

# AAYESHA

*a graphic memoir*

BY AAYESHA EJAZ



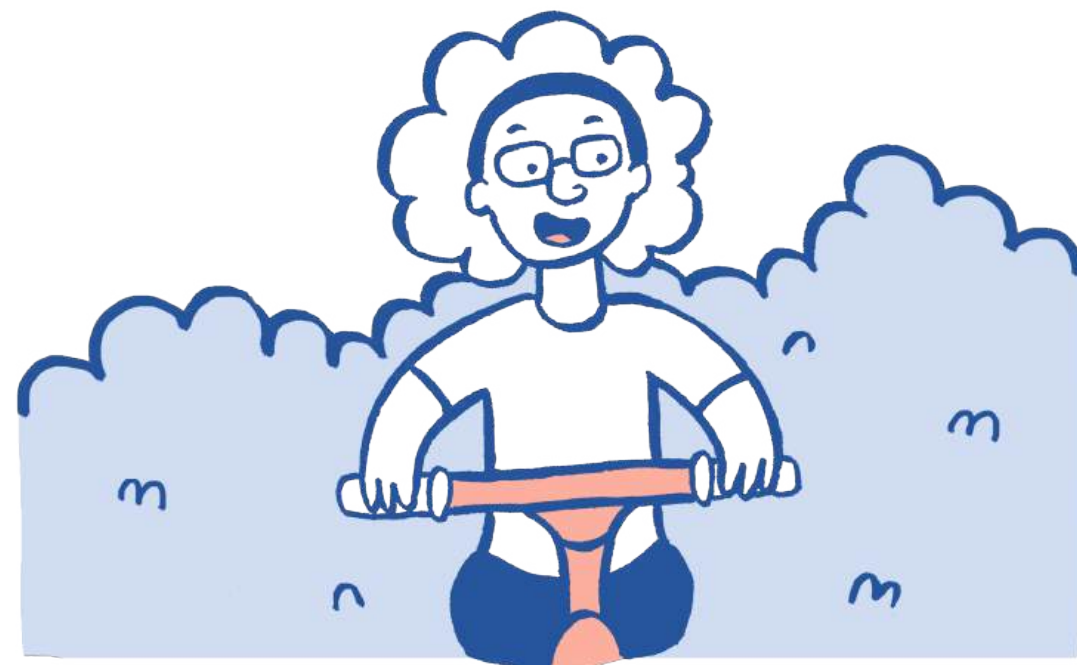
**AAYESHA**

# AAYESHA

*a graphic memoir*

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*For mummy and bhaijaan*



## PROLOGUE





BEFORE YOU GET TO KNOW ME, YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MY MOTHER. I HAVE A CLOSE-KNIT RELATIONSHIP WITH MUMMY. SHE'S MY BEST FRIEND.

HER LIFE HAS BEEN FULL OF TWISTS AND TURNS, BUT MOSTLY SAD.

MUMMY WAS BORN IN A NUCLEAR FAMILY



AT 20, SHE GAVE BIRTH TO MY BROTHER



BHAIJAAN

AT 18, SHE WAS MARRIED INTO A JOINT FAMILY



PAPA

AT 30, SHE GRADUATED FROM COLLEGE



THAT'S ME!

AT 42, SHE STARTED RUNNING A BAKERY



WE'LL GET TO THIS PART IN A BIT!

AT 23, SHE GAVE BIRTH TO ME

AT 22, SHE LOST HER MOTHER TO CANCER

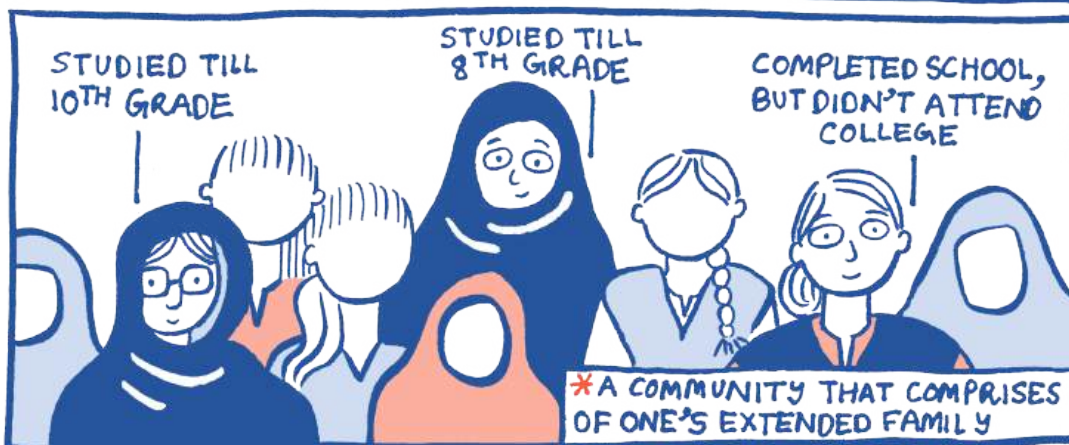
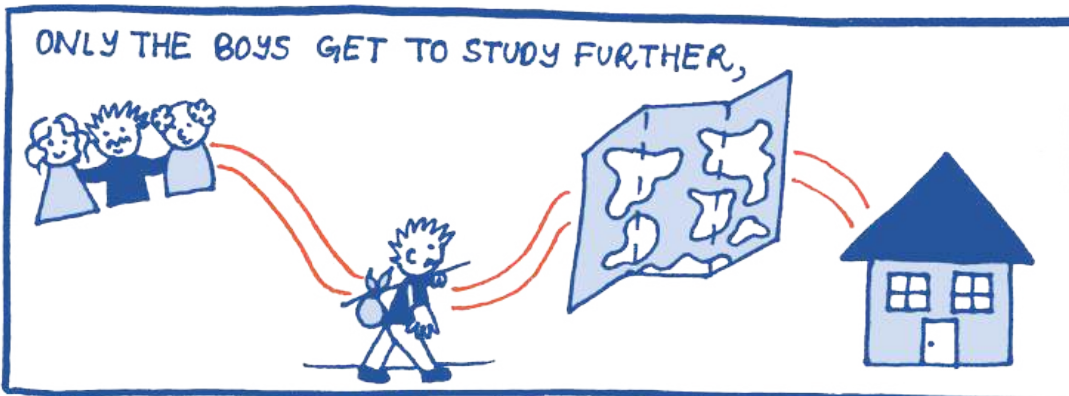


MUMMY DIDN'T WANT THE SAME FOR US.



MUMMY STRESSED EDUCATION OVER EVERYTHING ELSE.  
SHE WANTED US TO PURSUE OUR DREAMS.

IT WAS A HUGE DEAL FOR ME TO COME TO THE U.S.  
FOR GRAD SCHOOL BECAUSE IN OUR BIRAADARI\* —



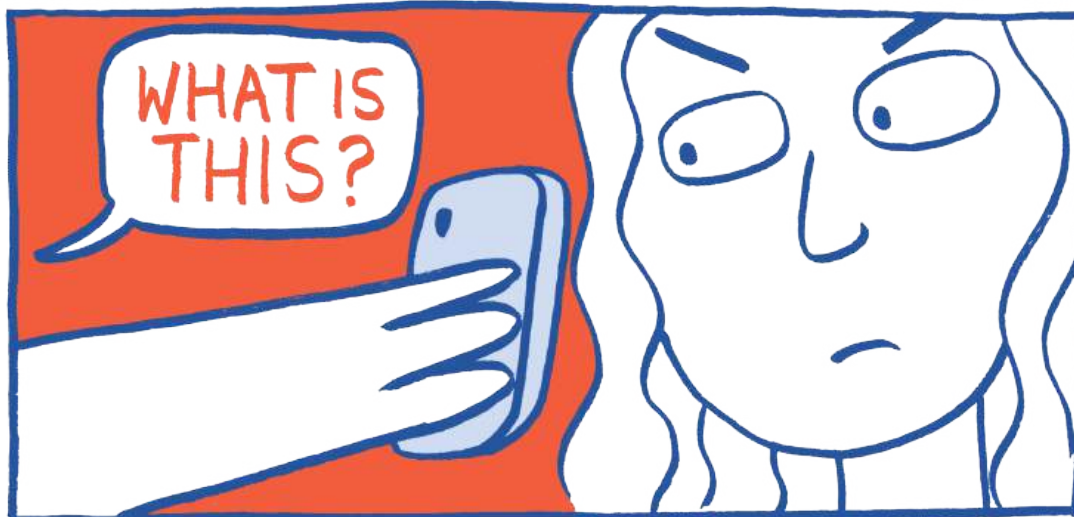
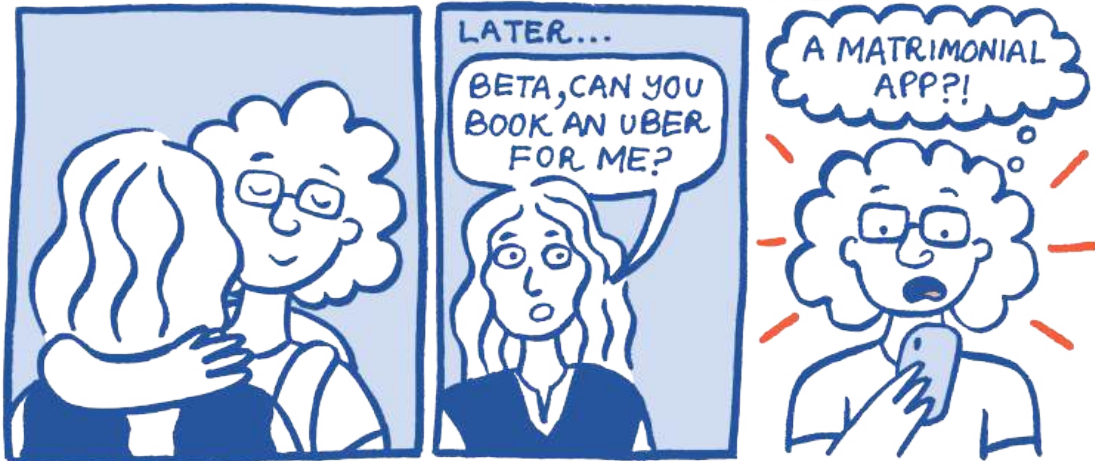
MOVING OUT HAS BEEN LIBERATING, BUT ALSO DIFFICULT.  
OLD TRADITIONS DIE HARD, BEING 23 AND SINGLE ISN'T  
EASY FOR MUMMY TO DIGEST.

DURING OUR PHONE CALLS, MUMMY BRINGS UP MARRIAGE  
CONSTANTLY...





LAST SUMMER, I WENT BACK HOME...



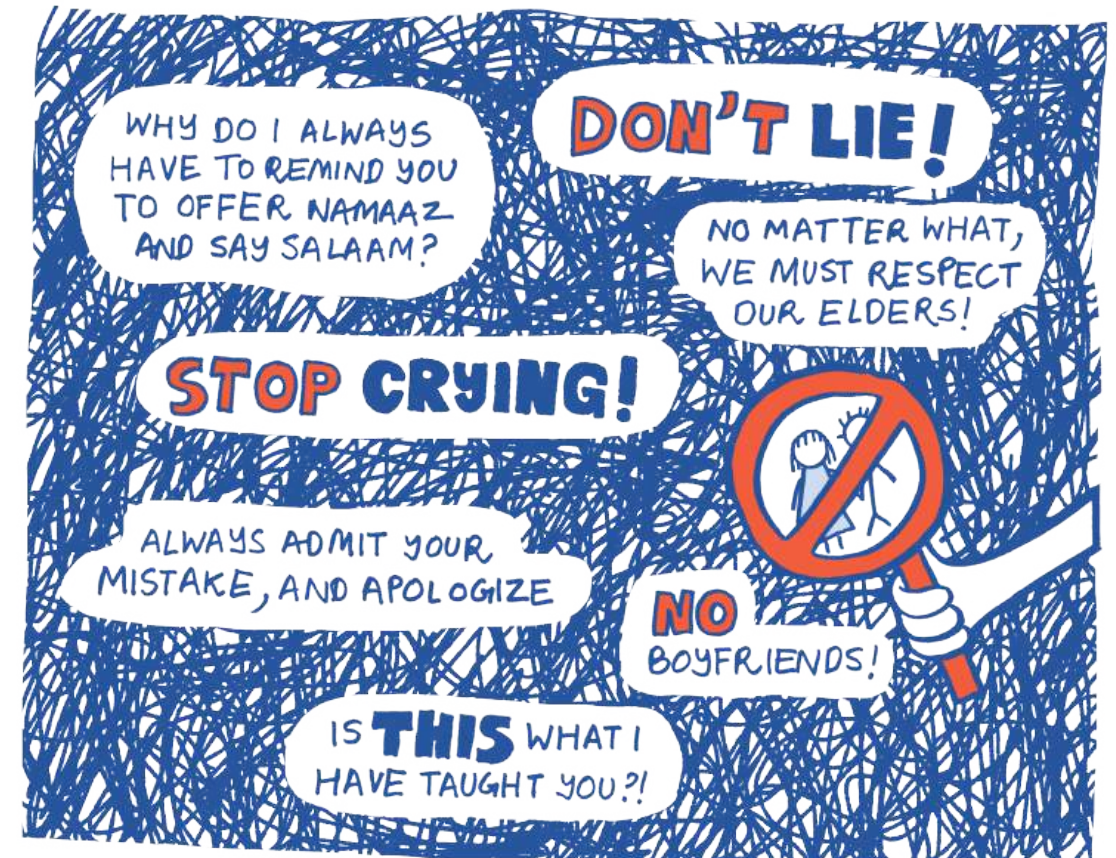
OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS,  
WE GOT INTO A MASSIVE

**FIGHT.**

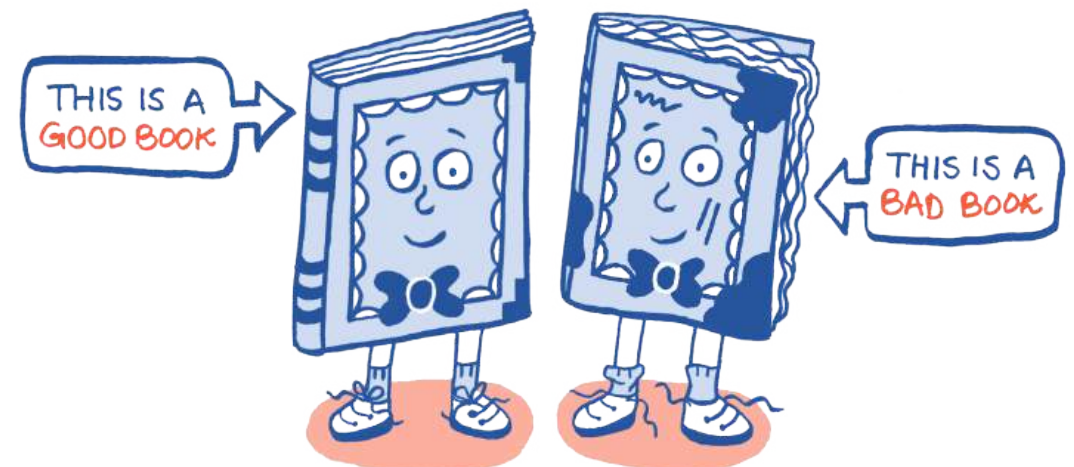
AND THEN, IT ALL CAME  
BACK TO ME...

## CHAPTER 1

I WAS RAISED IN STRICT SURROUNDINGS, WITH HARDLY ANY ROOM FOR FUN OR SELF-EXPRESSION.



OUTWARD APPEARANCES WERE QUITE IMPORTANT —

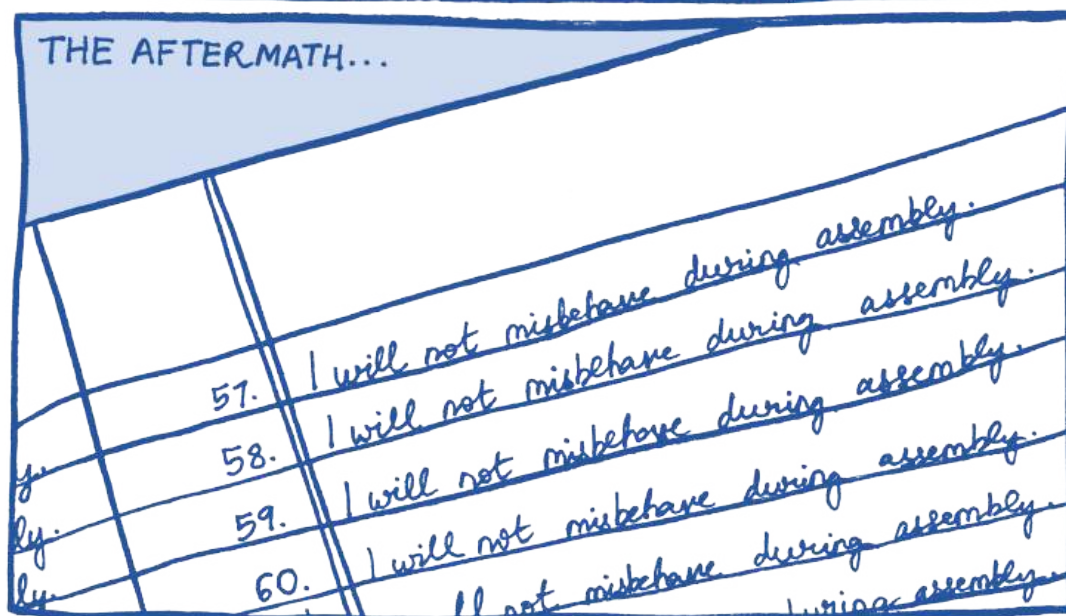




SCHOOL WAS NO DIFFERENT. I HAD TO DRESS PRIM  
AND PROPER. OUR UNIFORM WAS INSPECTED DAILY.

MY INNOCENT ACTS WERE SEEN AS MISBEHAVIOR.

ONCE, DURING MORNING PRAYER...





BHAIJAAN HAD ALREADY COMPLETED READING THE QURAN, AND WAS ONTO MEMORIZING IT.

I WAS OFTEN COMPARED TO HIM AND WAS THEREFORE SEEN AS A **FAILURE**.



I WAS ALSO UNLIKE THE GIRLS FROM OUR BIRAADARI...

### The Ideal Daughter



- OFFERS NAMAAZ 5 TIMES A DAY
- LIKES LOOKING AFTER HER YOUNGER SIBLINGS
- LISTENS TO HER PARENTS

### THE DISGRACEFUL DAUGHTER



- OFFERS NAMAAZ ONLY ON FRIDAYS
- LOVES SWIMMING AND CYCLING
- WELL...



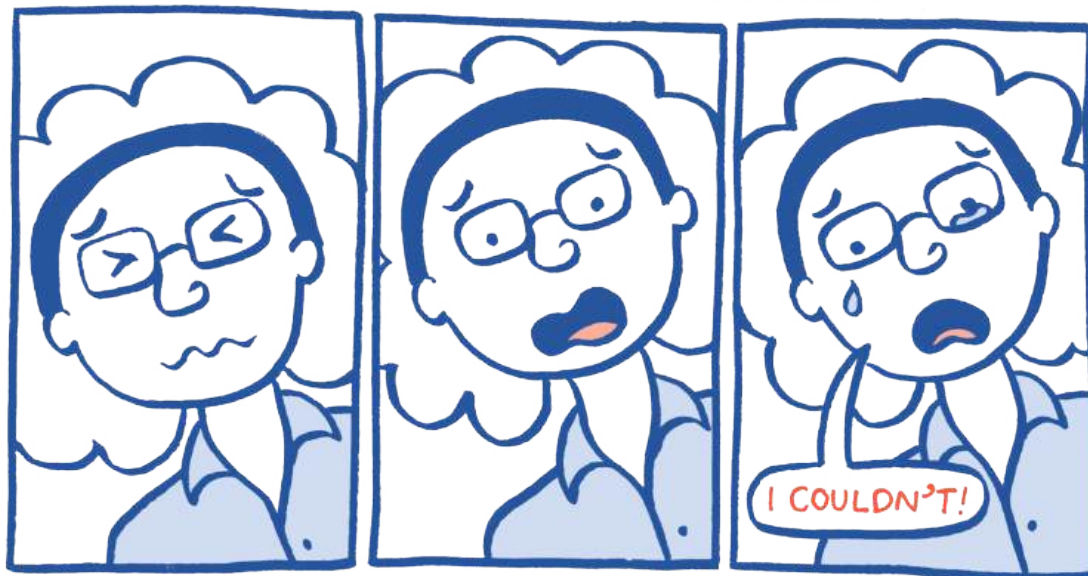
I WAS ALSO SLOW IN SCHOOL. ALL MY WORK WOULD COME HOME.

MUMMY WAS CONSTANTLY TRYING TO MAKE ME A BETTER VERSION OF MYSELF.

SHE'D USE TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES TO HELP ME MEMORIZE THINGS.



SHE'D EVEN STAY UP LATE TO HELP PREPARE FOR MY EXAMS, BUT I WASN'T A GOOD TEST TAKER...



I'D BE SAD BECAUSE EVEN AFTER WORKING SO HARD, I'D UPSET HER.

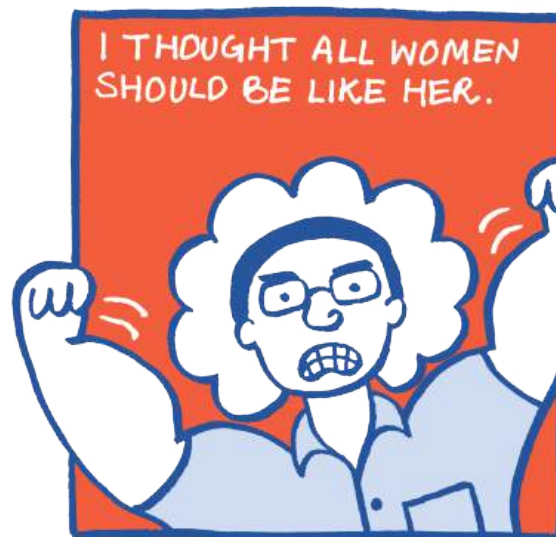
BUT THERE WERE SOME RARE OCCASIONS WHEN THINGS MADE SENSE TO ME IN SCHOOL.



HOW ROSA CHANGED THE LIVES OF SO MANY CITIZENS BY STANDING UP FOR WHAT SHE BELIEVED IN.



I THOUGHT ALL WOMEN SHOULD BE LIKE HER.

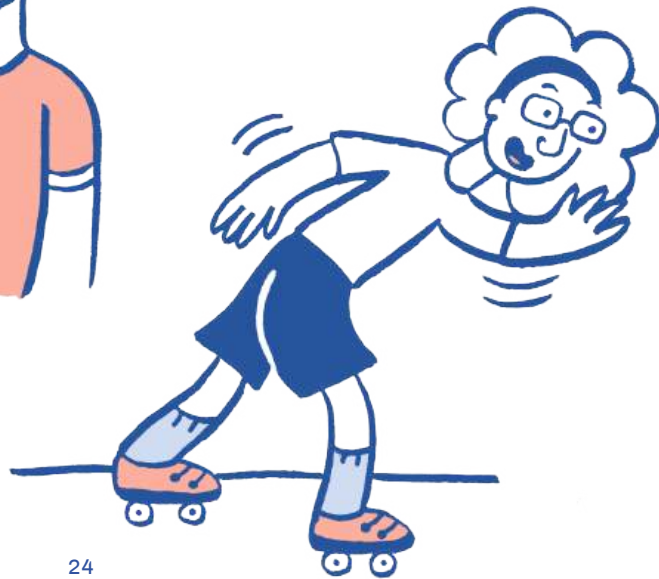


HER STORY GAVE ME HOPE!



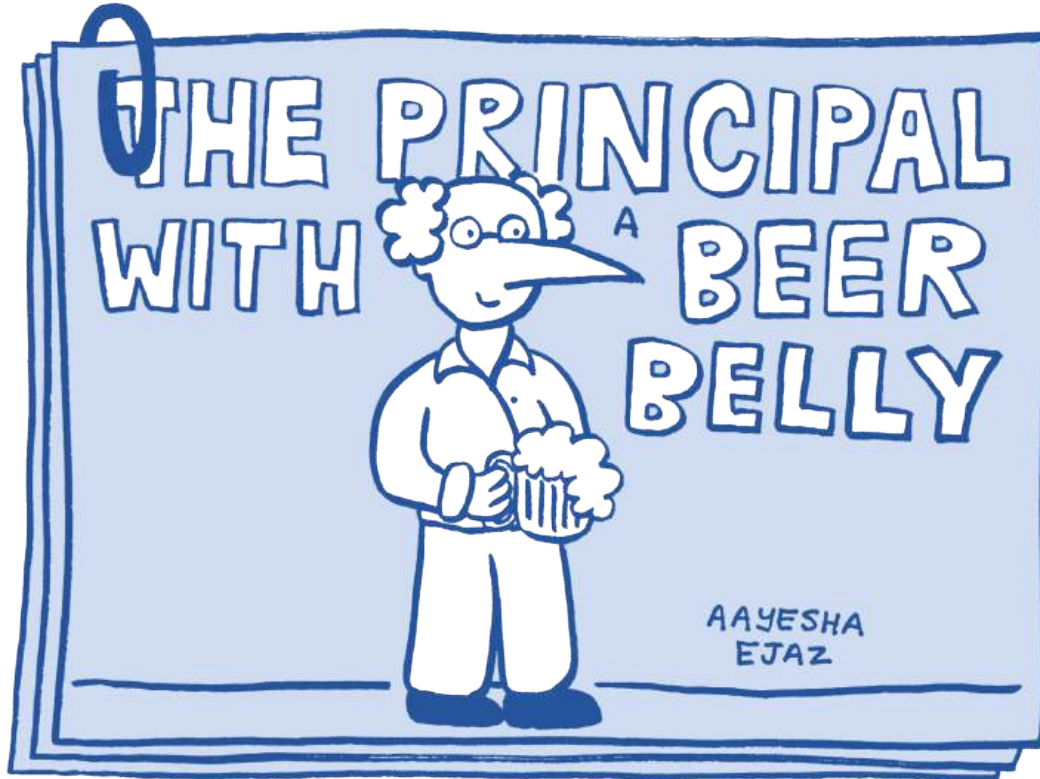


SO I WASN'T THE IDEAL KID IN SCHOOL OR RELIGIOUS STUDIES, BUT I ENJOYED MY TIME DOING OTHER THINGS.





AT 11, I JOINED A CREATIVE WRITING CLASS WHERE I WROTE AND ILLUSTRATED MY FIRST PICTURE BOOK.



MUMMY AND BHAITAA FOUND IT FUNNY, BUT PAPA...



SO I JUST CONTINUED TO READ IN SILENCE...



I WAS ALWAYS SCOLDED FOR BEING  
**OVEREXPRESSIVE**  
AND HENCE, WAS CALLED A BABY!

ALL I WANTED TO KNOW WAS —

HOW ELSE CAN I COMMUNICATE  
MY FEELINGS ?!

BUT NO ONE HAD AN ANSWER  
TO THAT.

IN ALL OF THIS, BHAIRAJAN WOULD ALWAYS MAKE ME FEEL  
LESS ALONE...





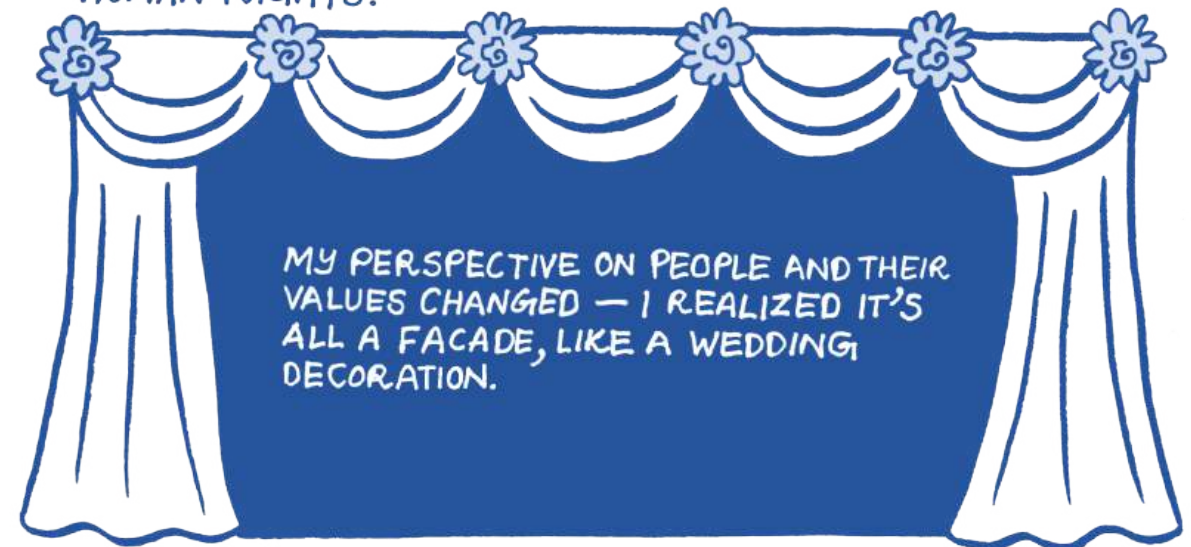


## CHAPTER 2

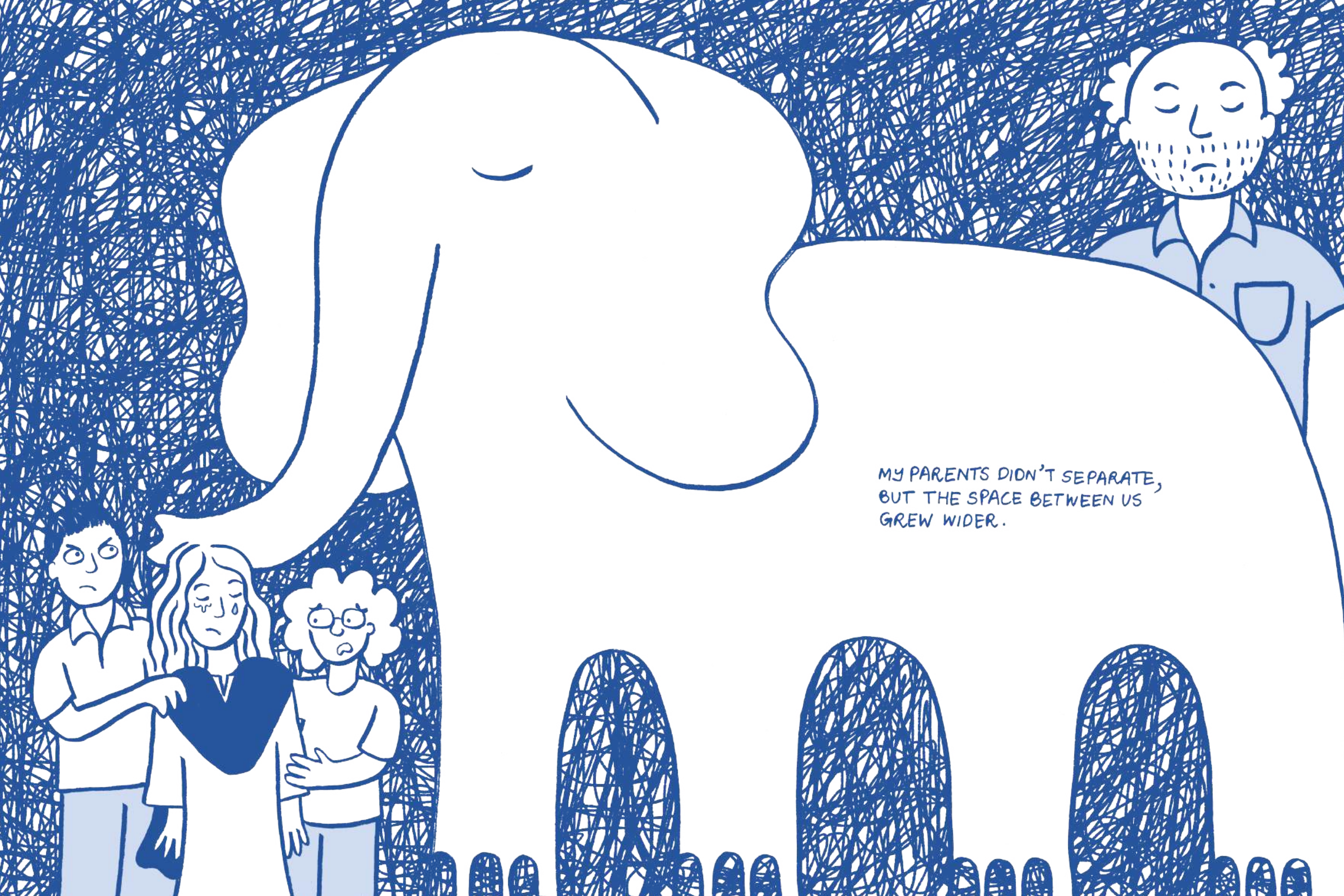
WHEN I WAS 14, AN INCIDENT CRIPPLED THE STANCE MY VALUES WERE BUILT ON. A FAMILY MATTER LED TO A MASSIVE RIFT BETWEEN MY PARENTS.



WE CLAIMED TO BE SO PIOUS, BUT WERE DEVOID OF BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS.







MY PARENTS DIDN'T SEPARATE,  
BUT THE SPACE BETWEEN US  
GREW WIDER.





IT SUFFOCATED ME.  
I WAS ASHAMED OF THE  
HOME I CAME FROM.





I DIDN'T TELL ANYONE ABOUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED, BUT MY FRIENDS COULD SENSE IT.

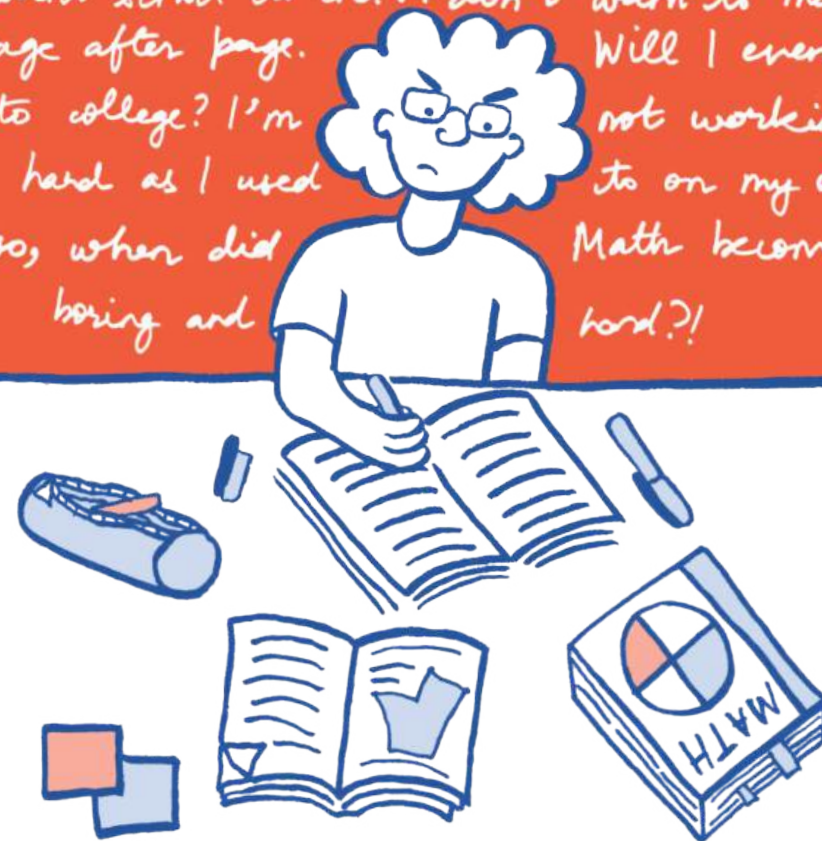


AND SOON, BHAITAA LEFT FOR THE U.S. MEANWHILE, MUMMY WAS TRYING TO BECOME FINANCIALLY INDEPENDENT.



SHE WAS TUTORING KIDS AND CONDUCTING BAKING CLASSES. I SAW IN HER A RESILIENT WOMAN.

I will not get married! I do not want to get married. I need to go to college. Education is important. Marriage can wait, education can't. I want school to end. I don't want to memorize page after page. Will I even get into college? I'm not working half as hard as I used to on my exams. Also, when did Math become so boring and hard?!



AND SOMEHOW, I MANAGED TO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL

CHAPTER 3

I GOT INTO AN ART SCHOOL—



DURING THE SAME TIME,  
MUMMY WAS GOING TO A  
CULINARY SCHOOL.

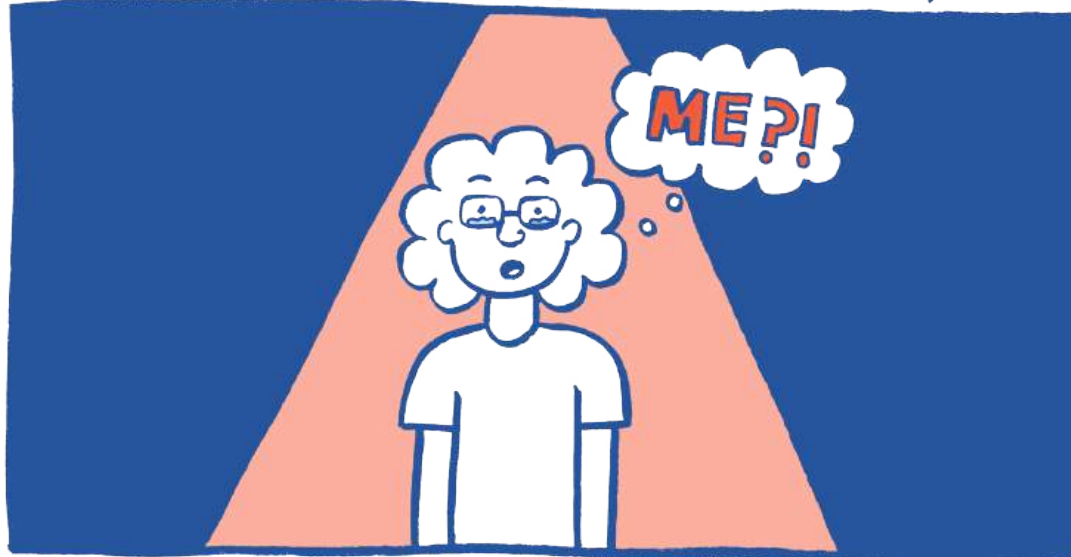


WE WERE GOING TO COLLEGE TOGETHER AND WE'D ALSO  
HELP EACH OTHER WHEN WE GOT STUCK.





I WAS DOING EXTREMELY WELL, AND EVEN COMPLETED MY FIRST YEAR WITH DISTINCTION, AND A SCHOLARSHIP!



BUT THIS LED TO ANOTHER PRESSURE, I THOUGHT I HAD TO PROVE MYSELF WITH AN EARTH SHATTERING IDEA IN EVERY PROJECT.



SIMULTANEOUSLY, MUMMY WAS INTERNING AT A HIGHLY REPUTED HOTEL IN DELHI, AND WAS CLOSE TO HER DREAM; HER BAKERY WAS ALL SET TO OPEN.



SHE WAS EXTREMELY STRESSED ALL THE TIME, AND I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO HELP OUT.





MY SUCCESS HAD TURNED MY FRIENDSHIPS INTO ENVY...



SHE GOT THE  
**SCHOLARSHIP**  
JUST BECAUSE SHE WAS ON  
GOOD TERMS WITH THE  
FACULTY.

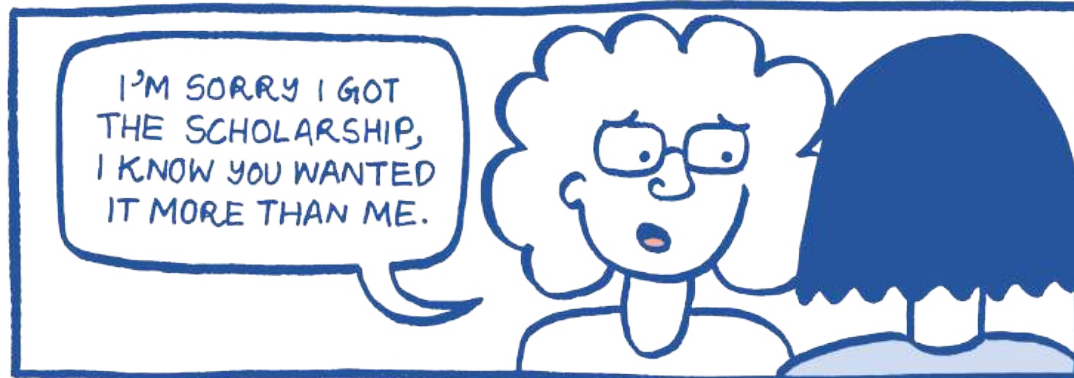
**SO MUCH DRAMA!**  
DOESN'T COMPLETE HER WORK  
ON TIME, BUT STILL GETS  
GOOD GRADES!

**SUCH A BABY!**  
SHE NEEDS HER MOM  
ALL THE TIME!

SHE LIVES IN A  
**MANSION**  
WITH A ROW OF CARS.  
I'D DIE FOR THAT  
LIFESTYLE!

I SAW HUMANS, BUT NO HUMANITY.

I THOUGHT I HAD DONE SOMETHING WRONG...



I'D COME HOME AND SNAP —



I'm not good enough. I'm nothing. I'll have to get married now. I have no friends. Everyone hates me. I can't complete anything. I can't sleep. When will I sleep? I want to do so much. I need an internship! DID I REALLY DESERVE THE SCHOLARSHIP?! No one likes me because I am a bad person. I am a BAD PERSON. A pathetic person. I'm a loner. I will always be a loner. I need to CHANGE myself. Is that even possible? This is all crap! Why doesn't my brain shut down. Shut down. SHUT DOWN! Shut down, please. WHERE IS THE OFF BUTTON? I'm failing as a human being. Life would be so much easier if I didn't overthink everything. I need to relax. I need to learn to relax and sleep. I need to apologize more. I hope mummy's career takes off. She's been working towards this for so long. Why can't she relax either?! Is this genetic?! Did I inherit this from HER?





AFTER WEEKS OF DENYING, THEN TRYING TO DEAL WITH IT MYSELF, I FINALLY WENT TO A THERAPIST — AND ALL I COULD DO WAS CRY.



I ENTERED A PLACE I'D NEVER BEEN BEFORE.

NO ONE BELIEVED ME, NOT EVEN MY THERAPIST...

SHE'S COMPLETELY FINE,  
DON'T PAY HEED TO  
HER TANTRUMS.

BUT I DIDN'T FEEL **FINE**,  
AND WANTED TO GIVE UP.

I POURED ALL MY FEELINGS OUT  
ON PAPER. I TRIED FINDING  
MYSELF THROUGH MY WORK.  
I KEPT MY SKETCHBOOK CLOSE,

AND PEOPLE AWAY FROM IT.

FOR IT WAS THE ONLY PLACE I COULD BE MYSELF.



IN THAT MOMENT, I REALIZED THAT I WANT TO DRAW FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE.



I STOPPED GOING TO COLLEGE — I HAD LOST MY DRIVE AND BECAME NUMB.

I ALSO STOPPED TALKING TO MY COLLEGE FRIENDS AND TEACHERS, BUT THEY FOUND THEIR WAY BACK TO ME.

MUMMY AND BHAITAA WERE BEING VERY UNDERSTANDING, AND TO MY SURPRISE, PAPA TOO!

I DIDN'T DESERVE ALL THIS LOVE AND KINDNESS. I THOUGHT I HAD TO BE PUNISHED.



#### CHAPTER 4



I FINALLY FOUND HELP IN A GOOD THERAPIST.

THINGS THAT BROUGHT ME JOY EARLIER, NOW TRIGGERED EMOTIONS THAT WERE DIFFICULT TO DEAL WITH.

YOU'LL HAVE TO ENGAGE  
IN THESE ACTIVITIES  
AGAIN LIKE A MEDICINE.

SO I WATCHED A MOVIE  
EVERY OTHER DAY.



HOW'S IT  
GOING, BHARATI?



SPOKE TO A FRIEND  
EVERY WEEK.



FORCED MYSELF  
TO LISTEN TO MUSIC.

WENT OUT  
FOR A MEAL  
WITH MUMMY  
OFTEN.



AND THEN, I HAD TO ACCEPT IT.

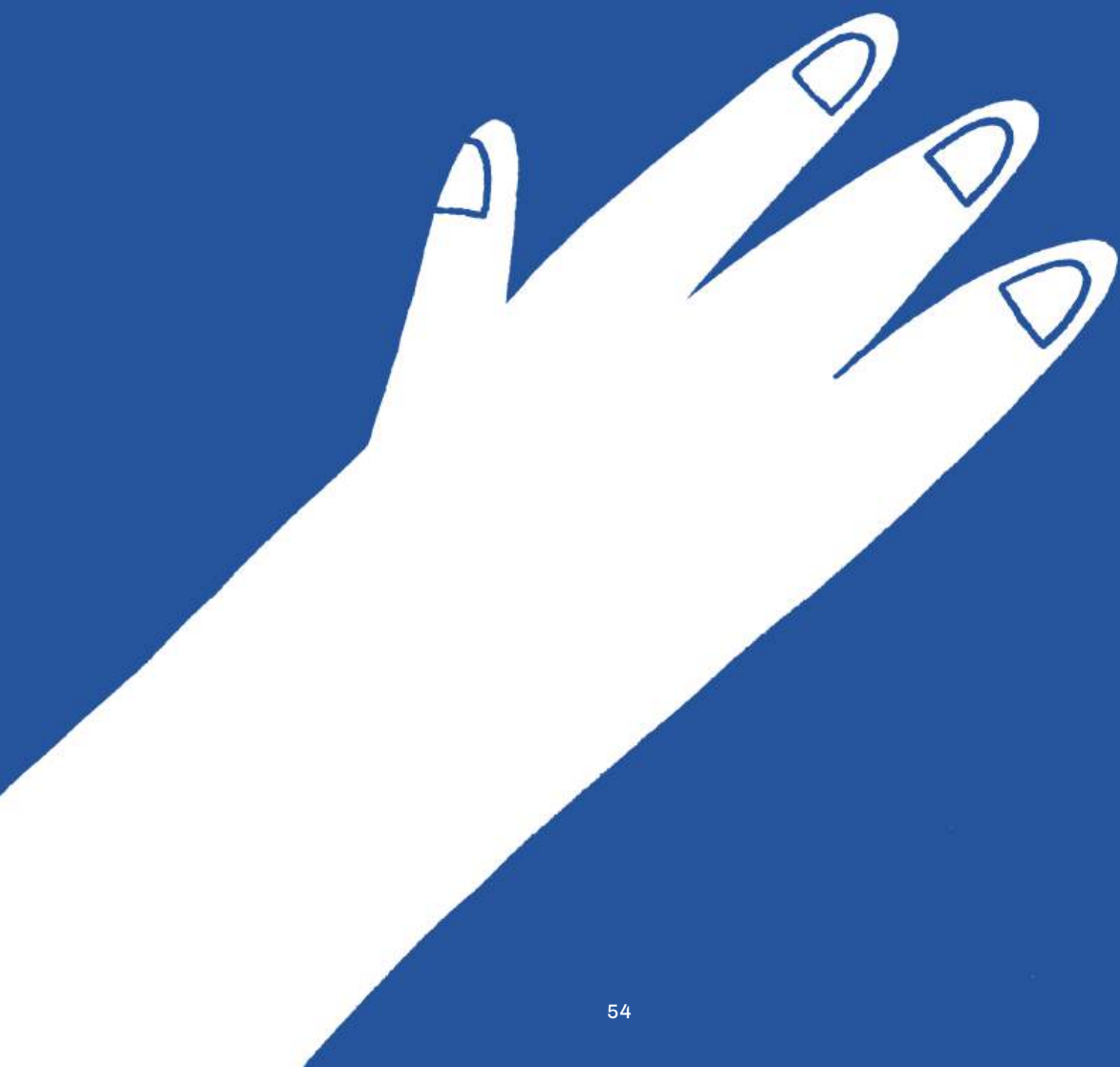


THIS IS PROBABLY HOW IT'LL  
BE FROM NOW ON. MAYBE THIS IS  
WHAT NORMALCY FEELS LIKE...  
I JUST NEED TO KEEP GOING.



I STARTED APPLYING FOR INTERNSHIPS AND OTHER WORK OPPORTUNITIES. DURING THIS PROCESS, I MET SOME PEOPLE WHO DIDN'T MAKE ME FEEL SMALL. I FELT VALUED AND WELCOME IN THEIR WORLD.

AND NOW, WHEREVER I GO, I MAKE SURE I FEEL THIS WAY.



THIS IS WHAT MADE MY UNDERGRAD STAND APART FROM THE FIRST 18 YEARS OF MY LIFE.



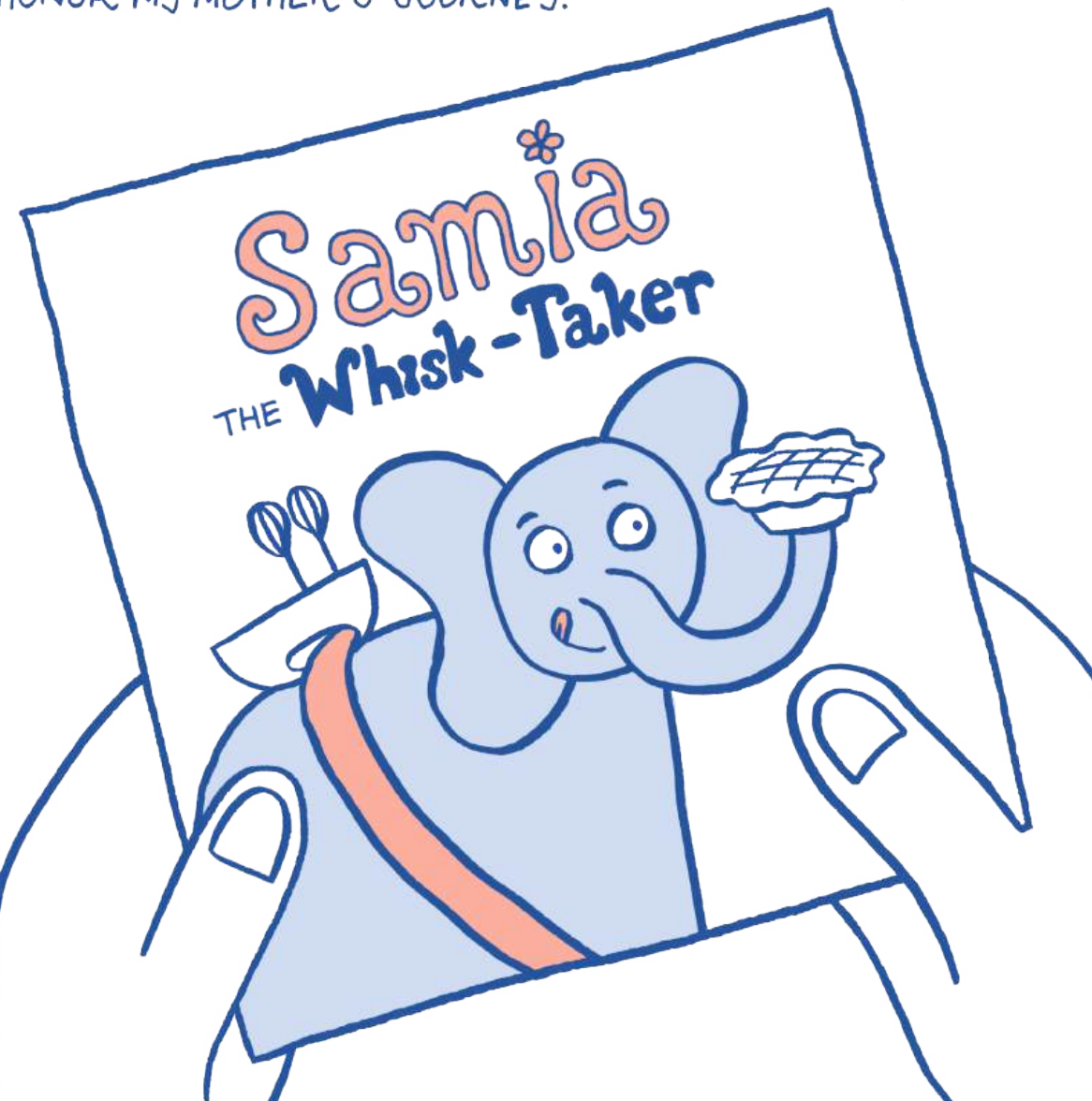
EXPERIENCING EMPATHY, COMPASSION AND ACCEPTANCE — I STARTED BELIEVING THAT THERE WASN'T MUCH WRONG WITH ME.

JUST SOMETHINGS THAT I HAD TO LEARN AND HEAL FROM.



## CHAPTER 5

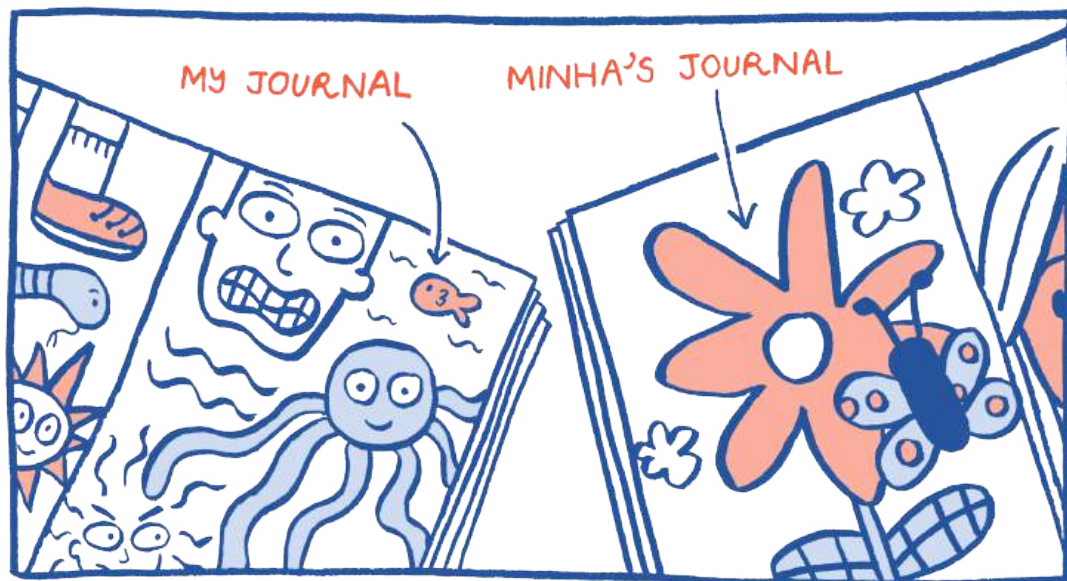
FOR MY GRADUATION PROJECT, I CREATED A BOOK TO HONOR MY MOTHER'S JOURNEY.



EVEN THOUGH I DIDN'T SHARE IT WITH MY FAMILY, I WAS ABLE TO RELEASE A PART OF THE BREATH WHICH WAS CAUGHT INSIDE ME ALL THESE YEARS.



AFTER COMPLETING MY UNDERGRAD, I TOOK SOMETIME OFF AND SPENT TIME WITH MY LITTLE COUSIN.

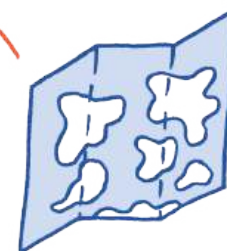


ALL IN ALL, I DISCOVERED THAT THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT **DRAWING** THAT **MAKES ME FEEL ALIVE**. IT'S LIKE REMOVING A VEIL; IT EXPRESSES REALITY THE WAY IT IS.

AND I WANTED TO **LEARN MORE...**

SO IT WAS VERY CLEAR TO ME, THAT THIS IS WHAT I WANTED TO STUDY, AND ONLY THIS.

TO MY SURPRISE, I WAS ACCEPTED INTO A UNIVERSITY IN THE U.S.



AND SO, I MOVED TO ANOTHER COUNTRY.



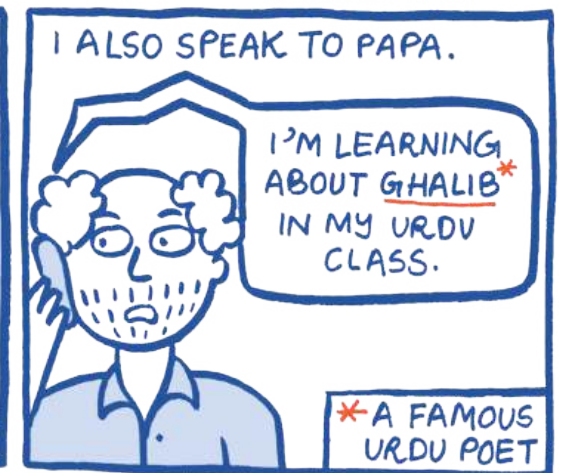
BEING AWAY FROM HOME HAS ALLOWED ME TO NAVIGATE  
LIFE ON MY OWN AND STEP OUT OF MY COMFORT ZONE.



I COOK FOOD THAT REMINDS ME OF HOME, AND SOMETIMES  
EVEN HAVE FRIENDS OVER FOR A FEAST!



I MAKE CONSCIOUS EFFORTS TO CONNECT WITH MY LOVED ONES...





WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN MY PARENTS  
TAUGHT ME TO RESPECT BOUNDARIES  
IN RELATIONSHIPS.

I STILL HAVE SOME BITTERNESS AGAINST  
PAPA'S FAMILY, BUT MUMMY DIDN'T  
RAISE ME TO TREAT OTHERS THE WAY  
THEY TREAT US.

I HAVE COME TO VALUE **TRUST,**  
**RESPECT AND HONESTY**  
IN MY RELATIONSHIPS.

I HAVE ACCEPTED MYSELF —

ONE DAY  
AT A TIME



BUT ON SOME DAYS, I STILL  
GET HARD ON MYSELF —

**YOU MUST  
DO IT!**



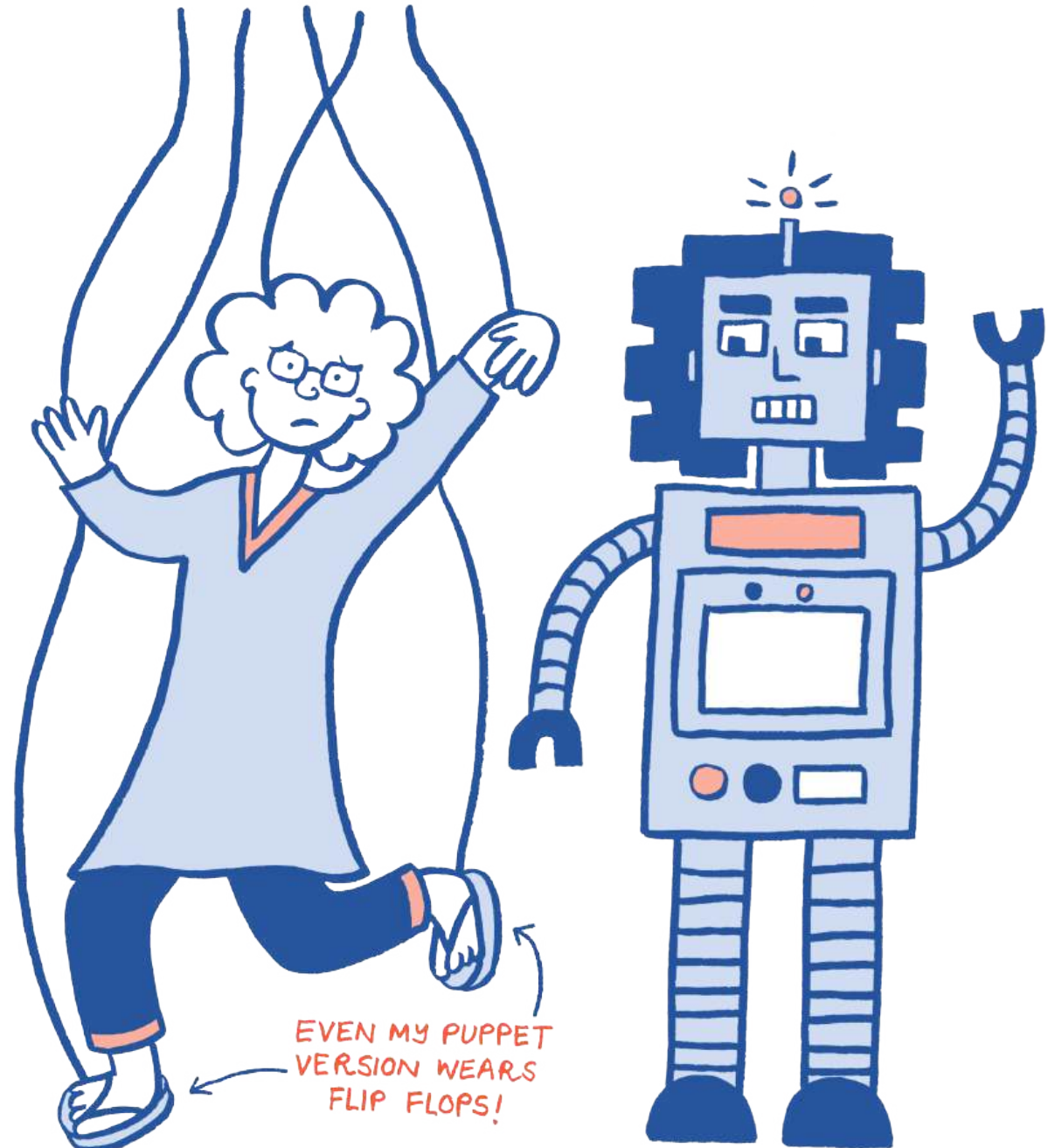
THEN I REMEMBER I'M LOOKING AT MYSELF FROM SOMEONE  
ELSE'S LENS. WITHOUT REALIZING, I HAVE EMBODIED THESE  
PARTS OF OTHERS.

AND I CONTINUE TO LEARN EVERYDAY...

I WANT TO BREAK AWAY FROM THIS WEB OF EXPECTATIONS. INSTEAD OF HELPING ME BE MINDFUL, IT ONLY MAKES ME OVERTHINK SMALL ACTIONS. IT STOPS ME FROM BEING THE VERSION OF MYSELF I'D LIKE TO BE.

SADLY, NONE OF THESE PARAMETERS ARE MY OWN.

I WISH THE PEOPLE AROUND ME HAD BEEN MORE ACCEPTING AND KIND. I WISH THEY'D MADE AN EFFORT TO UNDERSTAND ME INSTEAD OF MOLDING ME INTO SOMEONE ELSE...



EVEN MY PUPPET VERSION WEARS FLIP FLOPS!

I'M NOT A PUPPET OR A ROBOT.



## EPILOGUE



I DON'T KNOW WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR ME...

I'D LOVE TO AFFORD A NO-FRILLS LIFESTYLE, CLOSER TO NATURE.

AND ONCE I'VE MADE IT THIS FAR, I'D LOVE TO BRING MUMMY CLOSER TO MY NOOK SO SHE CAN BE AT EASE...



ANYONE WHO EVER GAVE YOU  
CONFIDENCE, YOU OWE THEM A LOT.

— Truman Capote

THANK YOU —

John Hendrix, Douglas Dowd, Dan Zettwoch,  
Shreyas R. Krishnan, Heidi Kolk, my entire  
IVC cohort, Prachi Mittal, Ragini Suresh,  
Anisha Saigal, Bharati Gupta, Radhika Goel,  
Pooja Nayyar, Aarti Ukeoi, Mohini Bottna,  
Jashti Pandey, Gautami, Meher Rajput, Vaitika,  
Sakshi Jain, Pallavi Agarwala, Himanya Sud,  
Minha Ejaz, nana, mummy, papa, bhaijan,  
Umber, Biggie and Sashimi\*

and anyone who ever believed in me.

\* Biggie and Sashimi  
are cats BTW!



**Aayesha Ejaz** is an Illustrator, Graphic Designer and Storyteller from New Delhi, India. She wrote and illustrated this memoir for her MFA thesis project at Washington University in St. Louis. When not working, she's always thinking about what to eat next or planning her next adventure in the city.

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Aayesha is born in an Islamic household in New Delhi, India where her surroundings don't allow her to express herself. As she struggles with the web of expectations around her, certain incidents in her mother's life make young Aayesha quiet. Aayesha's sadness, anger, and confusion prevail for many years until they finally burst. Eventually, Aayesha finds her voice back. With tiny and firm steps she and her mother are trying to move beyond the status quo.

Join Aayesha in this heartwarming account of real-life events.

If you have lived the life of a girl, irrespective of the culture you come from, you will find something relatable in this story.



### AUTHOR'S NOTE:

THIS IS A PURE WORK OF NON-FICTION. THE INCIDENTS IN THIS BOOK ARE RECALLED FROM MY MEMORY. NO DISRESPECT TO PEOPLE, THEIR BELIEFS, AND VIEWS ARE INTENDED. I HONOR INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES.

WHILE I'M NOT DEVOUTLY RELIGIOUS, I RESPECT THE CULTURAL PRACTICES AND TRADITIONS ROOTED IN MY RELIGION.