

# A Gift of Heart

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## Prologue

*I have written this primarily for our grand kids most of whom are still too young to read. May be someday when they grow up, they will read it. May be some of them will find some connection to the time, people and the place that their forefathers lived. In my wildest dream I see that this written piece has kindled their interest to find out more about the people and places of their ancestors. This is a gift of my heart for them. Others who knew my parents may also find this worthwhile to revisit them and their times.*

## A dream comes true

Isa's Bubu (grandmother) bought him a bicycle for his fifth birthday. I am yet to find an appropriate word in the thesauruses to describe his excitement and happiness at having it. He gasped for air as he fumbled: 'It is the best gift that I ever had Nana, I am so happy Nana, I love you Nana, and I love you Bubu, its 'awesome Nana'. He kissed and hugged us, I do not know for how many times. I took him out on to the street where he rode from one end of the footpath to the other. He rode it in pride, happiness and fulfillment all over himself. It seemed as if he had conquered the world.

He indeed conquered the world for me that day. I was just as happy at that moment because of a promise that my father made to me when I was about Isa's age, just got fulfilled. I got sucked in Isa's happiness and saw myself riding a bike next to him, just as I have had always dreamt. Isa, you made my dream come to true.

It was my first day into the school. On our way I spotted a kid riding a cycle like the one you had - Isa. I asked my father if I could have one of such. He said 'yes', I suppose, not to break my heart. Now I know he couldn't afford one. I often dreamt that I had a bike and I rode it with pride, just as you did. Dreams are just as good. It is even great when you can feel the same in reality. I felt it real. I had my promised bike, when you had yours.

Isa's younger brother Uzair had his bike a week after and it was a repeat performance. I bargained for one bike and ended up getting two, for myself. Thanks boys, I owe it you.

Its' all about being happy, in whatsoever you wish it to be, isn't it? Otherwise why our mums and dads would stay up for nights when we are sick. Why would they always get up well before the day break to ensure we have everything that we need

and why would they forego their own sleep, comfort and even food day after day to ensure we are safe and well. Why would a mother sit next to the window all through the night to see the son home? Why would a father break his back riding cycle day in day out so that the son can ride the bus to go to the college?

Why did The Mogul Emperor Babar sat in prayers for nights and days for the life of his gravely ailing son Humayun in exchange of his own. And as the son became well The Emperor fell sick, why did he chose to forgo medicine and nutrition and passed away shortly afterwards. I suppose he was happy to have gotten what he wished for and he wasn't the one to break his end of the deal.

## **Everyone's dad is a hero**

The International Centre for Diarrheal Decease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR'B) was a fun organization. I worked there for about 12 years from 1981 to 1986 and again from 1988 to 1994. The overall atmosphere at ICDDR'B was very different from most other organizations in Bangladesh. Outside of work people often met with their families in social invitations at each others' house. Discussions ranged from chit chats to anything and everything.

On one such evening I overheard someone mentioning the name of the office in which my father had worked. A recent junior colleague of ours was talking about his late father who had worked in that office as its Head. I had heard and seen his father when I was a young boy. He was a well known civil servant of his time. My colleague was obviously very proud of his father and was gloating about being one of his offspring.

Like him I am also very proud of my father and like to talk about him whenever I get an opportunity. I told him that my father also worked in the same office. He seemed very interested and moved over to me to find out what position my father had held in his father's (!) office. My father was an accountant there and when I told him this, he seemed very unimpressed. With a slighting smile he said: "You seem to have come a long way considering your background". This was of course a hint at my father's low-paid position and consequently my social standing. He kind of pitied me. I wanted to tell him that given the opportunity in which he was raised, he hadn't gone anywhere near where one should have gone. I decided to ignore him as I thought that with his kind of attitude, he wasn't worth engaging. However, I just thanked him for his compliment and said: "Wish I could say the same thing about you".

I often look back at this incident and every time it occurs to me that both this gentleman and I are very proud of our late fathers, but for very different reasons. We both think that our fathers are great. He considered his father great because he was such a successful person. I think my father is very successful because he raised me to be able to attain things that he was unable to attain for himself. He worked hard all his life so that I can have a better life than the one he lived.

In the end who would we call a more successful person; my father or his? I suppose it all depends on how one chooses to define success.

Most Bangladeshis that lived in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney during seventies knew Rezaul Karim too well for his wits and hearty laughs beaming through the round bearded face. He was every ones "Bhai" and we all adored his company. As he was close to finishing his doctoral thesis for Ph.D., one evening he announced that he would be returning home soon without completing the thesis. That seemed very unreal as all of his contemporaries considered him to be a very knowledgeable and a brilliant student. The Doctorate degree was there for him to take, only if he cared to hang around for few more months.

But he was determined and made up his mind. As a last ditch attempt to deter Karim Bhai, we confronted him collectively and demanded to know the reason for such an irrational decision. This is what he had to say.

Of late he had been receiving some worrying letters from his wife about their fifteen year old son. She was worried that the boy got mixed up with some wrong company and was going astray. She felt she was losing him fast and urged Rashid Bhai to do something urgently. Rashid Bhai decided that he could not delay his return and consequently risk his son's future. He argued that losing his own Ph.D. degree was not much of a price to pay against a possibility of wasted future of his son. He was already the Principal of Chittagong Polytechnic College by then. He thought that most he could reach with a degree of Ph.D. is a position of Vice Chancellor. But he considered it worth nothing compared to the future of his son. He gave up his Ph.D. and probably a brighter future for himself in the hope of salvaging his son's future. He returned home to Bangladesh the following week.

## **My father, my star**

My father and I graduated from the University at around the same time! I think he outran me by couple of years. After finishing the school from his village, Bajitpur, he had to start working at a very young age to support his family. He was the eldest of nine siblings. By the time he finished school, the otherwise reasonably well off family fell into bad times. The family had business in Kolkata (known as Calcutta at that time). My grandfather, a lone child of his parents like me, took very little notice of the business as a young man. When the partition of Pakistan from India took place in 1947, all of the business in Kolkata was lost. The family survived on property for some times and that too eroded soon. My father started working for the family with his unfulfilled desire for further education. I heard that he made very little money at his work and almost all of it he sent home for the family. That man strived happily all along his life to make others happy. It makes me wonder if we really know what makes one happy.

My father started going back to college when I was about to finish high school. He attended an evening college about 10 miles (approximately 22 km) away from the town where we lived. After work he would ride a cycle to attend classes and would return home pretty late. However, he never missed giving me the bus fare to go to my school or college. I never felt short of cloths, books and other amenities of the life of a youngster. I was content and happy but never wondered how.

In the early 60s we moved to our new house at Mirpur, a lower middle class suburb in the Dhaka city. My father built a small two room house with thin walls and a tin roof with his meager savings and loans from work. We were very happy; we had a house of our own on a small block of land – our own house. My mother (Amma) worked around the house all day. Abba (father) cycled his way home late in the evening from Jagannath College. We ate dinner sitting on a mat near the cooking stove and then Abba would go for his studies. Many a times I tried to stay awake to find out how long he worked. But it was only in the early hours of dawn that I would wake up to the sound of Abba's melodious Kerats: recitation of Suras from the holy Quran for Fajr (morning) prayer. Even today I can hear that sound anywhere and anytime, whenever I wish to, only by closing my eyes. How can I express my gratitude to Allah for such a priceless possession that Abba left for me! All my efforts to leave behind all the material possessions for my children seem so insignificant in comparison to what my father left behind for me.

I sat for my Secondary School Certificate Examination (Year 10) in 1963. I had to take the exam at Nawabpur High School, about ten miles away from where we lived. The exam centre being so far way, my mother and I stayed at Ghunu Khala's (mother's cousin) house at Purana Paltan during the exam. Purana Paltan is about a mile away from Nawabpur.

Abba stayed by himself at the house in Mirpur. A severe storm struck one night causing serious damage to properties in that neighborhood. Our house was completely blown apart. Fortunately nothing happened to Abba as he stood all night under the door between the two rooms. When dawn broke, he saw himself standing on the floor of his house with strewn bricks all around him. It was a serious blow for our family. We had no place to live. Abba was neck deep in debts building the house. There was no way we could rent a place to live in. Fortunately Abba's office allotted him one of its flats. We returned to Tejgoan to live again. This time it was a two bed room regular flat. Previously we had lived in Tejgoan for about six years in one room with communal toilets and showers.

I Think I was about 6 or 7 when we had first moved to our one bed room accommodation in Tejgoan, an industrial cum residential lower middle class suburb in the Dhaka city, the capital of Bangladesh. Our living quarter was a small one-bedroom unit which included a very tiny kitchen beside the narrow entrance hallway and an equally small verandah across the bedroom on the other side. Most occupants covered the back verandah to convert it into some kind of a room. Ours were made into a reading room for me with a chair and a desk. There were approximately 28 units, separated by common partition walls, in each of the two floors in a two storied building that spread lengthwise. The entrances to the units

were from an open frontage that ran from one end of the building to the other. Four baths and four toilets sat at each end of the building for use of the occupants of each floor.

The common frontage, baths and the intimate proximity of the units made it very much of a communal living. Walking from one end of the building to the other, one could easily make out what was cooking in each of the households. Most of the neighboring families were an open book to each other. As one came out of its unit, it felt like converging into an open courtyard where kids played and quarreled most often. Moms gossiped about other neighbors and dads complained about work and the price of rice going up over 25 paisa per sear (approximately one 20th of a cent per kilogram). It was mostly fun other than the pick time rush for the comfort zone. The stench however made the turn around quicker for the waiting lineup. During the summer months when we had more guests than what could be accommodated inside the one room unit, some of us would go to sleep on mats on the verandahs of the office block nearby. It had indeed been one of the greatest treat for a seven year old.

Returning to Tejgoan, this time into a more comfortable two room self-contained unit seemed like Godsend. We were a happy lot again going about our own business. Abba (father) went on with his life as if nothing had happened. He was a very soft spoken man and spoke very little. He always wore a composed smile of a very happy and content human being. Amma (mother) sometimes would lament about our misfortune. She wondered why we had to lose all of our life's savings: "We have caused no harm to anyone and none of our money is ill gotten!" Abba would smile and say: "Nothing happens without a reason. The One above knows it all and He must have had a good reason". He would say that we human beings can only see what is in front of us and what we can perceive. But He sees it in totality and decides accordingly. I now understand what kept him so composed and content in the face of all odds.

On the night of 25th March, 1971, the Pakistani military started one of the worst genocides on the Bengalis of then East Pakistan. Hundreds of students, police and others were killed indiscriminately in Dhaka city. It was followed by further lootings and killings in the outskirts of Dhaka by the Biharis (Urdu speaking refugees from India) of Mirpur and Mohammadpur refugee colonies. Quite a few Bengalis that lived in and around where our house had once stood were killed by the Biharis. If we still had our house there, we could have lost our lives too. Abba believed that Allah must have had decided long before to save this family of three and hence caused us to leave the property. I wish I could have such conviction, faith and dependence. Life can be so much better, if one only wished to make it.

Isn't it what the wise sage Al-Khadir taught Moses in Surah Al-Kahf, verses 65 to 82 of the Holy Qur'an? In it, through an allegory, Al-Khidr explains Allah's enormity and our limitation to fathom beyond what we see in front of us. In effect Al-khidir's response was that the human beings can only see what is in front of him and what it can perceive. But Allah sees it in totality and decides and acts accordingly.

Only Allah knows best, but I think this is what may have prompted my father to adopt the philosophy of contentment and happiness in his life.

## **The ancestral home**

Abba all along dreamt of returning to his village after retiring from work. He wished to retire as a school teacher in his village school. That was the main reason he took up studies at that late age. Though he had spent most of his life away from home, in his mind he had always lived in his home. I seem to miss that passion for “returning home”. I suppose this is the price of urbanization. Most of us never had a home in the same way our fathers had. We lived in cities - in houses which never became a “home”. Now that we have moved overseas, we will never know what home is. Only time can tell if it is the right thing that we have done for ourselves and for our children and their children.

Like most other homesteads in Bangladesh, our ancestral home at Bajitpur consisted of houses (units) encircling a central courtyard in the inner perimeter of the property, bordered by the village road in the front, and at the back, ended on a lazy stream that ran through the village on to the Haaor. Haaors are low lying rice fields that flood into enormous water bodies stretching beyond the horizon during the wet seasons. The lazy stream burst its banks during the monsoon when my Fufus (my father’s sisters) would visit their father’s home once a year by boats through this flowing stream. There was an outhouse at the front where my grandfather, a fair complexioned stocky little man with round eyes, sporting white thick beard and a natural smile, spent most of his time puffing into his piped Hookha. Between the outhouse and the inner perimeter, stood a lime grove of cardamom smelling juicy limes and fruit trees of many kinds. At the back and up to the stream were tall timber trees that grew over the ages.

Each member of the household lived with their families in one of the units. The biggest unit would normally be occupied by the head of the house hold, which could be either the parents or the eldest son in their absence. Often it is one common kitchen where all the women folk would work together to prepare daily meals. Children of the household grew up together following a common accepted code of conduct, hierarchy and love. It seems like fairy tales when Dada (my wife’s eldest brother) tells us the story of the juvenile exploits of their younger days. Their going together for a splash in the river, pinching fruits from the neighbors’ trees, slaughtering the chicken quietly for midnight picnic and being lined up for communal caning by elders.

Our older grandson, Isa was only 4, when they returned from a trip from North America with his parents. Everywhere he went, he met with new sets of cousins. He probably had the best time of his life. After returning he asked his mother as to why can’t he live with all of his cousins, all together, in one big house! The urge to stay



together or return to “home”, has transcended generations. Will ever the face book or the virtual chat rooms be able to replace what is lost?

Whenever I used to visit home with my parents, I would spend a lot of time by the stream watching frogs jump into the water and ducks playfully searching for fishes underneath in the clear water. I would listen to the sounds of chirping birds and follow the grass hoppers chasing one another, until my anxious mother found and dragged me for a wash and the midday meal. Rest of the times I spent with my grandfather in the outhouse. My grandfather would invite almost everyone passing by for a puff of his Hookha, only to introduce his grandson and to tell them, what a smart kid I was. I suppose we are all a sucker for our grandkids.

My grandfathers “home” now stands mutilated with a scar in the middle through its heart from front to back. The homestead now stands divided into six blocks, three on each side of the access-path in the middle. My cousins have erected their own homes in each of those blocks bordered from each other by brick walls. I wish if they knew what they have lost, or probably they do. They may have surrendered to the unkind demand of time.

My grandmother passed away when I was very small. I was about 12 years old when my grandfather died. They both breathed their last at our house in the presence and care of my father and mother. My parents had always felt gratified and blessed for being bestowed with the privilege of taking care of them in their final days.

## **A celebration of journey of life and to hereafter**

Abba’s desire to return home was cut short by an early bout of liver cirrhosis. He died at the age of only 55 in 1973. He was sick in bed for about 10 days only. He worked for all of us all his life but didn’t let anyone do anything for him even in his death. The Imam (priest) of the local mosque and many others came to see him on the day he passed away. The Imam suggested that Abba recite from the holy Quran with him. Abba started the recitation in a faint voice with the palms of his hands put together and spread over his face. The recitation became fainter and fainter as the palms slowly came to rest on his face. And then everything was quiet. I have not seen many passing away before but I hope all final farewells are as peaceful and serene as this one was.

As Abba passed away Amma held my hand so hard that I almost lost any senses to it. I turned to her and saw her tightly clinched face, jaw bones sticking out and tears rolling down the cheeks. She looked at me and let my hand go. Took me into her embrace so close as if I was a small baby, not to slip through her hands and heart myself. She murmured “who will now look after my son?” This woman who had just

lost her life partner was worried about who would now look after his 23 year old son! Mothers can be so strange and amazingly beautiful in so many ways.

As my mother slowly moved to the adjacent room a muffled sound of weeping erupted around the diseased. My Khalu (my mother's brother-in-law and later my father-in-law) shushed at everyone with his index finger on his lips, as if not to wake up someone who had just fallen asleep.

All of Abba's brothers and sisters were present beside him on his death bed except the one immediately younger to him. He and Abba were very close. He was working at that time in a remote area of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. He had no knowledge of Abba being terminally ill. He told us later that he had been feeling restless for some time and didn't know why. In any case he decided to take leave and head home for few days. On reaching home he found that most were gone to be with Abba and he also immediately set off for Dhaka. During the last few hours before his death, Abba repeatedly enquired of this brother Israel and wished to know if he came. A short while before passing away he whispered to one of his sisters that Israel would eventually arrive but a little too late. He did arrive but about fifteen minutes later.

My uncle, otherwise a very societal person, remained very quiet for the few days that he stayed with us. One day he took me out for a walk and told me that he had been hearing his brother calling for him from behind. He thought that he may be joining his brother soon. Not before long – in fact, within the next six months – my eldest uncle joined his closest brother in the heavens.

Sometime after Abba passed away your Bubu's (Liza, later my wife) eldest brother, whom we all revere and fondly call Dada told me the following incident about Abba. If I had not been told this, I wouldn't have known one other treasured side of him. In his early years, he worked at the Department of Civil Supplies (Food Storage & Distribution) at Chanpur, a sub-divisional town. One contractor of the Department of Civil Supplies faced long term jail time due to gross misappropriations. Abba was the key witness on behalf of his office. I am told that one evening the contractor approached Abba with a bag full of money to retract his statement in favor of that contractor. Abba is said to have declined and returned the bag.

Why did he do it? If he took the money our lives could have changed. Abba needn't toil so hard. But he chose a life of honor and truth. He died a happy and a proud man. He made all of us feel proud of him. He didn't need that money to change my life to what he wanted it to be.

## **Mothers are made in heaven**

When Abba died, I was about 23. I had just finished university and was waiting to take up a government job. His death happened so suddenly and quickly that I found



myself completely numb to what was happening around me. Those who came to console us said that I had to be strong for my mother as I was the man around the house then. But I felt like a child lost in the wilderness. Amma had all along been a strong and determined woman and she took charge. In fact she had been in charge all along. She feared that I, being the only child, could go astray. So she raised me from early on under strict discipline and all the affection one can get from a mother.

I could not stay outside of home after dark, even when I studied at the university. She was equally strong and affectionate to all her near ones. She kept in touch with all around her. And while she could, she would be there for anyone who needed her. She was a strong disciplinarian and a very generous woman. She was loved by all around her. Her nephews and nieces adored her. Nina's (my cousin's daughter) dear Tejga Apa was special to all her grand kids. She enjoyed having people around her. Any one that visited our house could rarely go away without having to join us for lunch or dinner or some refreshment. Even the vendors were often fed after she bought chickens and fruits from them at her doorstep. She would say that the way to express ones gratitude and thanks to Allah is by sharing his or her own bounty with others. We had more houseguests in our one-room accommodation in six years than in my five bedroom split level house in twenty odd years.

My mother had the heart of gold. She gave away our block of land at Mirpur to one of my uncles (Abba's brother) because he barely survived meeting the expenses of sending his daughter to Medical College. She sent money every year during the Eid to few needy ones of her own village and that of Abba's.

Tazin, Samin & Neon (our daughters & son-in-law) were the apples of her eye. She saw Tazin & Neon together for only few days as they returned to Sydney shortly after their wedding. She longed to see them once again before she passed way. Something that I could have arranged: but I did not. I have to live with that rest of my life. All of our children's and our friends knew her too well. Any one that would visit us had to meet and spend time with her first on their way up to the midlevel lounge room. I often heard her saying to the guests that her life was a life of complete fulfillment with her son, daughter-in-law and granddaughters. (আমার জীবন সম্পূর্ণ রূপে পরিপূর্ণ ও পরিতৃপ্ত – ছেলে বৌ ও নাতনিদের নিয়ে). Could I have prayed for anything more than that?

Amma passed away in 2005 on my lap and Bubu's. We used to travel frequently during those days and always feared that she may leave us some day when we were away. We prayed all the time that we be with her in case she passed away before us. Allah, the most merciful, granted our prayer. We held her close to our bosoms as she passed away in the blessed month of Ramadan.

I was about 56 years old when she was gone. I had my family, elders and many more very close cousins that I grew up with. They were all there for me all the time. But I never felt so lonely in my whole life. I felt empty, void and very distant from everything. Everyone shared my sorrow but I was not able to share mine with

others. I felt that if I had a brother or a sister of my own, between us, we could have known how the other felt. I have never been so lonely any more since then.

I had felt something similar to this once before: the night Tazin (elder daughter) left with her in-laws after the wedding. I felt like a part of my heart was torn away. But then, your Bubu and I shared each other's pain. It hurts a lot less when one is able to share the pain.

Amma had a special connection with her nieces and nephews. They were like her own children and it became emotionally apparent in an incident immediately on her death. She needed to be carried out of her room for the sacred washings. She was a big woman and required more than few hands to carry her. As I looked at my cousins and nephews present they jumped at the prospect of being able to take part in one of the last rites of their beloved Khala or Bubu. As we were about to lift her, someone intervened that no male other than her own son or husband can touch her. There was a standoff for sometimes as my cousins and nephews weren't ready to give up their right and fond desire. I had to intervene to overcome an unpleasant situation and announced that each one of them are as much of a son to her, just as much as I am. They spared no time at the opportunity of being able to perform something they treasured so much.

When our parents are still with us, we more or less take their presence for granted. They are like the big fruit tree that stands in our back yard for ages. It gives us fruits when we are hungry, protects us from the sun when it is hot, saves us from the storm when the going gets rough and caress us with its shade and breeze when we are tired and down. We rarely make notice of its presence. Like everything else it grows old someday. It starts to lose leafs and the trunks and become too weak to stay upright. All of these happen in our back yard and we care not to notice it. And some day when the big storm hits, the tree that protected us all its life, cannot protect itself anymore and is uprooted. Suddenly we realize that there was a tree, which is not there anymore. We realize what that tree meant to us. We think; why didn't we spend some more time under that tree or to be precise, with that tree.

## **My fair lady**

Your Bubu and I were married in 1977 when I was 29 and she was 23. Our mothers are sisters and when we were very small, they decided among themselves that we could be married some day. We were not aware of this until we were grownups. To all our grand kids who may be reading this: "You guys must not get any ideas in your heads. Your Bubu and I did not court before our wedding". Courting before marriage wasn't very common in those days. The first time I asked your Bubu if she was aware of what is to happen and what she thought about it, she completely froze for a moment and then started trembling like a lamb to the slaughter. I ran for my life before someone saw us and I got into trouble.

Later on in 1974 before leaving for the US, I asked her the same thing again and this time she just smiled and I knew what she meant. Couple of days before my departure for USA, Boro Bhabi (Dada's wife) was deputed to inform me of the family arrangement that had been made long ago. She asked me if I knew anything about it. I pretended as if that was the dumbest thing that anyone ever heard. Knowing Boro Bhabi for her child-like simplicity, I think she believed me.

After my return from US in 1976, as Liza (Bubu) and I were to be married soon, Dipu Bhabi (Liza's second brother's wife) proposed this time that if I wanted to, I could talk to your Bubu in private. Without anyone knowing we went a step further. We met outside – once or may be twice before the marriage.

I migrated to Australia and came to Sydney towards the end of 1977 and your Bubu followed me in early 1978. Sydney is an excellent place to be. We started our new life in a one bedroom apartment in Randwick, not far from the beach. We were on a slope and could see the ocean waves from our lounge room window. Life was good but we missed home. We found it very hard to reconcile with the fact that Amma (mother) was living by herself without us. We wanted her to be with us. Amma came to Sydney at the end of 1979 and stayed with us for about six months. She felt very lonely here, away from her home and from people that she had been with all her life. Life was very lonely for her without her familiar surroundings and people. We let her go back to Bangladesh with heavy hearts.

Tazin was born about six months after Amma returned to Bangladesh. This was a very happy time for us but it wasn't as much without Amma being next to her only grandchild. The thought that Amma will not be able to see her only son's offspring growing up seemed so unreal. I wasn't sure what to do but your Bubu was convinced that we needed to return to Bangladesh. Her rationale had been that Amma in all probability may not live as long as we may and hence we should attempt to give her the best that we could during her remaining life time. I feared that I may not find suitable work back in Bangladesh and I worried about an uncertain future. Your Bubu insisted that we should give it a try and if for some reason it did not work we could always return to Australia. That way we would know that we tried. We returned to Bangladesh in November 1980 when Tazin was about four months old. That was the best decision that we ever made in our life and I owe it to your Bubu.

We were a happy family again. I found myself a very good job with ICDDR,B. Samin was born four years later. Your Bubu worked hard raising the kids and taking care of Amma. Amma was a very strong willed women and Bubu always conformed to her wishes and kept her happy. When Amma had been sick Bubu used to tend to her like her own child. I have no word skill to describe how your Bubu looked after Amma. I owe it to your Bubu for working so hard all her life to give us a fine home and to raise two wonderful girls that we are so proud of. I have never seen her caring or thinking of her own comfort or possessions. She lives for others. I have never been able to assess her worth in our life. This may be because I got her so easily in my life; I did not have to strive for her. Do not tell your Bubu this, because I have never said this to her.

I haven't said many other things such as "I love you" in exactly these words and rarely brought flowers home for her (for which I am grilled by my daughters frequently). I think we love each other by being there for each other, by understanding each other through unspoken words, with our hearts, not words. We are a bit like the senior "Raymonds" without the fat pay cheques. I have not told her up until recently that I have had this dream often, even recently, that she is being married away somewhere by her parents, and I wake up crying my hearts out on the damp pillow. When I tell her of this dream, her eyes waters and she says "sorry", as if it is her fault that I have been heart by such a dreadful dream! I suppose one need be afraid to lose, to be able to love.

After Amma passed away your Bubu took up the role of remaining connected to everyone in the family. Just like Amma she will call everyone once a while. Others would call her if they wanted to know the whereabouts and wellbeing of the extended family members. Even now, living in Australia, she calls almost everyone once a while to enquire about their wellbeing. She is loved and adored by everyone. She has worked hard all her life to raise a family that we are so happy and proud of. She has a heart of gold and innocence of a child and as gullible as one could be. She could be made to believe anything with a serious face. Neon (son-in-law) makes the best of this and has a gala time with her. In Neon we have found the son that we did not have. He is thoroughly spoilt by your Bubu and I would not trade him for anything.

## **Back to Down under**

Tazin and Samin came to Australia after finishing school (year 12) in Bangladesh. They were here by themselves and Alhamdulillah they fared very well in their education and with their life. I may have somewhat matched Abba in a way that we both strived to create opportunities for our children to have a better life for them than ours. An elderly gentleman once told Tazin that her parents took a risky gamble by sending them so young and by themselves to this society but was glad to see that her parents have won that gamble.

We returned to live in Australia in 2008, three years after Amma passed away. We are grateful to Allah that we could hold on to our promise to ourselves that we would not leave her alone. We now have two grandsons Isa and Uzayr, the most precious things in our lives. Your Bubu is willing to forgo everything in exchange for those two. When I tell her that I plan to go back to Bangladesh and live there, she tells me that I can go if I want but she isn't going anywhere leaving those two.

It's a great thing to have your grandkids around you. You see your continuation in them and feel gratified. Ofcourse the other good thing is that you are free to spoil them as much you want, something that you wouldn't do to your own children.

## **So many to be grateful to**

I have indeed come a long way from where I started. Allah, the most merciful, has been extremely kind to me. He presented me with opportunities throughout my life, for which I may not have been worthy. I know that Abba and Amma are praying for us all the time from the heavens. I have been fortunate enough to receive kindness and blessings of all the elders including that of all our cousins. My cousins never made me feel like I had no brothers and sisters of my own.

There is another person of our family that held on to us all along her life. Jamila came to our house as a young maid in her teens. She lived with us for more than 40 years until we decided to move to Australia. Jamila declined a number of offers for her to stay in Dhaka with our other relatives. She decided to return to her village home. We feel responsible and senses of guilt for making her go back to the environment that became alien to her over the years, because of us. However it comforts us to learn that she has readjusted well in her village home and is adequately provided for. Amma made provision for a house and some recurring income for her if she ever had to live by herself. I have told Tazin and Samin that when I will not be there, they will be responsible to look after her. Your Bubu calls her often to find out how she is. Every year Jamila spends about a month or so with us when we visit Bangladesh. Your Bubu and Jamila have always had a very interesting relationship. Jamila found it hard to accept Bubu as another lady of our household as she herself had come to this house long before your Bubu did. By virtue of this seniority she believed that she commanded more authority.

I am grateful to my In-laws (Khala-Amma & Khalu) for the love and affection they gave me. My mother-in-law was a very tender and a simple woman who worked hard all her life to raise a family of nine children. She would be glad to see from up above how well all her nine children are holding on to each other through the good and bad times. She was a very kind and extremely hospitable person. I have rarely seen that household without any visiting relatives or outside guests. She had a serene look on her face and it lit up when she smiled. She was indeed a very pretty woman.

My father-in-law was an immaculate dresser of his time. He used to dress in white, as white as it could be. He was a lone son of wealthy parents, one who rode a horse to the school. He was a bit spoilt as he had to have everything exactly the way he wanted. We are told that when he ate fish, his mother-in-law used to sit next to him and meticulously took the bones out for him.

I was never a son-in-law in that house, but have remained a nephew and a cousin all along and I have loved every moment of it.

Every family needs a mentor or two to hold it together and be there for everyone when needed. Dada and (Faruk) Bhaijan are such mentors for your Bubu's family.

They have been the guardian and guides through the good and the bad times. It is rare to find the kind of bonds that exists among the brothers and sisters of this family. They laugh and cry together in each other's happiness and distress. I have rarely seen such reverence for elder brothers by the younger ones.

Dada still sees all of us as young kids. In fact we also feel like kids in front of him. We went to visit them in Washington DC in the middle of 2013. One day he dropped us at the museum and forced me to take lunch money from him for Samin, your Bubu and myself. By the way, I was then 66 years old. Bhaijan did the same thing when we visited them in Ottawa on the same trip. All our tours and sightseeing were taken care of.

I still remember back in 1976, I received Dada and Bahbi in Washington DC when they first came to USA for his work with Voice of America. By then I had lived in DC for about two years and considered myself a Washingtonian – almost. After Dada and Bahbi settled down, I went to stay with them for few days. Dada considered DC an unsafe place after dark and decided that I must not stay outside by myself in the evenings. A dusk curfew was imposed for me! I doubt if our grand kids will ever know of such affection and care. I have received love and care from almost everyone that I have come across throughout my life. I remain indebted to them for all time to come.

I was about 12 years old when Amma had to go to her village home in Shurulia for few months to look after her elder sister's children. Khamma (Amma's immediate elder sister) needed to be away to finish her Teacher's Training Program. This Khala struggled and overcame all odds to achieve what she aimed for herself and for her children. Any family should be fortunate and proud to have someone like her in their midst. However, when Amma was away, I came to live with Shahriar Bhai (my cousin's husband) for few months so as not to miss school. It just happened that the final exam took place during that time. I failed to pass in mathematics in that exam. Shahriar Bhai sent for a barber and had my head shaved. Since then I have not failed in any exam. Would any brother-in-law do something like that? No, I don't think so, unless it is your own brother who wished to make sure that you never fail in any exams of your life.

Shahriar Bhai is the brother that I did not have. In the time that I stayed in his house I never felt that I was away from my own home. During that period I contracted small pox. Shahriar Bhai and Bhaijan personally nursed me through the recovery and only informed Amma after I was totally cured. Throughout my life and until his passing away, Shahriar Bhai kept a tab on me to find how I was doing and if my moves were in the right direction. I am glad that he seemed always pleased with what I was up to.

He would often tell me about his own struggles through life and how he overcame it. He always acknowledged those who helped him in his struggles. Shahriar Bhai taught me to take pride in ones humble past and in the struggle to succeed. He taught me to acknowledge and be grateful to those that touched one's life in one way



or another and made a difference. Shahriar bhai indeed touched my life in more than one way and made a difference to it.

There are many others who have left their mark in big and small ways in my life. Not to be able to include all of them here is a limitation I attribute to myself. In no way is anyone any less than another. I remain ever grateful and indebted to all. I am sure each person's life is special in some way to him or herself. This is my attempt to leave a snapshot of the special times and people of my life for my grandchildren.

## The epilogue

I have lived my life to the full. I have no regrets or miss anything that I can think of. It is a life of complete satisfaction and of immeasurable gratitude to the Almighty. I have received favors all my life from everyone that I came across, including that from the Heavens whenever I prayed for it. I have one more final favor to ask for. When the time for me to leave finally comes; please make the transition brief, peaceful and serene as it could be. I wish to be remembered by my dear ones with fond memories of my life as well as of the moment of my journey to the hereafter. I wish my passing away not to be mourned but to be hailed as a journey to Whom and from where we all came. I pray that I am not judged for my shortcomings and weakness, for I will not pass it, but for my intent to see my near and dear ones as happy as I could ever make them.

“সমস্ত দিনের শেষে শিশিরের শব্দের মত  
সন্ধ্যা আসে; ডানার রৌদ্রের গন্ধ মুছে ফেলে চিল;  
পৃথিবীর সব রঙ নিভে গেলে পান্ডুলিপি করে আয়োজন  
তখন গল্পের তরে জোনাকির রঙে ঝিলমিল;  
সব পাখি ঘরে আসে - সব নদী - ফুরায় এ জীবনের সব লেনদেন;  
থাকে শুধু অন্ধকার, .....