

TEMPERAMENT HAPPY HOPE ANGER PAIR JOY GRIEF FEELING FRIENDSHIP LINGS PAIN SMILE FRENZY ENDEARMENT SENTIMENT IMPRESSION DEPRESSION CRAZY SYMPATHY JOY SINCERE CULTURE DESPAIR SMILE DREAMS WORD CULTURE PEOPLE PAIN GRIEF JOY FRIENDS CHAR

# EMOTIONS that EMBELLISHED my DRESS

GRIEF HOPE DESIRE WORD TEMPERAMENT SADNESS SMILE PAIN HOPE HAPPY SYMPATHY DREAMS DEPRESSION ENDEARMENT WORD SADNESS PEOPLE ANGER HAPPINESS RESPECT CHARACTER LOVE SADNESS SMILE PAIN HOPE HAPPY SYMPATHY DREAMS DEPRESSION ENDEARMENT WORD SADNESS PEOPLE ANGER HAPPINESS RESPECT CHARACTER

written and illustrated by

*Musarat Merchant*

## *Musarat Merchant*



was born in Dubai and raised in Mumbai and is currently living in New York City with her family. She is very cultural and cherishes her traditional values. From her dress to her etiquette Musarat

embodies desi Indian culture. She is extremely sweet and dutiful to her parents. Her love for Bollywood movies and songs represent who she is. She is fun-loving and has a cheerful persona. Her name is Musarat and it means happiness. Throughout this book, she is telling a story of how she grew up in different places, wearing these dresses that are incredibly special and close to her heart. Each dress in this book has a memory attached and emotions embellished on it! In every chapter, besides discussing the details of the dresses she mentions all the people close to her heart such as, her family members and close friends.

*To the wonderful women in my life*

my mother,

my late grandmother,

my late great grandmother, my late aunt Saba,

my aunt Heena, my sisters Salma, Shafaq and Humaira

and my best friend Asma.

# Chapter 1



## *My KG School Uniform*

This is the year 2004, and I am just a 5-year-old girl who lives in Mumbai, India. It is my first day of school at the Holy Name High School - a very well-known co-ed Catholic School. I am a Muslim, yet my parents preferred me and my older siblings to study from this school. by now you must be thinking, "why so?" - the reason is because compared to other government schools in India, Catholic schools were highly disciplined so the fact that I got admission in this school based on my merit makes my parents very happy and proud today!

Speaking of discipline, since this is a Catholic school, all of the students at Holy Name High are expected to be seen wearing this school uniform every day, only exceptions were three parties in the year, Diwali, Christmas and Children's Day party. This school was known for its discipline and prestige rules from academic policies till the way the uniform is supposed to be worn.

As a student here, my uniform was supposed to be a properly ironed pinafore with shin high straight socks and jet-black polished leather buckle closure shoes. The color of my pinafore is white but because there are exceptionally fine stripes of sky blue and lilac purple, when viewed from a distance the color of the pinafore appears sky blue. My pinafore has a midnight blue poncho like collar with a piping of the same sky-blue checkered fabric which is used in the rest of my pinafore. On the waist my pinafore had sky blue loops and a white cotton belt that maintained a feminine waistline. Under the belt a skirt which has two pockets on both sides and is slightly above the knee length. This was an ideal length for our school pinafore as it is not easy to run during the Physical Training class wearing a knee length skirt. Also, the skirt has kick pleats in it so there is more comfort and free movement for the wearer.

The accessories I wore with this uniform were my matching white socks with two midnight blue stripes which were also a part of my uniform. Since my hair was cut short, I could not make ponytails, so my mom always had me wearing a headband. As a kid I never liked wearing headbands because all the other girls in my class had long hair and they came to school with nice braided hair or cute ponytails, I wanted to look like them so that I could make them my friends. But without fail, my mom made sure that I wore a headband every day to school because my bangs looked very messy and I had a habit of playing with my bangs. So, to eliminate any distractions my mom made me wear a headband every day until my hair grew so that I could concern more in my classes than on playing with my hair. Other than this my mom has always been very caring and protective of me. I was one of those kids who caught cold very easily so my mom made sure that before leaving the house

she'd take a safety pin and attach a handkerchief on my collar so that I don't end up losing it and have it always!

## Chapter 2



## *The Most Embarrassing Day of My Life!*

It is a regular day at school, I am still in KG. Every day before our school ended my class teacher Ms. Norrin would make us all take out our school calendar/ planner and have us note down the things we were supposed to complete due next class and any important details about upcoming school competitions. There was this one day when before letting us leave after school she told us about a fancy-dress competition which was about to happen in school. She never specified what date, but I remember that she told us that we are supposed to dress up like our favorite cartoon characters or superheroes. At that moment I was so excited that I immediately thought of all the things I wanted to dress up as that I did not listen to what she said when the event was going to be. I was incredibly happy because finally after so many months of wearing that boring uniform I got a chance to wear my fancy clothes on a school day.

Without wasting any time, I went straight home from my school bus and told my mom about what my teacher told before ending the class about this competition. My aunt who was studying fashion design in college at that time was also in the living room when I told about this fancy dress competition to my mom. My mom asked me when was this even and I said I am not sure so my mom thought that it must be the next day because they always tell these things a day before the event. So, my aunt suggested dressing me up as a Barbie Doll for the fancy dress competition. My mom had the perfect dress. The fabric of this dress is extremely special to me because it was gifted to my mother by my grandmother who is resting in heaven right now. When my mom was about to get married to my dad, my grandmother purchased this oxidized golden shimmer fabric with velvet floral motif embossed on it and outlined with brown golden glitter from the Dubai Textile Souk, UAE. My mom used this fabric to make a dress for herself and she used the remaining fabric and made a beautiful sleeveless A - Line Maxi dress for me with a halter neckline. My aunt who was a soon to be fashion designer now used the trims and remaining fabric and made a cute matching purse and a headband for me. Other than the dressing part we were supposed to do something for the talent round so I memorized a few lines from the song Barbie Girl by Aqua.

The next day it was the day for the competition, I remember how confident I was for this as I was looking very pretty and had also memorized the lines to my song for the talent round. I was fashionably late today and that is how I missed my school bus, but no worries my mom dropped me to school. At the gate of the school the watchman named Mr. Mathew saw me wearing fancy clothes instead of wearing my school uniform. He got mad at my mom for not dressing me up in a proper uniform, my mom explained to him that there is a fancy-dress competition for KG students today hence I was wearing that dress. But he said, "there's no



competition today, your daughter is lying". My mom looked at me with anger in her eyes as now she thinks I lied to her. I refused to accept the watchman's false accusations and told my mom to have a chat with my class teacher Mrs. Norrin. Somehow the watchman allowed us to meet my teacher and just like the watchman even she got mad at me and yelled at me. Hearing her loud voice my eyes started watering and my face turned red and within a few seconds I burst out of tears, I was crying and I reminded her that she literally told about this competition yesterday and how can she say I'm lying I had proof I took notes! So, she said that she did say there was going to be a fancy-dress competition for KG students but soon not today. She explained to my mom that I misunderstood her announcement after yesterday's class and told my mom to take me home as it was against the school's rules for a student to sit in the class wearing anything other than a school uniform.

After fifteen minutes of my mom convincing my teacher to excuse me for my misunderstanding today and let me sit in the rest of the class, Mrs. Norrin allowed me to sit in the class. I had stopped crying now, but my heart was still pounding so fast that I could literally hear my loud heartbeats in the silent hallway. I was nervous about how the kids will laugh at me and make fun of me for not following instructions. And that's exactly what happened, I was like the center of attraction to the whole class as I was the only one not wearing the uniform, I remember only my best friend Afra complimented me on how beautiful I looked that day and made me feel better while the rest of the class was busy laughing at the clown a.k.a me!

All this humiliation and embarrassment wasn't enough that after my mom we went home, Mrs. Norrin - the most heartless teacher to ever walk on this planet came up to me and gave me a punishment which lasted till the last day of school for that year. She punished me by not allowing me to wear fancy clothes even on the three party days when every single student at the school gets to wear a dress other than our uniform. She banned me from wearing colorful clothes on all the three parties for the year, Diwali, Christmas, and Children's Day.

I still remember how I watched every single student wearing beautiful colorful clothes at these parties and I had to wear my boring school uniform for all year long and left feeling like an outcast every single time. I studied in this school for eleven years of my life and every year I would pray to God that everyone one forgets that I made his embarrassing mistake in KG. This has haunted me for years and even today till this day I am a 20 year old junior in college I can't forget the embarrassment and humiliation I felt on that day and I pray that none of my classmates mates ever remember me for that day.

# Chapter 3



## *Annual Function' 05 Frock*

It is year 2005, and I am in First grade. I have participated in the annual function. The annual function was the one event in the school where talented students participated and did performances in front of the audiences a.k.a. our parents. Originally, I wanted to be a part of the choir as I have been fond of singing from an incredibly young age and music was my favorite subject in Primary school. But unfortunately, the slots for signing up for the choir were filled out already so I had no option but to pick dancing. Our dance style was salsa, so we were asked to wear a combination of red white and black. The boys were supposed to wear a white button-down long sleeve shirt and a satin red bow with a pair of black trousers and us girls were told to wear any red colored knee length dress / frock with white stockings and black pumps. The school had ordered the costumes beforehand but because of the weather conditions the package was not delivered on time so on the last moment, like one day before the annual function we were told to find our costumes ourselves.

Luckily, mom bought this really beautiful red ballerina frock. Its skirt had many layers, first being the Valentino red satin and then about five or six layers of Valentino red mesh. It was a knee length skirt. The neckline was a crew and it had short puffed sleeves of tissue material. The waist portion had tissue just like Cinderella has on her waistline puffed up tissue. The only problem with the dress was the torso part was black glitter and as the instructions were given the dress had to be all - red.

My mom then came up with a brilliant idea. She had a red lace saree so what she did was she cut the fabric from her old red lace saree and she stayed up all night and stitched that red lace fabric over the black glitter part to hide it. She did all of this when I was asleep. Next morning, I woke up and was surprised to see how beautiful that frock looked now that it was all - red. That red lace really made the frock ten times prettier! My mom has always been highly creative and part of the reason why I am a creative person today is because of my mom. That dress was remarkably close to my heart because it was my favorite shade of red and mainly because my mom stayed up all night to stitch that dress just so I could wear it the very next day in school. Indeed, mothers are the biggest blessing from God!

# Chapter 4



## *My Birthday Outfit*

Every year for my birthday, September 7th - my mom would go and buy me a nice ready to wear outfit. This is a pretty basic outfit for today but the time when my mom gifted me this outfit, this was a huge trend in my country, India. It was my sixth birthday and I was in first grade. My mom gifted me this really beautiful peach color chiffon poncho top with satin lining. The chiffon layer was light, so its edges were embellished with pearls and fringes of ant soft thread with a thick diameter. That trim really added to the beauty of that poncho top and it also created a heavy weight that kept the poncho from flying on my face in an even a strong wind blew. On top of that poncho was a beautiful three-dimensional sunflower patch in the center of the poncho top.

My mom knew that if I liked any flower after roses that would definitely be sunflowers. As a kid I remember going to the public parks to see the sunflowers growing there. One of our neighbors had a sunflower plant on their balcony and I would love to water them whenever I got a chance to do so! Sunflowers made me happy, watching them dancing to the breeze made me want to dance as well, I loved the cheerful vibe of these flowers! If I had a bad day, I would go out in the park and look at sunflowers, my mood would be as bright as its petals after watching them, that is how much I loved sunflowers! My mom knew this and the fact that she remembered these details really showed me how much she genuinely loves me!

Other than that beautiful poncho the rest of my outfit was completed with a set of black bells - bottoms which had the same thing written on both of the bottoms of the pants and it said "always be happy" outlined in peach and tiny sunflowers printed around it.

# Chapter 5



## *Dress with Pain*

It was the month of October; it was very cold outside as winter starts in India from October and ends in January. I believe I was 7 years old, and I was having a terrible toothache. I was crying in pain for most of the day in school, so my class teacher Ms. Ambika Nair called my mom and notified her about my condition. My mom came to pick me up in the middle of the school day and since the class teacher herself saw me in so much pain she let me excuse myself from not working on the homework that was due the next day. We went to the dentist after school and I felt a bit better after taking pain killers.

My mom had warned me about eating too many candies but I have always been a sweet tooth so I didn't listen to her but now I was wishing if only I would've listened to her I would not be in this ouch pain. My aunt who lived just a floor below our apartment came upstairs to our apartment to see me and give me the soup that she prepared for me. The warmth of that soup really made me feel better and to make me feel even better my aunt told my mom about an invitation she got for the evening. Her friend invited her to her youngest daughter's birthday party with her kids. My aunt was an empty nester now as her oldest daughter was married recently and her son left for college. So, she asked my mom if she would not mind if she could take me along with her to this birthday party. She said she needed some company and even I needed something to change up my mood and divert my attention from my toothache. So, my mom said yes to her. Like I said earlier, it was very cold outside and I didn't really have fancy warm clothes so I asked my mom if I could borrow something from my sister's closet who happens to be two years older than me.

My mom gave me permission, so I grabbed this beautiful metallic gray long bishop sleeve A-line short dress made up of rich spun velvet with Peter pan collars. My mom had purchased this dress when we used to live in Dubai, Dera from the famous shopping mall called Al Ghurair Centre. What I liked the most about this dress was that this dress had a matching purse made up of the same fabric which was used to make the dress.

Little did I know that there was a big reason why my sister stopped wearing this dress even though she loved it. I was born in Dubai and so was my sister, ice my sister wore this dress and was incredibly happy and the same day she got hit by a car in the middle of reals and was hospitalized immediately. From that day she had associated this beautiful dress with that bad memory and since then never wore it again. But I did not even know so much about this incident until a few years back.

I wore this dress and I was so happy that I almost forgot all my pain from the toothache that I was experiencing that day. I sat in the car and I closed the car door. I realized that half of

my pretty purse was stuck in the car door and to fix it I opened the door. My uncle standing outside thought I was having trouble with the car door so while my hand was around the area where the door closes my uncle closed the car door real hard this time and guess what next thing I see that three of my fingers of my right hand were bleeding and swollen. So now, even I associate that dress with pain!



# Chapter 6



## *My Secondary School Uniform*

A lot has changed, it is the year 2009 now and I have successfully completed my primary school (4th grade) and I have been promoted to the Secondary section of the school as now I am in 5th grade. My hair grew long now so that I am finally able to tie nice two braids and secure them with a white rubber band. Since I have been promoted to the Secondary section of the school, other than the level of my studies my school uniform has also changed totally.

Now my new school uniform consisted of a bright white half - sleeve, buttoned up, Oxford collar shirt. I am supposed to wear this elephant gray colored tie around my collars with bright yellow stripes on it. The reason why it had bright yellow stripes on it was because our entire school was divided into four color houses, red, blue, yellow, and green and I was a member of the yellow house. On top of both of this shirt and a tie comes what is the heart of this uniform a.k.the pinafore again! Now my pinafore is a sleeveless deep V - necked elephant gray colored, with a belt like closure on my waist line and two pockets on both sides with a box pleated skirt. Now even the color of my socks has changed to elephant gray and it has two bright white stripes on each sock, and I paired these socks with the same jet black polished leather buckle closure shoes.

This new uniform gave me the new sport and confidence to go to school every day. I remember feeling very proud of myself wearing this new uniform as it symbolizes a new chapter in my life and it also reminds me of how far I've come as now it is my sixth year in this same school and I have only 5 more years to graduate for this high school.

# Chapter 7



## *Eid Outfit*

Out of all the days in the whole year, the day I am the most excited about even more than my birthday is the day of "Eid - ul - Fitr" or most known as Ramadan Eid. This day is kind of like a feast or reward for Muslims all around the world who sacrifice their desires in the month of Ramadan while fasting the whole month. Fasting means not being able to eat or drink anything from around 3:30 am. in the morning till the sunset around 7:30pm. in the night, yes not even a sip of water is allowed between this time. After fasting the 30 days of the blessed month of Ramadan, comes the day of Eid.

On the day of Eid, it is a Sunnah (the way prophet did things) of Prophet Muhammad (p.u.b.h) used to wear new clothes since then it has been a tradition that Muslims all around the world follow by wearing a brand new piece of clothing on this blessed day of Eid to celebrate with family and friends. So, every year I plan my Eid outfit for about three months ahead of the day of Eid. When I used to be a kid I'd buy ethnic ready to wear salwar suits from the market but as I grew up and I saw my own sister who is a fashion designer, I started designing my own outfits.

This particular Eid outfit is very special to me as this is the first time, I ever designed an outfit. I remember going to Mangaldas Cloth Market in Mumbai with my mom to shop for all the materials I needed. It is such a big clothing market that there is no easy one won't be able to find their desired fabric. I shopped for zebra printed satin, black Georgette, silver piping lace, gray studded silver broach, hooks, zippers, tick Tak buttons, and neon orange butter crepe for the lining. I went with this bold neon color as it was the year 2014 and neon or bright colors were in the trend! I gathered all these materials and gave them to my tailor so that he could see it before Eid, not at the last minute because I always want to make sure if the fitting is right and I keep extra cushion time in an event the outfit doesn't fit properly in the first fitting. The outfit I designed was a high - low, A - lined kameez. I used the zebra printed satin for the back and the left and right pleat. I also made use of the same zebra printed satin fabric for trims in the long sleeves. The middle pleat was neon orange butter crepe and also for the bodice I used the same neon orange butter crepe, but I asked my tailor to make horizontal pleats for the whole front side of the bodice. It had a crew neckline, a zipper on the back because I wanted this dress to be fitted. I used the black Georgette for its long sleeves and the dupatta (stole). Both the sleeves and the dupatta had trims of the neon orange butter crepe and zebra printed satin stripes. Lastly, I placed the broach in the neon orange butter crepe center pleat of the skirt as an embellishment.

I got a lot of compliments from my friend and family for designing this dress on my own even though I was just fourteen years old at that time, and it was a very proud feeling to wear a dress that I designed myself without even taking any fashion classes!

# Chapter 8



## *When I first wore a "Burqa" (Hijab Dress)*

It's the year 2015, and now I am a 15-year-old young lady. This is the first time when I felt the need to put on a *Hijab* which is an Arabic term for head covering and a *Burqa* which is an Arabic term for hijab dress. Why? Not because my parents didn't force or told me to wear it, I wore it by my choice as I didn't feel safe anymore as a young lady in the streets of India and not just me, at this time every single girl was scared to the core that she might be raped in the road or a bus. In 2012, when a young woman named Jyoti Singh, known as *Nirbhaya* meaning "the fearless one" (as the Indian Law does not permit to use the real name of the victim) was brutally gang raped in a moving bus around 9 pm in the night, in the capital city of India known as New Delhi, the whole nation was devastated, every parent thought that it was not safe for their daughters to take extra classes during the night time or work late in the night.

It was a very dark and scary time for every girl in India, the citizens of India did not even completely grieve the loss of this daughter of India that in 2015 instead of getting to hear the news of justice being served to the young woman who died a very painful death because of her rape case Indians hear an even saddest and utterly disgusting news that an infant girl was raped also. The whole country was shocked. Young girls feared to go out as they would earlier. Many parents stopped sending those daughters to schools for weeks because they feared that their innocent daughter might never come home like *Nirbhaya*.

I felt very scared because of the kind of news that I was hearing every day on news. There was a point where I did not even feel safe to leave the house by myself, I only went out with my older brother or father. After a few weeks, I finally built the courage to walk out of the house on my own but this time I wore a hijab and a *Burqa*. I made sure that every inch of my body was covered. It was a long sleeved, crew neck, maxi length, shift dress. I made sure that its silhouette was shift style as I didn't want the viewer (sick men) to estimate my body measurements and that's the whole point of wearing a *Burqa*. My *Burqa* was incredibly beautiful as it was jet black stretchy and cool fabric and it had self-black colored stones on all over it. When the Sun hits those black stones, they would give a brilliant shine and under the shade it had a matte black look. And I paired this *Burqa* with my black Georgette Hijab.

This *Burqa* was the dress that gave me hope in that time of chaos in the country. This *Burqa* which many people see as a symbol of oppression is what gave me the courage and confidence to walk out of my house on the worst days. Most importantly, I felt very safe and secured whenever I wore that *Burqa*, in a way, it was like my shield - as it protected my body from the evil gaze of some sick men in the society.

# Chapter 9





## *Passed down dress from the one who resides in heaven*

It's the year 2015, and I'm wearing a dress passed down from my aunt Saba, and this is a flashback....In the year 2006, during the winter season, the month of December which is the wedding season in India as many couples decide to marry around Christmas and the New Year's. Our whole family is planning and preparing for a wedding. This is not just any other wedding, this is my *Maasi's* (aunt's) wedding. My Maasi is a fashion designer as of now as she has finished her bachelor's degree in Fashion Design and is now about to get married and settle in her life. This wedding was really special for me as she is my favorite aunt and out of all us four sisters, I was her favorite niece. I remember having mixed emotions at that time as I was very excited for the wedding, that she was going to marry the man she fell in love with and also I was upset that she would leave our home soon as she gets married and move into her in-laws house. I was extremely attached to her as I spent most of my time playing with her so practically, I grew up in her hands.

As it was such a special wedding for our family, my mother's family that lives in Karachi, Pakistan is also invited to this wedding. Her family consisted of her parents (my grandmother and grandfather), her two younger brothers (my uncles) and her little sister Saba who is also my *Maasi* (aunt). My mother and my aunt Heena designed clothes for my oldest sister Salma and my aunt Saba. Both Salma and Saba liked to twin long before twinning was a trend. Both of their outfits had similar fabrics, but totally different designs. The fabrics used were purple satin and purple mesh which gave a shimmery magenta shine whenever the fabric flowed freely. The mesh had beautiful white lilies embossed on it.

My sister Salma's outfit was an A-lined maxi skirt and a V-necked  $\frac{3}{4}$  sleeved satin fitted blouse with a *dupatta* (scarf). Her blouse was made up of purple satin, it had a V-neckline which had trims of the purple mesh around the neckline. It is  $\frac{3}{4}$  sleeves had a small slit on the elbow, such that the elbow could be visible at times and not sometimes, it gave a nice and cute peekaboo look! Those sleeves and the bottom of the blouse were trimmed with a border of purple sequin trim. The *dupatta* (scarf) was simply the purple mesh fabric embossed with white lilies which had purple sequin trims on both ends of the scarf. The skirt was an A-line silhouette, with maxi length, it was also made up of the purple mesh fabric, and the purple satin was used as a lining to put under the mesh here!

On the other hand, Aunt Saba's outfit was a *salwar suit* (a long tunic and balloon pants with a scarf). The fabric used for the *kameez* or tunic was purple mesh on the top and purple satin on the inside as a lining. The tunic had nice flowy bell sleeves with purple sequin trim. My

aunt had a beautiful collar bone, so we gave it a square neckline. The *dupatta* was the same as my sister Salma's outfit. And the balloon pants a.k.a. the "*Patiala*" (extra pleated pants) were made up of purple satin fabric.

As a kid, I've always worn my sister's clothes as I'm a little sister who loves raiding my older sister's closet. When her clothes won't fit her anymore, and my mom had spent too much money on making those clothes, my mom would keep them in a separate closet and as I grew up, my mom used to give me those clothes when they would fit me. I have worn sister Salma's dress later at a wedding of a distant relative. I valued my aunt Saba's dress even more because soon after their family attended the wedding they went back to their country, Pakistan where she had a sudden demise because of her high fever reaching all the way to her brain. After my aunt Saba was no more, every time my grandmother would see her clothes, she would cry and remember the loss of her daughter. My uncle could not see their mother in that depressed state, so what they did was they parceled most of my aunt Saba's clothes to India to our place as I grew up looking the most similar to my aunt. Even today when I do certain things; my parents tell me how they see my aunt Saba in my actions.

When I wore this purple salwar suit of my aunt Saba, and came in front of my mom, she burst in tears, but the tears of joy as now she was seeing a glimpse of her sister who was resting in heaven in me! She came to me and looked at me with immense joy. I still remember how tightly she hugged me as soon as she saw me in her sister's dress. I could hear her loud heartbeats! My mom immediately Skyped her mother in Pakistan and showed her how the dress fit me perfectly. Guess what? My grandmother had the exact same reaction as my mother when she saw me wearing the same dress, tears of joy came running down her cheeks as she started seeing her beloved daughter in me!

I am thankful to God that he gave me a face and habits like my aunt Saba, cause after her sudden death - it was like the world was an empty place for my mom and her mother. I remember when I wore that dress, I felt like I was near my aunt Saba, that dress had her warmth, her playfulness and her elegance! I hope she smiled up there in heaven - when she saw me wearing her dress and looking just like her!

# Chapter 10



## *The dress I wore to celebrate the completion of my SSC.*

The 10th grade is seen as the last year of high school in India. After the completion of the 10th grade / SSC (Secondary School Certificate) one can finally be able to go to college. This was a big event for me as after studying all year long to give the SSC state board exams which tested us on our knowledge in 9 subjects with a cumulative portion, I deserve a break. These exams are the most difficult exams in India as the passing grade is 35% so you can imagine the level of difficulty of these exams. Even to get past that 35% was an achievement in my parents time but for me the level just got harder and now even though the passing was 35%, decent Indian colleges would not accept a student below the average of a 70% score in all of those 9 subjects. Insane right? I was going through a lot of stress; I remember for the whole month of March I had these exams. I started to prepare for these state exams in October as the syllabus was too vast and difficult! After I gave these exams in March 2015, it was my summer recess. It was the first summer of my life that I spent worrying and stressing as the grades were going to be out by mid-June.

Finally, it was the day when my results were going to be posted online! I remember the nervousness and the tension that I felt in that moment as my whole family was sitting next to me, and my cousins were on the call as they were all eager to know if I passed with flying colors or not. So far, my sister Salma was the one in the family who secured a 71% in her SSC so that was the benchmark for me. My mom had already given me a beautiful blue dress as a present as she believed that I will break my sisters record and score the highest in the family as I have been preparing for a long time and have worked very hard on this. Now that my mom had already given me a dress as a gift, I got even more nervous as I was thinking if I do not get the scores which she is expecting, she'd be upset. Nervously, I typed in my ID code and examination Hall ticket number to see my results on the State Board of Education's database. I had shut my eyes as soon as I got the enter key. It was silent for the first two seconds as if the world stopped, but then I heard a loud scream of my sister in the back and then my whole family clapping and cheering. I opened my eyes and I saw that I had passed that exam and guess what? I passed with distinction! I secured a total of 84.60% in my SSC boards and broke all the records of my sister and my cousins. Seeing this accomplishment of mine, my father gave me the money and permission to go out and dine in a fancy restaurant with all my siblings! My mother was thrilled with joy as now with this great average I could easily get into a great Science or Commerce College in India. She hugged me and told me to wear the blue dress she gifted me, for the evening.

As it was the summer season, my mom gifted me this ocean blue long and flowy cotton maxi dress with an A-line silhouette. The dress had a Chinese collar and had three show buttons running down the neckline. The innovative part of the dress was that it was Asymmetrical from the left side and had a long train in the front which was supposed to be tucked up on the waist with a broach that came with the dress. When the broach was pinned properly, it gave the dress a beautiful cowl effect! I remember how stunned my cousins were that evening when they saw me wearing that dress. I loved that dress for two things, first is its material which was extra soft cotton and second was the cowl effect, which in my opinion was the wow factor in that dress! When I wore that dress I felt very proud, as that dress reminded me that I have completed a big part of my education, I had made my parents and myself proud that day - and that was the best feeling ever! Also, the ocean blue color of the dress made me think that just like an ocean, there were endless possibilities of my bright future out there!

# Chapter 11



## *The dress I wore to celebrate our Farewell party'15*

This is the year 2015. It was the end of our 10th grade which is the last year of high school in India. Just like here in the United States, high schools do a prom at the end of the senior year, in India they do something similar called a Farewell party. At the Farewell party most, girls wear a saree or a beautiful evening gown and dress up as graceful women and boys wear four piece suits and dress up as gentlemen. The difference in a prom and a farewell party is that at a farewell party it's not necessary to have a date with you, as the whole point of the farewell party is for you as a student to have the last hours of joy, celebration and having a good time with your batch of senior students, best friends in the high school. It is called a farewell party as after this party, every student leaves the high school building and takes a new road to a college. Most people meet their school friends for the last time in their life as everyone moves to different places for different colleges after completing high school. I remember never seeing many faces after my farewell party because that's how life gets after high school, everyone is busy with their colleges and work. My friends and I were planning on wearing a saree, but because one of my friends could not arrange one, so at the last moment, we all had to change the plan and we decided to wear evening gowns instead. I was going to wear an evening gown that I had designed and worn at my uncle's wedding a few months ago. It was the perfect dress for this occasion of farewell - a dress by which I would be remembered!

The color combination selected for this evening gown were two of my all-time favorite colors both royal blue and baby pink. I added golden shimmer for the lining of the gown. The fabrics I used are as follows: Royal blue and baby pink mesh, royal blue satin, golden shimmer fabric, and a beautiful royal blue mesh velvet floral embroidered lace fabric. I used diamonds and a broach for embellishments. The silhouette of the gown is A-line. The neckline is a broad crew such that my collar bones and jewelry are visible. The sleeves are a full length made up of royal blue mesh. I had my tailor add elastic in the mesh sleeves to give it the ruche or gathered effect, which gave them a more Edwardian and feminine look! The bodice was made up of pleated royal blue satin fabric. The A-line skirt was made up of the royal blue mesh velvet floral embroidered lace fabric which was lined by a golden shimmer fabric. I used baby pink mesh to wrap the gown with an illusionary asymmetrical or tulip wrap. I used diamonds to attach that wrap to the bodice and the best part was the broach in the center of the waistline which gave my skirt a Cinderella dress like effect. I used royal blue satin to give it a long forward pleated ruffle from the waistline to the bottom of the skirt. And lastly, I used the royal blue mesh to make the gather pleats on the bottom of the skirt. I still remember when I walked in the school auditorium, where the farewell party was

arranged. Everyone stared at my evening gown as it was the most fashionable outfit in the room. I worked hard on designing it and it really showed. All my teachers and friends were shocked when I told them that I designed that dress, I must say I have learned a lot about designing from my aunt Heena and sister Salma. I give them all the credit for that dress! I felt the most pretty that day, I felt like a princess after wearing that gown. I never thought I could ever look that pretty! And guess who said that I look like a "real life Barbie today"? It was Mrs. Norine, my class teacher from KG, who gave me that compliment. Yes, she is the one teacher I hated the most as she punished me for not wearing fancy clothes for a whole year when I accidentally wore it in KG. Out of all the compliments, I loved her compliment, the fact that she still remembered that I dressed up as a Barbie for a fancy-dress competition in my first year at this school meant everything to me! I feel really touched when people remember little things about me, and Mrs. Norine did remember me!



# Chapter 12



## *My First Eid in New York City*

This is still the same year 2015, but with a big twist. As of now, it has been a month since me and my whole family have moved to New York, United States. We live in Jackson Heights, Queens. Normally on every “*Eid*” (a Muslim festival), all of my cousins and their parents would come over to our place so that all of us could celebrate the day of Eid together as one big happy family! But this year Eid was not the same for any of us as we were all continents apart.

Just like every Eid, I had my outfit ready. To me, Eid is more than just a day when everyone dresses up and wears designer clothing. To me the day of Eid was more about having a great time with my family, it was all about sharing love and affection, celebrating togetherness, and making memories! So, this year, now that I was so far away from home (Mumbai, India), Eid did not feel like Eid anymore. I felt lonely and empty inside as I did not have my loved ones by my side. This is why I didn't even feel like dressing up for this occasion, but I did only because it's “*Sunnah*” (tradition/ way of the Prophet Muhammed) to adorn oneself with their new/ best clothes on the day of Eid.

My Eid outfit this time is a beautiful red and black A - lined gown. It has a stunning black velvet bodice with gold “*zardozi*” embroidery on it. *Zardozi* comes from two Persian words “*zar*” meaning gold and “*dozi*” literally means sewing. This is a type of heavy and elaborate metal embroidery which is normally done on a silk, satin, or velvet fabric base. The sleeves are made up of cherry red colored lace fabric with gold satin trim on the cuffs. The skirt of the gown has roughly about forty to fifty pleats. The center pleats of the skirt are made from a cherry red colored georgette fabric and the rest of the skirt is made up of tomato red colored georgette fabric. Just like the cuffs, this A - lined skirt has a gold satin trim on its border.

Normally on Eid, all of us would go out in the evening, but since we recently moved here in New York City, we didn't really know a nice place, so we stayed home. I met my cousins like every Eid, but through a WhatsApp video call this time! They were incredibly happy to see us dressed in our ethnic attire even though we moved here to the United States. I myself was shocked to see the Indian, Bengali, and Pakistani families in my apartment building wearing ethnic attire as I didn't expect that people here follow such traditions. I was upset before that I was not able to celebrate this auspicious festival with the rest of my family, but after I saw my neighbors celebrating just the way we used to back home, finally I smiled. I was glad that I could at least see my family back home through technology. So, in this way, this outfit has many mixed emotions attached to it.

# Chapter 13



## *The Dress I Wore at My Sister's "Shaadi" (Wedding)*

Fast forward three years, it is my sister's wedding day, July 24th, 2018. It is my oldest sister Salma's wedding and we are all extremely excited as this is the first wedding in our family. I have three sisters and a brother who is the oldest. Out of all of us siblings, Salma *Appi* (sister), is the strongest of all. I respect her a lot as she is my oldest sister, and in our culture the oldest sister is next to a mom. I have a special bond with her, as there were nights when I've fallen asleep in her lap peacefully. And there were days when she cooked food for me and fed me just the way my mother would do. Just like my mother, she is strict and disciplined and this is why when I was young, I felt that she was too hard on us. But later in life, as I grew up I realized that the reason why she was always so tough on me to do better was to make sure that I didn't end up on the wrong path and focus on my goals and studies. Today, I am very thankful for all the times she guided me when I went wrong, I would not have been the woman I am today without her guidance!

Today is a very special day for my whole family as we have been planning for this day for pretty much all of our lives! Whenever we would see a wedding or some celebration on the television or *Bollywood* movies, we would plan to do the same thing for my older sister's wedding. The night before her wedding, according to the ancient Indian tradition to apply henna on the bride's hands. So, since me, myself, and my older sister Shafaq are both certified professional henna artists, both of us applied bridal henna on Salma Appi's arms and feet. Next morning, we went to the salon and got our makeup done. We reached the hall in the evening, my father and my older brother were welcoming the guests, while my mother and us daughters were setting up flowers for the occasion.

My outfit is very special not because it is a Pakistani bridal suit, but because this outfit is picked by Salma Appi. Since childhood, she has always been my stylist. She picked this gown for me and suggested that I should get a Cinderella-like hairdo for the night. She was not wrong, and never has been in styling me, I remember how pretty much every other guest at the wedding complimented my look and especially my natural bun hairdo. I am wearing a gorgeous pink modified A-Line, floor length gown, fully embroidered with *Zardozi*. The gown has a midi length jacket on it that is enclosed with two gold ribbons that tie up together. The bottom of the ribbon is embellished with beautiful gold tassels studded with diamonds. The gown has a pink dupatta (stole) with it and I preferred to wrap it around my elbow this time rather than wearing it typically on my neck as I was wearing heavy studded bridal jewelry on my neck and ears. Also, I was wearing matching pink and golden bangles to sum up the look!

Both my dress and jewelry were very heavy to carry, but there was something which was heavier than both things - it was my heart. Watching my sister getting married and moving to a totally different state, Texas was very heavy for my heart. I was experiencing a bittersweet feeling, as on one hand I was so happy to see my sister getting married in a great family and on the other hand I was sad that now my home would be empty without her in it.

# Chapter 14



## *The Dress I Wore When I Met an Angel*

This is the year 2019, I am invited to a wedding festivity of my mother's friend's daughter Zeba. I call her Zeba *Didi* (sister) out of respect as she is almost the same age as my older sister. This was a musical night and the groom's family arranged it.

I remember the groom's side of the family giving out "*gajras*" (fresh jasmine garlands) to all the female guests including me and my friends. A "*gajra*" is a very significant hair accessory for every Indian woman as Hindu goddess wore them to decorate their hair. Also, it is an ancient tradition of Indian women to wear a flower garland on their hair on special occasions, this is why the female guests were given these garlands and were asked to tie it on their hair or wear on their wrists as a floral bracelet. They accidentally gave me an extra garland so I had two of them instead of one, so I decided to wear one on my hair and the other on my right wrist.

Since this was not the actual wedding, I wanted to go simple with my outfit but at the same time I wanted to wear a statement piece. So, I was wearing this stunning red saree dress with gold *zardozi* and rhinestones embellished on it. This dress was special for me as I never wore a saree in my life, and this is the closest thing I wore to a saree. Just like a saree, this dress had a "*pallu*" (cowl gathered one sided drape) this "*pallu*" and the left shoulder were heavily and embellished and the rest of the dress was plain red cotton fabric. I loved the fact that this dress was made up of cotton as it was one of those warm nights in June. What makes this dress so special is what memories I made that night attached to it.

Every time I see a celebration in which all families come together and have a good time, I think of all the memories I made back home with my cousins and their families. It hurts me that I haven't been able attend any of my cousin's weddings back home, moreover, I haven't even been able to see their kids, as they were born after I moved here. So, watching everyone with their families and kids running around got me emotional and was almost about to cry, but I didn't as I heard a little boy's voice that touched my heart. As I said, there were kids playing and running around, one of those kids was this two-year-old beautiful boy who spoke *Hindi* aka my mother tongue. I was so happy and surprised to see a kid that young speaking *Hindi* so fluently! Normally, kids here do not speak any language other than English so I always feared that one day my kids might also be like one of those who are not interested in learning the language of their culture. To me culture is very important! I love it when people embrace where they come from and value their culture! So, when I saw this kid running around, hopping, playing, and laughing, it looked like a bundle of joy and positive energy to me! I looked in his eyes, they twinkled like stars! And his smile! *Masha Allah!* (an expression of appreciating something beyond beautiful in Arabic).

I was very impressed by this kid, so I called him and asked him his name. He said his name is Abdullah and immediately he asked me to play with him. I told him I had no toy to play with him, so he removed the "*gajra*" (fresh jasmine garland) from my wrist, balled it up and told me to play catch with him. He was so cute that I could not say him no and so I started playing with him. In that moment I remember I felt a next level of joy, as I forgot all my worries and sadness. Truly kids are angels! I totally lost track of time as I was so happy playing catch with him until it was almost an hour and his mom came to take him as they were leaving. Turns out, his mom was a lady I met a few days ago, in some previous wedding event.

I do not know why but, I felt a strange kind of bond with this kid from the moment I heard his voice! It felt like I have known this kid forever, and from that day I decided that I will love this kid as much as I love my nieces. Today, Abdullah is not just a cute kid I met a year ago, I call him my nephew! And every time I wear this dress, it reminds me of the day I met this angel.



# Chapter 15



## *My 20th Birthday Outfit*

This is the year 2019, September 7th and today is my 20th birthday! Fortunately, my birthday was on a Sunday, so I was able to celebrate it with my whole family and my high school best friend Asma. I remember how as every birthday my family surprised me with a cake cutting ceremony on 12 on the dot. My phone was flooded with messages and missed calls from my close friends and relatives from back home and here. Next day, I went to meet my best friend Asma. I remember that I was more excited about finally getting to meet her after 6 months, than celebrating my birthday, as we could not meet all summer as she spent her summer in Pakistan attending her sister's wedding.

Asma and I share an incredibly unique bond. I still remember how we first met in the high school cafeteria. It is crazy how a random conversation about halal food options, gave me and Asma a best friend for life in each other. Even though we went to the same high school, we never had classes together, yet we maintained our friendship for so many years and will keep it strong forever. Since we did not have any classes together, the only easy we could meet was in our lunch on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Later in senior year, we could not even meet each other in lunch break, so what she would do is that, she would skip her Cinema class and come and sit next to me in my Cartooning class. Our teachers were okay with it as she already took that class in junior year with that teacher and due to program errors, she was accidentally a student again in that class. My Cartooning teacher, Mr. Frank Giella was a very fun teacher, so far, I can tell he is the best teacher I ever had as he was very funny and cheerful. He noticed that I was a good student and as I was an introvert, I barely talked with anyone in the class. When he saw me talking to Asma, he was shocked to see that I talk and talk a lot actually! Mr. Giella also noticed how we would wait for each other after school to go home together. He noticed our bond and saw how happy I used to be in class from Asma's presence, so he happily welcomed Asma to come in our class and sit next to me.

So far now we are both in college, on this day we are both Junior's in college. So after so long I was very happy to see her. Getting to see her after so long was itself a big gift for me on my birthday! As usual, Asma and I planned out outfits, she was very ethnic clothes and I was wearing Western clothes this time! I wore this stunning fuchsia one shouldered asymmetrical top with voluminous ruffles by Fashion Nova. I layered this top with a black long-sleeved lace top by H & M and enclosed it with a black and golden belt by Express on my waist to give this outfit some more details. I paired this with black skinny jeans and black suede chunky heeled loafers embellished with gold spikes. I was wearing these long black beaded duster earrings by Forever 21. This dress reminds me of the good times we had and the memories we made that day! She really made sure that I enjoyed every second of my birthday! What more can I say? I am blessed to have a best friend like her! To me she's more

than just a best friend, she is a sister that I got to pick myself! She plays an especially important role in my life as she always helped me out when I was struggling, even when I was confused like most high school seniors are while deciding their major. I was stuck between choosing nursing or business as my major in college. But since she was my best friend, she noticed something that I did not. She told me that she sees that I have an eye for fashion just like my sister by the way I dressed up. She was the one who suggested me to major in the Business and Technology of Fashion, at the New York City College of Technology and to be honest, I love what I am studying, and I can't thank her enough!

# Chapter 16



## *The Dress That I Will Always Treasure!*

On my 20th birthday, Asma gifted me a dress. What made this dress so special was the fact that she bought this dress for me on her trip to Pakistan with her first paycheck! How sweet is that? I remember how she told me that she was volunteering in a hospital for community service and was getting paid half the minimum wage for it since it was for school credit, so it means a lot to me that she spent all the money she earned from that job to get this beautiful dress for me as my birthday present. And therefore, I titled this chapter as *"The Dress That I Will Always Treasure!"*

She told me that when she went out for her sister's wedding shopping, she saw this dress on the mannequin in a store and the mannequin resembled my body proportion so it reminded her of me and she thought how perfectly that outfit would fit me! She knew that I didn't have any dress in purple so when she saw that this dress was in purple and also of my size, she couldn't stop herself from buying it for me. The fact that she went out to shop for herself and ended up spending her money on that dress for me, itself means a lot to me! It really shows me how she remembers me even when I am not around her. This proves how much she really loves me, and I am very grateful to have a best friend like her.

The full outfit was in a rich purple color, this outfit had three pieces. First, an A-lined pleated chiffon midi length frock, whose bodice is fully embroidered with *"zardozi"* and also, the bottom trim of the frock is heavily embellished with red stones and gold embroidery. Second, the pants are made from a satin fabric and have gold floral embroidery on it. Third, the long *dupatta* or stole is made from chiffon fabric and just like the frock and the pants, one side of the *dupatta* has a thick border of *"zardozi"* embroidery.

I wore this outfit when we were hosting a religious gathering at our house. So instead of wearing the *dupatta* on my neck or shoulders as I would normally wear, I wore it on my head. Head covering is a part of my religion, so this made the outfit perfect for this gathering. When I wore this dress, its purple color reminded me of the dress that was passed down to me after my Aunt Saba passed away, so it gave me some flashbacks of her and I felt sad for a while. But later, I cheered up because I remembered that my best friend gave this dress to me as my 20th birthday present and I should not be sad wearing it.

# Chapter 17



## *Finally, I Got to Wear A Saree!*

All my life I wanted to wear one thing and it was a "saree". As I said in previous chapters that I was very close to wearing a saree but then because of change of plans I wouldn't get a chance to put it on. That day, I was attending a friend's wedding, so it was the perfect occasion to put on a *saree*. I remember how my mother would never let me wear a *saree* as it would make her cry seeing me dressed up as a woman. So, I remember being extremely excited to wear this *saree*. Even though I am 20 years old now, I still do not think that I can handle a regular Indian *saree*, so I ordered this easy to wear ready-made (already pleated) *saree* for this wedding from Pakistan.

This *saree* is fully made from heavy silver sequin fabric, so it was a perfect outfit for attending a wedding at a royal palace. Speaking of royal, I wanted to give this *saree* a grand look. Originally, this *saree* came with a white satin  $\frac{3}{4}$  sleeves blouse, but I thought that white would look too simple. So, I incorporated a mock neck royal blue puffy cowl effect long sleeved satin blouse with this *saree*, to give it a modern twist! For the accessories, I was wearing long silver earrings and a silver necklace with rhinestones and sapphires studded on it, silver diamond studded bangles and the most precious accessory to this dress was undoubtedly my great grandmother's sapphire ring!

That sapphire ring was passed down from my great grandmother to her daughter in law (my grandmother) and then she passed it down to my mother. I remember that after I got ready and came out in the living room, my father was looking at me from head to toe for about a good 30 seconds non-stop! I was confused so I enquired if something looked odd or extra? He shook his head with tears in his eyes and said, "No *beta*, (child) I'm just looking at how fast my little girl grew up! And now in a few years you'll get married because now you have turned into a beautiful woman from my little girl". He got super emotional when he saw me in this *saree* as this was the first time, I was wearing a *saree*. Watching dad get all emotional, my mother immediately went to her bedroom, opened her jewelry box, and gave this ring to me! She said, "she was waiting for the day I grow up so that she could pass on the ring to me". This sapphire ring is not even that expensive but the fact that it was treasured for three generations, is what makes it one of the most valuable accessories I have as of today! I cannot wait to pass down this ring to my own daughter someday!