*Mumtaz and her three grandchildren, August 2013*

me a grandmother. I have three awesome grandchildren! And Fatima, this girl of mine, she is so positive about whatever she goes through, she has made me very, very proud. Last night I said to Ish, "You know, I'm so lucky! Out of that terrible marriage I got you three girls! I can't imagine how life would be without you three. Life would be so boring without you!" And she said, "Thank you, Mom." I'm lucky to live with Ish. (She was married, but now she is not, and I am so lucky to live with her). We have a nice house to live in, we decorated it together, and I just really feel very blessed.

*After coming to live in Canada, did you ever see Oscar again?*

I did. In the year 2000 I went to Belgium to see my brother, Murtaza. Oscar lived in Brussels as well, so I told my brother that I wanted to see him. I knew that his 26-year-old son had been shot and killed in the Belgian Congo and after that he went downhill. It's a big thing when you lose a child. Oscar just could not believe that I had come to visit him. He was so nice. He said, "If I would have seen you walking on the street I would not have recognized you! You have become such a beautiful woman." He said it over and over, and when we left his house my brother said, "You see? I tell you all the time that you are beautiful but you don't believe me." As he got older Oscar started to get Alzheimer's, and he lived for quite a few years in the Alzheimer's hospital in Belgium. Massum went to visit but Oscar didn't recognize him. He died of cancer about ten years ago now, and honestly, the day I found out that Oscar died I was very, very sad. And you know, when my daughters were kids, one day while we were having breakfast Ish asked me, "Mom, are you going to choose our husbands, who we marry?" I said no, that I was never going to do that. She said,

“Even if we want to marry a white boy?” I said, “Yes. If you want to marry a white boy or a black boy, you go ahead. That’s fine.” And they all kept that in their minds. When Irshad was nineteen, she was working in the parliament in Ottawa and she phoned me one day and said, “Mom, do you remember a long time ago when you said we could choose whoever we want to marry?” And I said, “I do remember, and I’m still telling you the same thing.” She said, “Okay, I’m coming home because I’ve got some news for you.” I hung up and started crying. I thought, *Oh, my God, she’s coming to tell me that she’s gay.* I just had a feeling.

*What made you think so?*

In my heart I knew. I had my suspicions from when she was a child. When she told me, she said, “Mom, I never go to the gay parade, I never go where people might see me,” she said, “I don’t want people coming to torture you if they see me doing this or that. I know how much this hurts you and I’m so sorry.” She was so sympathetic about it. And for the first five years after she told me she was gay, every time on the phone or when we saw each other we would cry. She would say, “Mom, I am so sorry to put you through this, I’m so sorry and I honestly don’t know what to do.” I would say, “There is nothing for you to do,” but it hurt because when the world found out, they were kicking my butt too. She would cry because she was thinking that she was hurting me, and I was crying because I felt for her, and how the world was going to treat her. The world is cruel.

*Did people give you a hard time about it?*

There were people who stopped talking to me because my daughter was gay. They’d say, “Oh, religion this and religion that!” One day, the wife of our mullah—the man who speaks on the big chair at the mosque—came and said to me, “You know, everybody knows your daughter is gay and everybody is talking about her.” She told me that I was encouraging Irshad to be gay, and that from an upstanding, good family this doesn’t happen. Well, I just flipped. I totally flipped, and I said, “You know what? She didn’t just wake up one day and decide to be gay and I didn’t encourage her to be gay. Believe me, it is hurting her and it’s hurting me as well. I’m her mother. You can all say whatever you want, but she’s my daughter and I love her to death.”

*What did she say?*

Nothing. She said nothing. And I just say to God, “You know the position I’m in. What am I going to do? It’s my daughter’s happiness. I know it’s against the religion, but I don’t know what to do.” And honestly I don’t. And you know what? People are saying that gay people are choosing this lifestyle, and that’s not true! They are wired differently, and it is scientifically proven. My brother Murtaza is gay. He has been with Jeff for the last thirty-two years, and you can mention it if you want. They’ve been together a long time but have separate houses. So they go for the weekends to each other, and they always go on vacation together, and they’re so happy together!

When Irshad was a child, we would go to Sears to buy clothes for the first day of school and she would go to the boys’ department and want baseball shirts with white and blue stripes and corduroy pants. And I said, “No, you can’t get that! Look, the girls are choosing the frilly blouses and skirts.” And she would say, “Mom, I don’t want to wear that.” She didn’t want to wear dresses and she walked like a boy. I would get so mad at her for it, the poor girl, oh, I feel so bad about that now. I would say, “Why are you walking like a boy? Why can’t you walk like a girl?” She would give me a dirty look but she wouldn’t say anything. I feel so sorry about that now. Oh, my God. Honestly, I’ve got so many regrets about those things. I did not know the person that she was!

*It seems to me that you’ve more than made up for it by being so accepting and supportive now. It might not have come easy for you, but that just makes your acceptance and unconditional love*

*all the more valuable.*

You think so?

*I do. You know how many people who come out of the closet are rejected by their families? Lots!*

I know. Those poor people. I could never reject my daughter. I love her and I would never, ever tell her that I don't.

*Has your mosque become any more open about gay people since the time when the mullah's wife said that?*

I don't know, but people do at least talk to me. They don't say anything. They don't ask me about her. Nobody asks about her from my in-laws. When some of them say, "How is Ish?" or "How is Fatima?" I say, "Oh, they're fine and Irshad is fine too. I've got three daughters, not two." It hurts like hell, honestly it does, but when I would talk to Irshad about that she'd say, "Who cares, Mom? So what?" And I would say, "But I do care! I'm a mom! And it does hurt me!" But you know what? All that I went through over the years has made me a very strong woman. And now I really don't care. If somebody says something to me, I'll be right there with my answer whether they like it or not.

*Are there any gay people who go to your mosque that you know of?*

No.

*Could you have ever imagined, when you told your kids they could choose who they wanted to marry, that you would one day be blessing Irshad's marriage to a lady?*

Never, ever, not in my wildest dreams, ever. Oh, my goodness. And I could not be happier. Irshad is so happy with Laura, and I love Laura as much as I love my three daughters, honestly. She calls me her Muslim terrorist!

*Haha! You've met your match, Mumtaz. Some Christian churches and some synagogues honor same-sex weddings now. Do you think that some mosques in the US and Canada will start allowing them too?*

No. I think the mosques and 99.9 percent of the Muslim people will say no. I'm in the 00.1 percent.

*You don't think that eventually a few will come around?*

Nope. I don't.

*Irshad had told me about a gay imam in this country, in Washington DC, and he will perform wedding ceremonies for gay Muslims, but as far as I know he's one of very few, if not the only one, who does.*

Oh, wow! I didn't know that!

*I read that there are eight openly gay imams in the world right now. But I also remember when there were no Christian churches that officially allowed gay people to even openly attend. It's really quite a recent acceptance, and not by all churches, either. If enough Muslim gay people decide that they want to get married, do you think that little by little there may be more acceptance in that direction?*

I'm sure there are lots of Muslim gay people but they won't come out.

*Is it because they're afraid their families will be upset?*

Yes. They're afraid that their family will disown them, or that people will talk about them and that kind of thing.



*Mumtaz and Massum in Montreal, 2014*

Exactly, hahaha. She will murder you if you get Massum a pink suit. Then she will be *your* Muslim terrorist!

*I can't think of a Muslim terrorist I'd rather have!*

Massum won't be a terrorist, but he will be terrorizing the world with his pink suit. *Big OMG!* I can just imagine him in it.

*I'm just one of many who thinks Massum is fabulous, right?*

Oh, everyone loves Massum. A lady I know from mosque here in Vancouver ran into him at the Hajj, and she knew that he was my brother. When she saw me in mosque after she came back from her pilgrimage, she said, "How is it that such a Satan-woman has a brother who is such an angel?"

*What!?*

*Some christian fundamentalists say that gay marriage causes global warming.*

Oh, what a bunch of idiots! Global warming was happening thirty years ago and there was no gay marriage then. How stupid those people are! Oh, boy.

*What does Massum think about Irshad getting married?*

He thinks it's fine.

*Of course he does! I must find him a perfect pink suit in appreciation of his being such a sweetiepie.*

But he'll have to come to New York to get it, right?

*Yes! It would be so nice if he could wear it to Irshad's wedding! But I don't dare suggest that or Irshad will want to murder me.*

She was joking, she's a good friend of mine. But it's true, Massum is a very noble guy. He's very, very kindhearted.

*Note: In May of this year, 2016, Mumtaz honored Irshad's wedding to Laura with a speech and a blessing, which fortunately for the world, was recorded on video.*

*Would you tell about the wedding?*

Well, first I have to tell you that a little while before the wedding, I lost my voice. Irshad said to me, "Mom, you know you have to give the speech! So don't talk! Don't talk at *all*, to *anybody*, until the wedding!"

*That can't have been easy for you.*

No! Because you know how much I love talking. The whole family went to Hawaii for the wedding, and I still didn't have my voice back completely when I arrived. I wanted to have fun and laugh and talk with everybody but my little five-year-old granddaughter found out that I wasn't allowed to talk in order to save my voice. So every time I said *anything* she would say, "Mamima! Game over! Stop talking!" Every time! She would catch me talking, put up her hand and say, "Game over, Mamima. Stop *talking*." So you know what? I locked myself in my room, which was excluded from everybody, haha. Irshad had booked a special room for me and for Massum.

When the wedding day came I had to tuck a microphone into my sari and another one into my bra. I thought, *Oh, my God! I'm fat enough already and now these things are making look fatter!* I knew that no matter what I did I would not look any slimmer. And I didn't have any choice but to have those microphones on so they could record my voice for the video while I was giving my speech.

*Irshad posted something online about you making history by reading a verse from the Holy Quran to bless her wedding. How did you choose what to read?*

Well, every Friday I get an email passage from the priest in Toronto, I liked one of them especially that I thought might suit the girls, so I sent it to them. Irshad found that passage in Arabic. I read one line in Arabic, and then the meaning and the rest in English. But I made a mistake as I was reading, and that was so funny; instead of saying "these two 'creations' of God" about Laura and Irshad, I said 'creatures'. I corrected myself but I could not stop laughing, and Irshad and Laura were laughing too. You can see it in the video. "Creatures," eh? And I just could not stop laughing. But you know, the wedding could not have been better or more perfect. Massum gave Irshad away—he was on one arm, and on her other arm was her friend Jim, the man who introduced her to Laura. It was so beautiful. Everyone was there, Ish, Fatima and her family, my grandson Liam was putting a lei around each person's neck, my oldest granddaughter Lauren sang, and she has the most beautiful voice on earth, honestly, and little Blakie, the five-year-old, she was the flower girl. It was such a beautiful, happy day. I will never forget it.

*Note: Irshad posted at least part of the speech on Youtube, but I thought it would be nice to transcribe it and include it here as well. So here is what Mumtaz read at the wedding:*

*Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim.* In the name of God, the most merciful, the most compassionate. Salaam alaikum, everyone. Peace be with you all.

I'm Irshad's mother, and I could not imagine a better life partner for my daughter than Laura. Several months ago I emailed Irshad and Laura a verse from the Holy Quran (chapter 6, verse 116). And in my email I emphasized: this is for both of you. In Arabic (the first line) the verse goes like this:

*Wa in tuti' aksara man fil ardi yudil luuka 'an-Sabii lillaah*

Here is an English translation (of the entire verse): If you obey the majority of those on earth, they would lead you away from God's path. They follow nothing but idle fancies and preach nothing but idle falsehoods.

Now, you might think I sent this to Laura and Irshad in order to lecture them. But no, I did not. I sent them this verse because I am so proud that they are living up to the spirit of the verse; to find your own path with God's guidance. To listen to the voice of truth within yourself, even—or especially—when others judge. To recognize that you are unique creations of God, and when you honor your uniqueness, you show gratitude for what God has given to you.

Most people are too afraid to be truly different. They fear being criticized by family, friends, co-workers, or even society. Not my daughters. In their own way Irshad and Laura have always lived by their inner compass. This does not mean they have been selfish. In fact, Laura asked me for my blessing for this union. After making her sweat—just for the fun of it—I gave her my blessing. So did my brother Massum. Because as Muslims we have faith that God knows best, and what he created is what he meant to create. Today those two beautiful creatures are combining their—Creations! Sorry! Not creatures! Hahaha! Today those two beautiful creations are combining their freedom—Oh, my Lord!—and as a mother, with the knowledge that only a mother can have, I know they will use their double dose of freedom to serve the will of God, and the needs of all his creations, from human beings to animals, to nature. One of the greatest principles in Islam is *Tawhid*. *Tawhid*, which means the unity of everything on earth. I understand this better today than I ever have. Irshad and Laura, we are united in blessing your union. May Allah continue to guide you both and your furry little family. Amen

Welcome to the family, Laura. To the craziest family!

*When I saw the video, Mumtaz, I imagined people all around the world getting courage and comfort from seeing you supporting your daughter in such a big way. You may be the only Muslim mother who has done that so publically.*

That is very true, yes. And there are people who have said to me, “How could you do that?” And I say, “How could I not? How could I not?” I am feeling so happy right now, I cannot tell you how happy I am, honestly.

*There are people who actually said that?*

Yes! Just because she's gay. And I say, “You know what? You are discriminating against my daughter, and I don't want to hear anything from your mouth anymore. I love Irshad exactly the same way I love my other two daughters.” Laura is married to my daughter now so she's part of my family, but really, I'm not obliging myself because Laura is now part of my family. I just plain love her, that's all. And now Irshad is living with Laura and all those dogs that Laura adopted! And when I go visit them, I will have to put up with those dogs too! That is one thing I am not looking forward to.

*I saw the pictures of you with some of those little dogs at Irshad's. And they were all visibly smitten with you.*

Yes, I know! I know! And I don't know why they like me! Since my childhood I was taught that our religion teaches that dogs are dirty because they put their noses everywhere. And to shake that off now would be very hard for me.

*I saw a photo of one little doggie guy looking at you as if pleading, 'Oh, please notice me or I will die!' And then the next picture shows you giving in. I saw the proof.*

I know! I know! I can't fight it. And I don't want Irshad and Laura to worry about their dogs just because of me. I don't want to be the 'high-maintenance mother-in-law', you know? That's no good. And my daughters, they have minds of their own and they are adults and now whatever they do is up to them, right?

*Did you have any pets as a child?*

We had parrots. There was a gray parrot, I don't remember his name or where we got him, but he lived in the house and we fed him only shelled peanuts, nothing else. We had to sweep the floor a few times a day, and I remember that in the voice of my mom he was calling all the time, "Massum!" and screaming at everybody. Parrots are so lively! They never tire of making noise and making a mess. After fifty years I still love parrots so much. They are so noisy and loud, like me! You never feel that you are alone with a parrot in the house. I would adopt one now in a heartbeat. A while ago Ish brought home a cat. His name is Jet, and he's so handsome. He's so happy because he spent a very long time in the shelter.

*He really hit the jackpot getting to live with you and Ish.*

He better think that! He doesn't want to sleep in Ish's room. He wants to sleep in my room with me, all the time. He's always in my room. I closed my bedroom door but for two weeks he was at the door waiting. He would be waiting at the door whether I like it or not. As soon as I would open the door to go to the bathroom, he would sneak in and run under the bed and not come out. Now every night he is in my bed, snoring like crazy. I said to Ish, "You know what? I'm married to a man who snores. A cat! And I didn't even ask for him! He snores so loud I can't sleep!"

*Why don't you kick him?*

Well, I feel bad doing that. But I do feel that without being married I am actually married to a man now, this cat who snores so loud. But I love purring! Purring is such a soothing sound, isn't it? It feels so good. The cat is content and happy and all is well.

I saw on TV where a mother bear was killed and left behind two babies, a little brother and sister bear, snuggled together so scared. A man working for the wildlife conservation was told to shoot the two baby bears and he refused. And he was fired. People rallied over that, saying, why was he fired for doing the right thing? I don't know if he got his job back or not, but I thought of those little bears, the little brother and sister bear, and I thought, "That's me and Massum!" People are so stupid! If a bear goes into somebody's backyard and somebody complains, they come and shoot the bear. But look at all the forests that people have taken to build houses! Everywhere! Everywhere! There is no place for the animals to go, not anywhere! But why are we killing them? It's our own fault, we human beings. We are taking over everything! You know how many bears are dead just for going into someone's yard? And beautiful bears! So many bears here are dead because they go into people's backyard and go into the garbage cans, or they break into a car to look for food. They have to be fed too, you can't blame them!

*I love bears.*

Me too! Me too. Me too. It's totally wrong.

*I think we people are the worst of all the animals.*

Exactly. We human beings! We are a bunch of jackasses, I swear. You know, sometimes I can still feel embarrassed that I only had three years of school in my life. But I think I actually know quite a bit. When I tell my grandchildren that I didn't go to school much, they say, "But Mamima, how did you get so smart?" And I say, "You know what? I worked for it. And how does the work go? You look and learn every day, and if you don't understand something, you ask."

I feel very much blessed for what I've achieved. I raised my three girls and gave them enough education to stand on their own feet when they grew up. Of course I cannot take all the credit for this because they all worked very hard themselves. They met me in the middle. I would say that raising my girls is the biggest achievement of my life, as a single parent.

My three gorgeous girls have given me three different kinds of happiness. Ish has kept me under her wings, Irshad has given me a kind of fame—the kind of fame that is used for the goodness of humanity—Irshad uses her fame for that goodness, and Fatima has given me three gorgeous grandchildren. My girls are always there for me whenever I need them, they are brave, they are answers to my prayers, and my beloved brothers, I'm always at the center of their lives the way they are in mine, and it's happy, happy, and happy.

Most of the time I am happy, and I thank God every day for my three daughters and my three grandchildren and my three wonderful brothers who I love so much. The past is past and the future looks good. And I think that is a really good deal.



*Mumtaz in Toronto, 2013*

## About the cover art

The deer art you see on the cover is a watercolor painting based on a photograph from the Hawai'i State Archives, made specifically for this issue of *Housedeer* by the artist Michele Zalopany. Part native Hawai'ian, Michele spent her formative years in Detroit and Hawai'i. Her photo-based work is included in more than twenty-five permanent international collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Eli Broad Collection, the USB Collection, the Walker Art Center, the Carnegie Institute, and others. She has been a guest lecturer at the American Academy in Rome, Cranbrook Academy of Art, Middlebury College, and other venues. She was a Visiting Lecturer of Visual Arts at Harvard University in the years 2007-2008 and 2009, and since 2001 she has been a professor at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

Michele lives and works in both New York and in Sutri, Italy. To see more of her work and for contact information, visit her web site: [www.michelezalopany.com](http://www.michelezalopany.com)

*Nana i ke Kumu*  
*"Pay attention to the Source."*

*A special thanks to Michele Burgevin for the cover lettering and for the creation of the Housedeer logo.*

