

## A Midnight Ride into Ahmednagar (1974)

My father was a Golden Glove Boxer in the mid-1940s, boxing while serving in the Navy during WWII. When I was a little girl, he taught me how to box in case I was ever in a dangerous situation. "This is how you protect your thumbs from breaking," he would explain, and then demonstrate how to hold my hands for punches. He taught me the uppercut, the right and left-hand 'jawbreaker', and the jab. As a child I never had to use these skills; Dad made it known to all the boys I was a trained boxer! Those boxing lessons must have been deeply ingrained in me as they came in handy along the Meherazad Road some 25 years later.

The Mandali were fond of giving a nickname to those who came on pilgrimage, truly fun for all! Pendu said I was "All Mutton and No Brain!" introducing me to others as, "A sweet child but a naughty girl!" Bhau called me "Soldier"; Muhammad Mast named me "Gama" after the famous Indian wrestler of the '20s; Padri also called me Gama. Mehera would tease me by calling me "Baba's Dal (doll) Baby" because every night for dinner she and I would sit at the table and eat a mound of Dehra Dun rice and plain dal—hence the nickname. What they all agreed on was the moniker of "Mad Woman" to refer to me because of my yearning—and gripping desire—to be at Meherazad in general, and at Arnavaz and Goher's side in particular.

Oh! the curse of my desire to be at Meherazad! The cravings: the angst and tears when not satisfied. All-consuming thoughts tore me apart! I came to understand later their burden robbed me of so much and must have been annoying to the Mandali at times! It was exhausting to have to work so hard to satisfy the 'wants' in my young life at that time ~ wants that too often drained the lifeblood for the actual needs of my life. The anxiety my wants produced in me left me bereft on Fridays when Meherazad was closed. Concealing my dread meant I had to act 'normal'; if I became a pain in the backside, I would no longer be welcome. Such was my state of mind and heart, and as hard as I tried to be nonchalant about it around Meherazad, I am sure my efforts were a dismal failure. "Mad Woman" stuck as the accepted reference to me. "Oh, God!" Eruch would cry out in the morning. "The Mad Woman has arrived!" he would shout. "Run for your lives!" he would continue while laughing and holding his arms outstretched for my morning hug!

The posted arrival time at Meherazad was 9:00 A.M. in those early days; Meherazad was closed on Fridays. As the months passed in the first year of my stay, I artfully managed to figure out a way to arrive before 7:00 A.M., leaving Ahmednagar by sunrise. At first, Aloba would tell me this was not good because if others found out, they, too, would come early before the Trust car left the compound for the office. I used to sit and quietly wait for nearly 2 hours before Clinic started. But then, to keep Aloba calm, instead of sitting on the cement bench outside the old Dispensary (where the villagers were waiting for treatment), I devised a plan: I would go inside the clinic and work. I set

up the treatment trays, cleaned the burnt matchsticks and wound pieces of cotton at their ends to make swabs. I made ‘malam’ (ointment) from glycerin, rose oil, powder and sulphur, whipping it into a creamy consistency. I would sit and draw used injection needles across the sharpening stone and then sterilize them, boiling them over the Bunsen Burner. I sat and cut strips of material out of old cloth and sheets; I rolled them into bandages. The truth is, I worked the hardest to look busy and helpful so I would not be ‘officially’ told to not come early out to Meherazad. (It would be fair to describe me as shameless at this time.) I behaved with this cunning for several months.

Then one morning Aloba came with a cup of tea and some biscuits, serving me while I was seated inside the dispensary doing various chores. Finally! At last, I had been accepted into the inner sanctum of this sacred place of unconditional love by the Gatekeeper! I had swum across the moat and not been eaten by the crocodiles! I no longer had to bother if the bridge was drawn or not; I had arrived at my destination and was safely inside, ensconced within the palace walls.

However, I was being deceptive with the Mandali; I never told them what I experienced during my bicycle rides out in the early morning hours—and back into town at night—along the road at Shindi Village about mid-way to town. If I had been honest and forthcoming instead of consumed with getting to Meherazad for even an extra minute on those sacred grounds I would have saved everyone a lot of grief. My focus on my own selfish needs—combined with emotional and spiritual immaturity—caused an unnecessary uproar that could have proved deadly. *I never told the Mandali that at the culvert at Shindi Village men and young boys would come to the roadside—or sit up in the banyan trees—and toss rocks at me, striking and hurting me badly at times.* I was more afraid the Mandali would tell me to not come out to Meherazad than I was of the daily fear and pain the villagers inflicted on me with those stones. And I cannot tell you how awkward it was to treat those same people at the Meher Free Clinic and to not let on what I was experiencing!

The rock throwing went on almost daily for several months. I never spoke a word of it to anyone for fear it would get back to Meherazad. It was not until one morning a rock hit me dead center on my spine, between my shoulder blades, that the truth came to light. The pain I felt was piercing and my hands became numb; I could barely control my arms. I fell off my bike and scraped myself terribly and was bleeding. Out of sheer willpower and repeating Baba’s Name, I was able to somehow pick up my bike and walk the rest of the way out to Meherazad. My arms were nearly useless; my hands had no feeling as I walked the several miles to Meherazad with the bike leaning against my body. It was grueling and I was dizzy and sick to my stomach; I retched several times along the way.

You can imagine my emotional and physical state when I finally arrived at the approach road and walked that final distance to the Meherazad Gate. Without making a

sound, I walked around the corner of the kitchen and just stood there. I arrived just as Mani, Eruch, Rano, and Bhau had gotten into the car to go to the Trust Office for the day. At the edge of the verandah stood Arnavaz, Goher, Naja, Pendu, and Aloba shouting out ‘Avatar Meher Baba Ki Jai!’ as Yusuf started the engine. And then I appeared seemingly out of nowhere, dropped my bike, and just stood there like an apparition of a warrior who had fought alongside Shivaji in some long-ago battle. The car engine shut off and everyone flew out and rushed over to me. I was taken into Eruch’s room and Goher and Arnavaz began to clean me up and examine me. Eruch stood there, arms folded across his chest, demanding to know what happened. “How did this happen? Who hurt you?” He was gruff and as his voice became sterner, he told me to “Speak up, child! Who did this to you?”

At this moment I started to cry like a baby. Goher admonished Eruch to stop making me cry! Arnavaz, in her calming manner, told Goher to just clean me up and check me, and for Eruch to wait to ask me for details later. Eruch replied that there was no reason I could not answer questions and he wanted to know what happened! Eruch’s questioning me fueled my level of hysteria—my fear grew! Had the dreaded moment come when I would be told to remain aloof from Meherazad? Would I be banished from the castle? All I could think to do was to plead as if my life depended on it! “I’m okay. Please don’t make me stay away!” I repeatedly said, begging with no sense of shame. It was pitiful! And then Eruch, calm now, speaking to no one really, said, “Baba! What are we to do with this Mad Woman? We can treat her scrapes, but this madness that has caught hold of her. What to do?”

This statement sobered me up and I was able to calm down. My hands had stopped tingling and I showed Eruch I could lift my arms up. I said to him, “I’m strong now, Eruch! See?” as I lifted my arms over my head. “Let me show you by squeezing your fingers,” as I reached out my hands to him. He must have felt better; my arms seemed to be okay because he chuckled under his breath and said he would show me how strong HE is by squeezing my ears! And again, he asked, “How did this happen?” Me, still trapped by the ‘Demon of Deception and Desire’, chose to lie out of some crazy sense of self-preservation. “Oh, some mischievous boy threw a rock at me and it landed on my back.” Eruch was furious and Goher, speaking Gujarati, said something I can only imagine! At the time I did not understand Gujarati, but her tone was unmistakable!

My explanation that one boy, one time only, had tossed a stone my way seemed to satisfy everyone. Even though I had now become a liar as well as deceptive with the Mandali, I thought I had skated home free. Eruch informed Arnavaz and Goher that he and Mani would talk about this situation and consult with Adi regarding how to respond to the attack. Before turning to leave his room, he said that Aloba was to ride alongside me in the evening when I left—up to Shindi Village—as this would most certainly prevent this miscreant from tossing another stone at me.

They believed that until a plan was put in place, Aloba riding with me to Shindi would protect me from further attack. The villagers at Shindi would know the Mandali were aware I had been harmed. Although I felt bad for Aloba having to do this at the end of the day, I was selfishly relieved I had not been banished. Even under these circumstances, my desire had such a strong grip on me that I was totally consumed by my own wants—shameless, really—and unable to behave with consideration for others or any sense of emotional balance.

Having Aloba escort me up to Shindi Village worked for a while; the projectiles aimed at me stopped. I crossed over the culvert safely, passed the tea shop at the side of the road with no taunts shouted at me, and merrily continued the ride into Ahmednagar. By His Grace, I was feeling much better and the bruises had long since faded into yellow tones, disappeared, and the scrapes had healed. Goher treated me with homeopathy and Mehera rubbed arnica oil on my bruised vertebrae several times daily. I was fortunate my injury was temporary, and I mended quickly.

Then one fateful evening some weeks later, everything turned upside down. Aloba stopped at the spot on the road where he usually did and made his presence known. But then, suddenly, a group of men and young boys appeared. They came at me with sugar cane stalks in their hands, heaving them at me like spears. The stalks whisked past my head, some striking me on my torso. One landed in the spokes of my bike wheel and I was tossed like a rag doll onto the road. I immediately stood up and saw several men and teen-age boys coming toward me; they were menacing. Without hesitation, I planted my feet in the position a boxer would take in the ring. Hands up with fists closed, I took on the stance of a warrior about to do battle. From the recesses of my childhood memory bank, Baba brought up the lessons of my dad's boxing coaching—taking Baba's Name, I was fearless. And there stood Aloba, about forty feet away, shouting Baba's Name and cheering me on as if he were ringside at a match with a bag of peanuts and a cold drink!

The ringleader came at me first—and without hesitation, I punched him in the nose before he could touch me. Bam! He went down. Immediately two other men came at me, one from each side. With swift delivery a left jab took one man down and a right jab the other; they both fell backward and hit the ground, knocked out. Another man came at me from the front; an uppercut lifted him off the ground and he was reduced to rubble, lying next to the other three men. Four swift and perfectly delivered punches—just like dad taught me—and all four were down and out!

Within seconds I heard Aloba screaming at me, "From behind! From behind—Vesta, he's coming at you from behind!" Aloba was jumping up and down and wildly swinging his arms as he shouted this over and over. I did a quick pivot and saw this huge fellow coming at me. Before I could even think, I punched him right in the chest at his sternum, knocking the air out of him. One punch dropped him to the ground as well.

But this punch was different: this punch made a sound like a branch snapping, and it hurt badly I looked down at my wrist and saw that my arm was misshapen about 3 inches above it. It was totally Baba's Grace that the people from the village and those at the tea stall who witnessed this 'fight' were retreating. No one dared to approach me; I must have looked like a crazy person! All five of those men had each been laid out by one deftly delivered punch and were not moving. I do not know how I would have defended myself if anyone else had come at me. My right arm was broken.

Again, my fear was not for my physical wellbeing; it was fear this would end my coming to Meherazad. I said nothing to Aloba as I picked up my bicycle. As I picked up my bike, I shouted 'Thank you, Aloba! Jai Baba!' and climbed onto the seat and began to cycle back to town. Guiding the bike with my left hand on the handlebar, I held my right arm close to my body. I gave a menacing glance to the people along the road who stood there, their mouths agape. They seemed spellbound and had been silenced by what they had just witnessed. Stray dogs who had been sitting at the tea stall waiting for crumbs to be tossed their way also stood and stared, heads down, ears pressed close to their skulls. Their tails no longer were wagging. The only noise was the hiss of the Bunsen Burner under the large pot heating the next batch of tea and the clang of my bike chain as I began to pedal back home. Even the crows that had been cawing as they found their sunset roost in the tall banyan trees overhead were silent.

By the time I reached Pop's House, I was in shock. Heather and Lindsay were not home. I barely remember what happened next or what I said to Kesar (the woman who helped maintain our household. Kesar had been saved from the circus by Goher and KT's sister Roshan and was brought to Ahmednagar as a teen. She was wonderful to us!) She saw that I was injured and sent her son running for a rickshaw. She bundled me up, placed me inside, and told the rickshaw driver to take me back to Meherazad! By now it was after 8:30 and dark. Just like the apparition of a few weeks earlier when I had been hit by a rock in my back, I again appeared, like a ghost in the dark. But this time they all knew what had happened because upon Aloba's return after accompanying me, during dinner he had recounted to the men what he witnessed from his ringside seat. He reenacted how I took out five men from Shindi Village with one punch each, got back on my bicycle, and continued as if nothing had happened. Later, when Mani, Arnavaz, Goher, Rano, and Naja had come over to the Men's Side for relaxation after dinner, Eruch and Pendu egged Aloba on to repeat his dramatic performance for them! He had just finished recounting for the women what had happened and sat down on the bench when they all heard the rickshaw coming down the driveway and into the compound.

And there I was, slumped in the rickshaw, sweating, in shock, and covered in vomit. Without hesitation, Eruch and Bhau cradled me in their arms and took me to the cement bench outside the dispensary. Bhau had been in his room working on his writing

and came out to see who had arrived in the rickshaw at such a late hour. When I said I could stand, Bhau held me on one side and Eruch on the other and they were able to walk me over to the verandah. Goher began to clean me up and Arnavaz ran to her room to retrieve clean clothes for me that we kept in her room in case I needed fresh clothing after working in the clinic. Kesar had wrapped my arm up and used wooden spoons as a splint; once I was cleaned up, my clothes changed and I was stable, Goher checked my arm and announced it was broken. And all I could mumble, over and over, was “Please don’t send me away,” as morphine coursed through my veins. What a spectacle! I am quite sure I sounded pathetic, to say the least.

Goher asked Mani to inform Mehera my arm was broken, and that she was going to take me into Boothe Hospital for an x-ray and cast. She asked Aloba to go get Yusuf to get the car ready to go to town. After quite some time, Aloba returned and announced that Yusuf was nowhere to be found. Eruch was irritated to hear this, and went searching for him, loudly calling out “Yusuf! Yusuf!” By now I was sitting upright, leaning into Goher’s chest as she held me while Arnavaz rubbed my back, repeating Baba’s Name. After quite a long time, Eruch returned quite upset and cussing. He had found Yusuf asleep in the field outside the compound, passed out drunk! Yusuf had gone to visit friends after a wedding and drank too much! He had previously struggled with drinking but had long since sworn off alcohol. But this night—of all nights—he was passed out, stone cold drunk, and unable to drive. Oh, the upset! There was no way Yusuf could drive into ‘Nagar to Boothe Hospital.

The next thing I knew, I was in the back seat of the Trust car and Mehera was there with Meheru, placing blessed water on my forehead while repeating Baba’s Name; the men had scattered to allow Mehera privacy. My head was on Goher’s lap. Morphine had transported me into a surreal, pastel watercolor scene of a Maxwell Parrish painting. In my altered state, the world had tipped off its axis and I had floated into some fantasyland in the Himalayas to a place where unicorns danced at the edge of a magical forest. I heard flutes softly playing and could see their gentle notes floating in the air on pink and gold ribbons. Chimes gently rang out from inside a turned-over earthen pitcher out of which honey flowed in abundance. Brass tones were echoing from inside the ripples of the rivulets of honey, bursting into the air as they flowed toward a gleaming blue saucer with a shiny gold rim. A bunny rabbit dressed in a white satin gown with lace trim had placed the luminous saucer on the marble floor where the flowing honey found its final resting place. I watched as kingfisher birds tried to catch the chimes’ vibrations as the music burst from the golden liquid into the air. I was surrounded by waterfalls rushing down a mountainside and the mist from the churning water seemed to envelop me, cooling my hot and fevered body. I was oblivious to the calamity unfolding.

Then, without warning, I was abruptly yanked out of my hallucination by Eruch announcing, with great irritation in his voice, “Yusuf is drunk and passed out, lying in the

field!" His statement was followed by a pregnant pause...until he announced with complete and total resignation—the obvious: "I suppose I have to drive now!" This was horrific for Eruch, as he had sworn off driving after the 1956 Satara accident when Dr. Nilu was killed and Baba severely injured. But there were no more options. This night is the only time he ever drove a car since that fateful day in 1956. Surrendering to the moment, Eruch climbed behind the wheel, started the engine and we pulled out of Meherazad. As we drove into Ahmednagar, Eruch was not shy about telling me what a curse I had become to him at that moment! After twenty years he found himself behind the wheel of a car barreling down the highway, something he had sworn he would never do again in this lifetime!

And so, it happened! We drove into town in the dark of night, Eruch behind the wheel, cursing and grumbling the entire distance. I was lying down in the back seat, my head in Goher's lap. While rubbing my shoulder, she kept repeating, "My poor child! Mara bacha (my child). Baba help her!" Of course, Eruch was having none of it! He'd admonish Goher, "Your poor child? What about me?" he would ask, knowing that the question quickly flew out the window—to be lost in the dark of night. Incredulous at what was occurring, he again asked, addressing no one in particular, "How did this happen? Why on this night, of all nights, did Yusuf get drunk?" In between cursing, he would announce in exasperation, "Yusuf should be driving, not me!" I remember fleeting moments of pity for Eruch, but like those unanswered questions, these sentiments, too, flew out the window to be lost in the dark of night. "Why were there five men, Baba? What was the need for the fifth man?" he asked, challenging the events of the last several hours. "Four men to be clobbered was sufficient to make the point!" he lamented, his oration eloquent, conveyed as a declarative narrative.

This is how we traveled over the dirt roads from the Meherazad driveway and onto the highway into town. The headlights cut into the darkness; the overhanging banyan trees framed the way with drooping hugs. Behind the wheel of the car was the cursing driver. In the back seat the bemoaning doctor, cradling the blissful child who was in a drug-induced state of euphoria. We sped along the road to Ahmednagar just before midnight, three minstrels singing in their own key, each mandolin being plucked by angels' fingers.

Days afterward, I could not stand myself for the deception and lies and confessed the truth at teatime on the Men's Verandah. As we were talking about what happened and all the interplay for each of us, I learned an especially important lesson about the danger of allowing myself to be held in a headlock by my desires. It was both cleansing and liberating to be released from some very unhealthy habits and a destructive inner dialogue. I was able to speak without self-pity or tears. I was able to say what Meherazad meant to me without any expectation. I was able to say how much I loved and respected the Mandali and hoped they would be patient with me and help

mold me into a person who would please the Master. I promised to take criticism as the gift of love it was meant to be and to not get in their way as they went through their days' duties. I was calm and matter of fact as I spoke. With newfound maturity, I could state a quite simple goal and asked sincerely and whole-heartedly for help to achieve it. At this moment I was able to act like an adult without losing my child-like manner, leaving behind the need for childish antics.

But there was still one final burden to lay down. The time had come to own-up to my confused inner turmoil, which had been rolling around in my head like a marble circling my inner skull, trapped in perpetual motion. We had been talking for about an hour, sharing thoughts about the past several weeks when I looked up and said, "I need help." I continued as cool tears welled up and slid down my cheeks. "*I love Arnavaz and Goher more than I love Baba*," I stated out loud, surprised I had not been struck dead by lightning! "*I love Arnavaz and Goher more than I love Baba and feel so unworthy of all three*," I repeated. But just by putting this feeling into words, the grip it held over me was loosened. Eruch chuckled and then came over and put his hand on my head and said, "Of course you are worthy, my child! He sent you here to His Home, didn't He? So many are coming now and more will follow!"

Arnavaz and Goher understood the gravity of what I had just said, as they had been helping me work through some trauma I had experienced before my arrival in India. They came and sat one on each side of me. Goher took my hand in hers, saying, "My child, my child, you are loved by all of us." And Arnavaz, in her inimitable 'Arnavaz Way' said to me, "Mara bacha. Do not bother with anything right now. You will come to know that all love comes from Baba and all love returns to Him. The time will come when you love for loves' sake—and loves' sake alone!"

Fear had paralyzed me on a very deep level, but at this moment it started to lift from my being. Most importantly, I realized I could release my weakness of not being able to accept the love which had been given so freely and without condition; I could change my thinking. I knew Baba could heal me in an instant if I got out of the way! My old patterns of thinking were akin to willingly surrendering untold treasure to a robber baron—I was allowing a thief to steal happiness and joy from me. Fear had pilfered divine coins from the leather pouch my Beloved had bestowed upon me. I understood the choice was mine to stop the theft and to make Baba my Constant Companion. Of course, life could be filled with love, grace, and goodness! Baba would give me the strength needed to disentangle myself from the fear of loss, so I would no longer be in a perpetual state of intimidation, reacting to things that were not even real.

The interplay of happenstance, fate, and the mysterious nature of what had transpired due to a rock striking me while cycling had repercussions for us all. A perfect alignment of circumstances collided with a jumbled-up knot of karma. It was astonishing how those pesky sanskaric ties unfolded on that pivotal night. Later, each time we

recounted the drive into town, Eruch would look at me, shake his head, and ask “What did I ever do to you that you cursed me as you did?!” Goher would scold him for talking to me like that! Then we would all laugh!

And so, it happened that a child—a child who felt so broken—was able to begin to mend the breaks in life that hurt so much, all in the soothing balm of His ever-present Grace, Love, and Perfect Care.