Chapter forty two

Walk, Walking, Talking Home
Devika Chawla

WALKING, WRITING, AND BEGINNINGS

Memoir essays have affective archaeologies. They emerge from many somewheres. They contain portions of our emotional selves that we did not know existed. More importantly, memoir essays emerge because they are meant to take us to many elsewhere, the unknown places that we need to visit. Memoir essays are rooted specifically in the personal, they may or may not explore broader cultural issues, but they might do so through the lens of the narrator’s personal story. In this way, memoir essays are akin to a “confessional-emotive style” of autoethnography wherein autoethnographers “expose personal details that may provoke emotional reactions from readers” (Chang, 2013, p. 118). The confessional-emotive style of writing is most often accessed by writers exploring personal and relational issues. A style I utilize in this chapter.

Even so, writing, all writing, note anthropologists Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean, “remains a charged form of voyaging,” one that involves “transformative passages” (2017, p. 2). Why did I write this memoir chapter about walking with my grandmother? Why did it emerge when it did? Why did I need to write it? What happened once I wrote it? Here, in this space, I walk myself through these questions, answering them as best as I can. Understanding why I wrote this chapter is also a quest that illuminates the writing process, both for myself and for others. Another kind of voyage, if you will.

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As far as I can recall, the story of writing about walking with my grandmother has its origins in an image. So, let me begin here with the story of how the image arrived. In early Fall 2010, having completed (for that moment) a large portion of oral history fieldwork with cross-generational family members of India’s Partition refugees, I was in a hiatus. I had also just earned tenure and was in that liminal space between employment impermanence and permanence. Part of me was still there, in the field in Delhi, but the other part was here, in Athens, Ohio where I live and work as a professor. Of course, one can argue and one must, that while our fields might be located in specific geographic locations, they are also dispersed and flexible. We embody them, carrying them with us wherever we happen to be. At the same time, I was in a liminal, crisis-like space that often emerges when fieldnotes—headnotes, written notes, the oral history interview archive—become overwhelming. On the one hand, I was the warden of a sea of stories in the form of the oral history archive, and, on the other hand, I was struggling over how these stories needed to or had to be told. In short, there were many liminal performatives at work. The singular crisis was really a literary and anthropological one of “stuckness” between fieldwork stories and their telling. As an ethnographer and an oral historian, I was living with two nested questions—how to tell this story, and how to tell it well.

Since 2007, I’d met with, sat with, cried with, co-witnessed 45 oral histories of men and women who had survived India’s 1947 Partition by the British. About a third of my participants were elderly men and women who lived through the Partition. Many of these elderly participants were just a little bit younger than my grandmother (Biji), also a Partition refugee, who died in 1998. In Fall 2010, in my writerly stuckness, I began seeing an image of myself as a little girl in a frock carrying a stick to ward off unruly crows and accompanying my Biji on her evening walks. It was an image from the early 1980s when Biji lived with us, my grandfather having passed away. The stick
I was carrying was his. Of course, this image did not fall from the sky. It was generatively occasioned by the oral histories that were/had inhabited my conscious and unconscious world for three years, stories of elderly refugees like my grandparents. Even so, an image is never just an image. There is a story before, after, around, and beside it.

The image was both intimate and panoramic. Perhaps, cartographic is a better word, but for the moment, I want to stay with the words intimate and panoramic. The image was a moment of my day as a seven-year-old who was forced to accompany her diminutive grandmother on her daily evening walk. Biji was being bullied by a flock of angry crows, so I was supposed to carry a stick and fling it around to ensure that she completed her walks unscathed. The image began as a visual footnote, then became an account, and then a story that was intimate and panoramic. Intimate because it reintroduced me to my close relationship with Biji, a closeness that I knew, but had buried in the business of becoming an adult. Memories of these walks led to remembering that the walks were a family legacy. In these many walks, Biji told me the Chawla Partition history—how we fled Pakistan for the new India, how we survived, how we came to be new Indians in a post-colonized India. These moments were both small and large. They were about our family but also about how the ordinary is imbricated in the geopolitics of a region.

So, I began writing around the image and an unruly story of sorts started emerging. The essay entered several terrains, it answered questions that I did not even know needed answers. Questions such as why I walked, why I had a history of walking, why walking was such an important part of my writing process, after all, in reading and writing we traverse multiple landscapes, maps, histories, memories. The essay was about learning to think and listen in rhythm with my body’s movements. It linked my own migration to my Biji’s in ways that would have seemed impossible had I not seen the image and begun writing the story around it. Ironically, I wrote the essay in fits and starts, walking with a small notebook on side roads and main roads of my small college-town. Thinking, creating, composing, remembering—in walking.

Eventually, the more important story that started emerging in the essay was that of “voice.” In writing around and beside that image—both intimate and panoramic—I found myself learning to write in the voice that I needed for the book I eventually composed from the oral histories (see Chawla, 2014). It is the voice—both intimate and panoramic—that I would use to craft the stories of the 45 ordinary human beings who lived through the catastrophic partitioning of the India into India and Pakistan. Human beings like Biji, who lived and died as refugees in a new India that never quite felt like home. Ordinary humans caught in extraordinary geopolitical circumstances. That image of myself, my grandmother, the stick, and the crows was therefore almost essential; it arrived both serendipitously and generatively. It became the vehicle to craft the story that would craft the voice, which would lead to the answer to the two crucial representational dilemmas that haunt ethnographers of all stripes—how to tell this story and how to tell it well.

And then, I chose to begin my book with segments from the walking essay. It was only natural, the story before the story, the voice before the voice, the saying before the said.

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Stories have aftermaths. If we are lucky our stories have readers and audiences. How a story is encountered by a reader is mostly beyond the control of its writer. In its short life of six years, this essay has gathered some readers, some of whom are my own undergraduate and graduate students. The affective and practical responses of the two groups are distinctive. When undergraduate students read the essay, they focus on the relationship between my grandmother and myself. Some say it reminds them of their grandparents, others say they long to have a close relationship with a grandparent. They read it as nostalgia and intimacy and loss. The responses from graduate students are disparate and unsurprisingly, more mature or one might say more seasoned. The graduate students are more curious than the undergraduates about the trauma of migration. Many of them focus on walking as a metaphor. They consider it an essay that symbolizes transformations. They talk about routines and habits that ethnographers cultivate, even fetishize. Talk about habit generates more stories about other habits we ethnographers like to nurture. And so, we ruminate over habits of thought and thoughtful habits. Even while these interpretations are uneven and unequal (as all interpretations inevitably are) they are re-readings and re-writings—passages that readers themselves make when they encounter the work of words and worlds.

These interpretations have lent the essay another life altogether. I’ve learned more about my own process of the essay from their readings, which has eventually led me to write about habits, rituals, even habitual objects that we keep/collect/curate in our lives. So much so that my ongoing writing on family objects and material memory is a consequence of these/their
readings. The crucial lesson of writing the essay and understanding its aftermath has been to understand that the “voice” for the next phase of ethnographic writing will arrive when it needs to, just as it did then. Another voyage in another time.

WALK, WALKING, TALKING, HOME

I have a walking history, if there can be such a thing. It begins when I was seven years old. We lived in a small north Indian town called Moga close to the Pakistan border. My grandfather had recently died, and Biji, my grandma, had come to live with us. She and I shared a room and developed the love–hate relationship that inevitably ensues when a child finds herself rooming with a 75-year-old grandparent. Biji had many rituals—waking up at 4 a.m. to recite portions of the Gita and the Gayatri Mantra; cleaning her dentures as she whispered “hai ram” for the next hour; oiling her hair with coconut oil; eating her isabgol with warm water—isabgol is an ayurvedic stomach cleanser which everyone in generations previous to mine swears upon. On weekdays, we held a reluctant peace since I needed to wake up for school at 6 a.m. and with Biji around I was never going to be late. But on weekends, the room became a battle zone as I resisted getting out of bed until 8 a.m.—a considerably late wake-up time in Biji’s world. For Biji, every day was every day, and she lovingly nourished her routines.

After the first year we became used to this pattern. Weekend mornings were still unpleasant, but we had discovered a fondness for one another, a fondness that came from my childish realization that Biji’s presence was beneficial to me. She began to help me tidy my room and being a devout Hindu, she’d tell me stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata before I slept. I have never taken to religion, yet because of Biji, I remain enthralled with the fantastical dimensions of most religious stories. And whatever I know about Hinduism comes from these bedtime tales. Biji bathed me before school, braided my hair, and even helped me with my Hindi homework. Born in 1908, Biji was my paternal grandmother. She never attended college, but had passed the highest-level exam on Hindi proficiency that women were allowed to take in the early 1900s. It was called the Prabhakar, and my parents tell me that it was then considered equivalent to a master’s degree.

Only now, I realize how radical this education must have been for an Indian woman born in that era. It makes me wish I had met her as a grown-up. Alas, grandparents are always presented to us in the autumn of their lives and we are able to garner mere remnants of their personalities, their experiences, and their histories. In time, I stopped complaining about the morning rituals and would often help Biji oil her long white hair. Even today, almost three decades later, a mere whiff of coconut oil can take me back to my elderly roommate. Much to Amma’s chagrin, I keep the product away from my own hair. Amma, my mother, constantly reminds me that the coconut oil was the secret behind my grandmother’s hair, which remained thick and long until she died. Out of guilt (for not applying it) or habit (because coconut oil was a permanent fixture in my childhood home), I keep a fresh bottle of coconut oil at home, here in Appalachian Ohio. But I cannot recall the last time I massaged it into my hair.

One summer evening Amma asked me to begin going for walks with Biji. “Why do I have to do that, Amma?” I demanded. Yet another hour of my day was being given to my grandparent. Her only response was a frightening glare. I conceded. What was the other option? I often threatened to leave home because of such incidents, but my parents and Biji would laughingly urge me to stay until the next morning, knowing misery would turn into memory overnight. At breakfast, Papa explained that Biji’s evening walks had become unsafe. “How?” I asked. We lived in a compound that was enclosed within the Nestle factory where my father was the personnel manager. Biji walked along the sidewalk adjacent to large Eucalyptus trees that were apparently home to an army of crows. Since she was a diminutive woman, they’d fly close to her head and scare her. A crow had poked a beak in her skull a few evenings ago. When she complained, Papa and Amma thought a companion would help. I was asked to fling around my grandfather’s walking stick if the crows came too close. The stick went with Biji wherever she traveled. Biji was a small woman and I was probably barely four feet at the time; I have never grown over five feet any way. Stick or no stick, we hardly made a daunting pair.

Her walk began a half hour after our regular afternoon tea, which was taken at 4:30 p.m. Not surprisingly, I was sullen when we started, and Biji humored me by telling me about the time when I was a toddler and fell into a shallow ditch full of water outside the family house in Delhi. “What happened? Did I drown?” I asked. “You would not be here, would you?” she grinned. I was constantly interrogating Biji about my routines as a baby, what I ate, how I spoke, why I cried, and when I crawled. As I have grown older, childhood stories have taken on a mystical and mythical quality. They are a space that I long to know again, but as an adult, I also find this fascination with one’s past, whether more immediate—as
for a seven-year-old—or further on in time, sustains us as one of the ways we meet our selves in the present and future. We are not our childhood, but that space shadows us, infused with meaning, asking to be recalled. When Biji and I reached the row of Eucalyptus trees I realized that Papa had not been exaggerating. There were at least 20 crows perched on two of the trees and as soon as they saw Biji, they began crowing angrily. There were some men walking ahead of us, but the crows had their eyes on my tiny grandmother. I thanked my stars that I was carrying the stick and waved it around angrily. Biji continued talking. And, so began our daily walks that would last until I was ten and was sent to boarding school.

We were a curious pair—a tiny white-haired lady in a white cotton saree with her head covered and almost a foot shorter small girl in a frock and a page-boy haircut carrying her dead grandfather’s walking stick. But we were fearless together. These walks and our room created a bond that would have otherwise never been forged. As the weeks, months, and years went on, we talked of everything. I learned more and more about my family in Pakistan, about my great-grandfather who was given the title of Rai Sahib during British rule. Biji told me about the great Quetta earthquake of 1935 that almost killed my grandfather. He was trapped under a large wooden wardrobe and was rescued by his younger brother, Jagan. This explains why my father’s uncle was so dear to Biji and why no trip to Delhi was complete without a visit to his home. She also told me how we lost our land and home in India’s Partition in 1947. I think I was the only grandchild who knew early on how we became refugees, moved to Delhi, built homes, and how my father and his siblings came to be educated amidst deep economic hardship. When these stories disturbed and frightened me, I’d naively urge Biji to forget them and not be so unhappy. She would sigh and say, “When you grow old, you are sad, I cannot explain it, there is a word in English for it—melancholy—it does not go away.” As I write this, I am gripped with sorrow at my foolish words to this widowed refuge who was also my grandmother. Grief remains an unknown place until one has encountered it.

When my parents decided to send me to Waverly, a Catholic boarding school in Mussoorie, a small hill town nestled by the Himalayan ranges, my evening jaunts with Biji ended. My older brother Samarth had left for boarding school a few years before me, and with no grandchild in the house, Biji decided to return to living with her older son. As an adult, I’ve come to understand how important the moment of my departure was because after it, Biji and I would never again live together in the same house for an extended period of time.

At the beginning, Waverly was a difficult place—an old and strict Catholic convent that opened in 1845. I was afraid of its aging buildings and also of the other girls, some of whom had known each other since nursery school. I’d been sent there in grade six as a ten-year-old. So, there was a lot of catching up to do. In those initial months, when finding even one friend was difficult, I walked the corridors of Waverly—the school sat on a hill and was cordoned off from the town so hiking the hill was not allowed. I made two friends during these walks—Puja and Priya—and we remained inseparable, like sisters, until we left Waverly. Days in Waverly were so regimented that the only downtime was the 45 minutes of dead time between dinner and bed. On some days, we would saunter down the stairs from the middle school to the baby dormitories—the name given to dorms where the seven- to nine-year-olds slept. The baby dorms were a novelty because the children slept on small beds that were placed together in large hall-like rooms. I think it was so they wouldn’t be frightened if they awoke at night. Our beds in the senior dorms, on the other hand, were separated from each other by frilly white curtains, which you could draw to create makeshift cubicles. Ria knew the baby dorms well. She’d been at Waverly since she was seven years old, three years before I was sent there. When we walked past them, she studiously avoided looking inside the large glass windows. She said they reminded her of her first year in Waverly when she was unbearably homesick.

If you have not been to British-style boarding schools in north India, you may be surprised to know that they are spread across vast spaces. While mine took up only one small mountain, my brother’s reached across seven hills. The important thing was that because we walked, we learned to notice things that we were blind to during the day. I discovered that the head girl sat at a particular spot behind the statue of Mother Mary on the main hard court before dinner and read her mail for the day. The head girl was the student-voted leader of the school student council, which was made up of four captains and four vice-captains who governed one house (a group of students) each. Dividing schools into houses continues to be common practice in British schools, I am unsure of the history of this practice, but it was popularized contemporaneously in the Harry Potter series. In fact, I noticed that this was the spot girls chose when they wanted to read letters from home. It was where I would begin reading Biji’s and Amma’s letters and the occasional letter from Papa.
We were not averse to peeping into rooms that we were disallowed from entering. The staff dining room was a particular favorite mostly because we hated our own dining hall food. The nuns and teachers had a separate kitchen and a different cook and even though they are supposed to lead ascetic lives, they seemed fond of eating well. We saw fresh meat and delicious-looking dessert at their table, every night. And each nun nursed a routine. Sister Lia, our needle-work instructor, drank red wine with her dinner every night. Sister Lucy, who was also our Chemistry teacher, had a sweet tooth and liked to play music in the nun’s dining room—I think it was because she could not bear to talk to the other nuns. Our English teacher, Ms. Díaz, spoke with her mouth full, and our biology teacher, Ms. Pinto had a penchant for tomato ketchup, pouring it liberally on all foods. The senior dorm matron, Miss Maria, barely ate anything. She’d confessed to us that she found the food too bland. We knew she hoarded junk food in her bedroom adjoining our dorm—we could hear the crinkling of wrappers late into the night. We were comrades in our dislike for that food, we thought. So we were peeved when she busted a midnight feast we planned one Easter weekend. Ms. Mishra, our art teacher, never ate with the other teachers, we would later come to know that she was a Brahmin and sharing food with the Catholics was a sin for her.

The nuns at Waverly wore habits that revealed just the front circles of their faces. They were part of a conservative French-Catholic order founded by Claudine Thévenet who was canonized in the early 1990s, a few years after we graduated from Waverly. We were ever-curious about how our wardens looked with their heads uncovered. The closest we ever came to finding out was with our principal, Sister Prudence. We all agreed, from what was visible, that she had the most symmetrical features of all the nuns. One day we’d wander by her quarters and chanced upon her sitting at her dressing table admiring herself. While we could only see her in silhouette through the frosted glass windows, it was hard to miss her thick waist-length dark hair. Her quarters became a regular part of our walks and we soon discovered that Sister Prudence brushed her tresses with great gusto every evening—an after-dinner ritual. It did not take us very long to spread the news about her hair and the hair-brushing ritual. I’ve always felt that Sister Prudence knew of our peeping, but she humored us; we were never reprimanded for either the spying or the gossip. For many months, we stayed busy speculating why such a beautiful woman would take the habit. Many years after Waverly, I heard from a friend-alum that Sister Prudence was the youngest offspring of a wealthy Anglo-Indian family from Kerala, and that she’d taken her vows against her family’s wishes. I often wonder what her life might have been without the habit.

We spent innumerable hours contemplating whether the nuns and the teachers ever invited men to eat with them. Waverly was an all-girls convent school and men were a scarce species. Sometimes, brothers from the all-boys Irish Catholic school in the area came to dinner and we waited in anticipation for a nun to elope with a brother and give up her habit. Surely, the pretty Sister Prudence deserved to be saved from this life? We were so cloistered at Waverly that dreaming Sister Prudence’s escape was the only way we could imagine a way out of our own existence and to envision, albeit in a miniscule way, what our own lives could be and would be outside school. But we’d become so disciplined that we never dared imagine our own liberation.

Walking the 150-year-old corridors of Waverly was a ritual, a continuity that linked my present to my walking days with Biji. Each footstep made me feel more “at home” in this place “away” from home. Each footstep returned me to the comfort of our walks and made me less homesick. It continued to prepare me, as it had with Biji, to pay attention and to “learn to listen” to the stories my friends told me. I was creating my own rhythm of peripatetic listening, observing, and thinking that would eventually become my manner and movement for understanding oral and life histories of Indian women, what became my research focus as an academic. Decades later, I would read American writer Rebecca Solnit’s meditations on walking and need no translation for her musings, “The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts” (2000, pp. 5–6). More necessity than leisure, both movement and thought, walking was (is) my way of comprehending the known and the unknown around me—both an unlikely and an obvious legacy of walks that began because a little girl was asked to guard her grandmother from cawing, ferocious, and unruly crows.

I finished high school and moved home and then there is a drought in my memory about walking. I must have walked, but I don’t remember much. Maybe I did not walk, and so I could not remember much. To some extent the drought can be explained by two absences—Waverly and Biji. After leaving for Waverly, Biji was lost to me. Now we met each other only during crowded family moments. When she was in her early eighties, Biji returned to stay with us temporarily. On a short trip to visit us, she broke her hip in a fall during dinner at a relative’s home. I was with
her when it happened. We became roommates for the duration of her convalescence. It did not take us long to fall into our old habits. We talked, we argued, we grumbled, we complained about each other. We never spoke of walking. We knew that her walking days were over. She lived to be 92, but in the last ten years of her life, she was instructed to walk only if necessary. I was terrified that she was going to die. I’d taken to waking up with her at 4 a.m., and if she was late in getting up, I would put my index finger to her nose to check if she was still breathing. She’d inevitably pipe up and laughingly declare, \textit{main abhi zinda hoon}, “I’m still alive.”

Walking takes on significance with my move to the United States in the late nineties. My experience of the United States begins, like a lot of foreign students’, in a small college town. In my first few months here, I was almost afraid of the vast Midwestern spaces of Michigan, and I kept my walking limited to campus sidewalks. The expansive emptiness of the Midwest was frightening, and the absence of human bodies on the road made me almost apologetic for being on foot. After my first semester, I felt braver and began venturing into the quaint downtown area beyond the campus where a lot of international students happened to also convene. In the summers, I took to walking at six in the morning and came to notice the nitty-gritties of small town living in the United States. The people returning from night shifts at local factories, workmen heading to gas stations for their morning coffee, the odd professor jogging, and the even odd student, like me, trying to get a walk in before the day sprang to life.

Later, I would move to northern Indiana to join a doctoral program in the college town of West Lafayette—a slightly larger city. I could not afford a car, and would not get one until 2009, years after I could afford one. I began walking earnestly in Indiana—the landscape was flat, boring, and dismal, a stark contrast to the lush and familiar greenery of the Himalayas—but putting my feet to the ground somehow made the place less strange, made it almost a part of me. During the winter months, in both Michigan and Indiana, I walked the snow in wonder, not because I had not seen snow before, but because I’d never seen it fall on such leveled topography. Perhaps, walking the vastness peeled away some layers of the alienation I associated with the terrain, almost as if by treading upon it I was domesticating it. After being in the United States for three years, I knew that for me walking was one way to calm the turmoil of exile that raged inside of me. In those early years, walking was like a bridge between the country of my childhood and this new country that I was making my own. A bridge held together by the stories Biji had told me. It was during one of my daily walks that I made the decision to not return home.

I cannot say that there is a specific walk on a special day when I made up my mind; it came gradually as some decisions in life do. I was in my second year in doctoral school, and in any week, I was clocking about 30 hours of reading for my graduate seminars, ten hours of actual in-class time, and some 20 hours of teaching as an assistant in public speaking classes. I was also in and out of several sweet, but ultimately unsuccessful romances. I did not have time for anyone but myself. When I walked, I’d consider how lonely my life was. Here I was, almost 30, still single, and studying for a doctorate that was only going to make me even more ineligible for marriage to an Indian man.

Still, I did not always feel sorry for myself. Walking helped me to think through some dense readings that I was undertaking in my doctoral seminars. In between ingesting much scholarly jargon and my daily walks, I read innumerable novels. I’d been an aspiring writer for years and studied literature as an undergraduate. I was getting a doctorate because it seemed the ideal way to do the two things I liked best—reading and writing. I think walking became a different, and in some ways, necessary way for me to encounter these twin worlds. What if a character had done this instead of this? What if the story had been set in New York instead of Caracas? What if the protagonist were a man instead of a woman? I’d imagine answers to these questions as I walked the spare landscape. I took to carrying a pen and a mini-notebook with me—to note ideas about writing, people—I completed unfinished sentences and thoughts and found words for essays and poetry that my dingy attic apartment would certainly never have inspired. This curious dance between writing, reading, and walking convinced me that I was happy, that I was where I needed to be, and that home was going to be a place I would find because I had learned how to step inside this medley.

Later, when I set out to write a dissertation on the experiences of Hindu women in arranged marriages, walking remained central to how I listened to the recorded life-histories and wrote them up as stories. I spent four months one summer collecting these stories in India and when I returned, I was able to listen to them, hate them, love them, and finally write with them because I carried them with me on my walks. Somewhere along these meanderings, I understood that one rhythm—one foot in front of the other—was becoming my way of deciphering the rhythms of others in other worlds. I was (re)learning and (re)visiting that merging movement to ear was “my” organic way of living with the stories I had gathered from my
field. Could my dissertation have been written had I not walked? Of course. Only the stories would not be a part of me as they are even now. Taking them in as I walked had settled them inside of me, a kind of convergence that sedentary listening might or might not have engendered. I walked one hour every day, and still do, and I experience those 60 minutes as both empty and fecund—they take me where I must go—inside the stories I should note and away from the ones that I should let go.

What I know is that Biji, our walks, and her stories were a companionable shadow in these transcontinental perambulations. In 2007 it came as no surprise to anyone in my family (or myself) that I initiated a cross-generational oral history study of refugee family stories and India’s Partition. And when “home” as—sense, presence, absence—became the central focus that I “chose” to note in the oral histories, I knew that things were coming full circle. I was going home or being taken home, to learn more about refugees of my grandmother’s generation—to find more pieces of her and of the life she left behind in Pakistan. Movement and travel had become my metaphors for understanding experience, life, and the world. Perhaps this was fated, as my devoutly Hindu Biji would say, things were going just the way they had always been planned. Our walks were (and are) trailing me, directing me to where I needed to go and what I needed to learn.

For years I associated walking with the company of women—my grandmother, my friends in Waverly, the women in my doctoral research. I cannot say that I have any memories of walking alongside any boyfriend, and my spouse loathes the activity, calling it boring. I return to Delhi at least once, if not twice a year. In the last five years, I realized that I’d overlooked my father and his walking regimen. Of course, I have always known that he walks every day, but I’d never given it much thought—Papa worked long hours and we were a little bit in awe of him as children, we just didn’t know him well. During these visits, I found that Papa would return from his walk at 6 a.m., just as I was stepping out for mine. He had retired some years ago, so I was puzzled and asked him why he felt it necessary to walk at the crack of dawn—well, almost. He replied, “I know all the men in the neighborhood, they want to walk and talk and chat and gossip about this, that, and the other. It’s too much chatter too early, so I go before any of them reaches the park.”

“Are you running away from your friends?” I giggled. He glared at me and said, “I don’t need them that early in the morning.”

True. Of course, once all these Uncles—a title we use to refer to all my father’s friends—knew who I was, they would take turns to walk one round of the park with me. Indian women who live alone abroad are still curiosities, particularly Punjabi women. The Uncles wanted to know if I lived alone, whether I cooked for myself, if I had any friends, and didn’t Americans make bad friends because they are, after all, selfish? Once they warmed up, the questions turned more personal:

“Why are you not thinking of marriage?”
“Why are you living so far away, leaving your brother to take care of your parents? Are you not concerned about them?”

Then when I did eventually get married, the questions shifted:

“Are you not planning children?”
“Do you not want them?”
“Do you not like children?”

I decided that my father’s walking dilemmas were very real. Some stories could be sacrificed. I needed to let the Uncles go. Now when I am home my father and I walk together—Uncle-less—at the crack of dawn. We talk of the extended family, my father’s cousins and Papa’s surviving Uncles and Aunts. Biji inevitably enters our conversations—she was a central figure in the extended Chawla family, much loved and immensely respected. These days, Papa and my talks are morbid; I am given an update on all the elderly relatives who have died in the months that I have been away—reports that show me that, at 79 my father has begun paying attention to mortality.

In 2009, when I was approaching my 35th birthday, my husband and friends insisted that I needed to get a driver’s license. They said it was time for me to get independent and taste some freedom. They reminded me that I was an oddity in a culture where driving is associated with becoming an adult. I argued and argued, telling them freedom does not come from knowing how to drive. I feel free, I said. “And besides,” I accusingly asked my husband. “Didn’t we agree that one of the benefits of living in a college town was that one could buy a home close to the campus and walk to work?” No one was having it. I was told to stop waxing philosophical, get practical, and realize that driving was a necessity in the United States. So, I took driving lessons and passed my test a few weeks short of my 35th birthday. Even now, ten years later, I drive to work when I need to carry books and heavy objects. But I avoid long drives on my own. Driving does not
come naturally to me, which is sort of inevitable when one learns the skill this late in life. It is also not natural for me because I associate bodily movement with thinking and when I drive, even though there is movement, I feel imprisoned in the rules that I must follow and the violations I must not commit. I am not a fearless driver nor an aggressive one. Driving has, in fact, made me less punctual. I overestimate my speed and also find it necessary to stop for every pedestrian attempting to cross the street—they could, after all, be me. I know I anger at least one driver behind me every day. Driving is a complication that I have grudgingly accepted. My only solace is that I still can walk my sacred hour.

I was in the United States when Biji passed away. She died on a cold December day, three days before I was to arrive home for winter break. It was a sad entourage that came to meet me at the Delhi airport. On the 13th day after her cremation, as is customary, there was a celebration in our neighborhood temple—a small havan, high tea for the extended family, and the singing of bhajans. After this we congregated at my parents’ home for dinner—we had not been together like this for at least ten years. Not surprisingly, the talk turned to Biji who I was told had been very worried when I had moved away to the United States to study. She’d blamed my father for letting me go and told them, “This child is now lost to you, she will not return.” My father’s older brother, Bade-Papa, addressing me by my family nickname, asked, “Gudia, you were her favorite, you know?” I shook my head, “Oh no, she loved Samarth the most, she treated him like a son.” Samarth had been almost entirely raised by Biji because when he was born my mother held a full-time job. Biji became his day mother and Amma his night mother. My cousins and I always knew that he was special to her. We did not feel un-loved by her, we just knew.

Uncle walked over to his briefcase, popped it open, and took out a picture of me when I was 16, an old modeling shot which a professional photographer friend of the family had taken. I’d mailed Biji that picture because after she moved away, we only met once a year, and I wanted her to keep up with how I was changing. I wanted to show off and let her know that I was almost an adult and that I was pretty. She replied with a letter written in her very proper Hindi. In it she admitted that I was turning into a beautiful girl, but she cautioned me to cultivate modesty. Instead of taking pride in my appearance, I was to worry more about school and making something of myself, she instructed. After she died, my uncle and aunt discovered the photograph inside her Gita; behind it she had written in Hindi, “Gudia, meri poti,” my granddaughter. Uncle said she inevitably displayed the picture to all her visitors, proudly announcing that I was living and studying for a doctorate in the United States. She never failed to mention that I had taken care of her by being her guard during her evening walks and saved her from the wicked crows. The moral of this story, according to my Uncle, was simple—if I could fend off Indian crows, I was brave enough to live alone in the United States. There were shouts of laughter around the table with my older cousins improvising a rhyme, “Gudia can fend off crows, so Gudia is brave, so she can live alone—in the United States.” Maybe Biji was right, maybe staying off the crows was brave, maybe it taught me to be unafraid. Our walks were her main memory when she was dying. That day I realized how special those evenings were. I will always be ridden with guilt for not having met her before she died. There is nothing to be done, no dramas to be staged, no memorials to be written, and no eulogies to be read. But I can walk. And I do.

GLOSSARY

Amma: Mother
Bade-Papa: Older Father. A term used to refer to your father’s older brother in some north Indian families.
Gita: One of the most famous and popular of the Hindu religious texts.
Gudia: Doll. A common nickname given to girls in north India.
Hai Ram: Hail Ram. Ram is a famous Hindu God, who is the central protagonist in the Hindu epic Ramayana.
Havan: A prayer ceremony.
Bhajans: Devotional songs.

REFERENCES