

## THE INHERITANCE

*By Sanam Maher*

Soon, it will be six months since my mother passed away. In the days after she was buried, my sisters and I began to divide her belongings amongst us. Over the years, she had given us most of what was valuable—a watch from the year I was born, paper-thin round gold earrings with turquoise stones set in a webbed pattern, a milky blue and pink opal pendant—when we got married. And so what remained to be sorted through were a lot of clothes. In my pile was a paper bag filled with photographs and a handpainted silk chiffon dupatta.

The dupatta is a sunny yellow, covered in purple, orange, and pink flowers and green leaves. It is 25 years old and was worn with a kameez of the same print. I cannot remember any specific occasion when my mother wore this, but I can close my eyes and instantly return to her bedroom, to watching her get dressed for a dinner party as she listened to Jagjit Singh *ghazals*. It sounds garish, I know—bright yellow isn't the easiest colour to carry off, and a yellow covered in swirls of colour? But she made it work, pairing that yellow outfit with crimson lipstick, bracelets and bangles, and two necklaces, her dangling earrings on full display since she had cut her hair in a boyish crop, rings on both hands.

Over the years, as my mother struggled with mental health, invitations to dinner parties dried up, occasions to dress up were fewer, and that yellow kameez was lost somewhere. She became a person who could not be trusted to take care of handpainted chiffon dupattas, and so what is now mine is a little worn, with the tang of unwashed clothes, a bit crumpled, specks of an old stain here, a tear with feathery frayed edges there.

Our relationship suffered with her health. We didn't talk for a long time. The person I knew was gone, and in her place was an imposter, one I did not have anything to do with. I felt this until the day she died.

As I went through the packet of photographs that came with the dupatta, I found myself looking closely at her. Most of the pictures were taken before I was born. I love that blazer, I thought, looking at a photograph of her in Greece. Another photo—that's a great bag.



I paused at a picture taken on a boat. Don't I have that same shirt? In another, she is wearing sandals exactly like a pair I had worn down to the sole last year. Every summer, I buy cotton blockprinted salwar kameezes by the armful, the only clothes bearable in the heat, and here she was, wearing them decades before they became fashionable. The prints and colours were variations of the ones in my closet.

Do you have a person, an ideal self, that you have always imagined when you picture yourself at your most put together? Perhaps she is a model in a magazine or an actress. A woman you spotted on the street and never forgot or someone on Instagram whose posts you save because this right here is how you would like to present yourself to the world. There, in those photographs, was the woman I had been imagining for years. It had felt so natural to follow her cues that I never questioned where the instinct was formed.

Sometimes what you inherit has been yours all along. It is not an opal pendant or a string of pearls. It may not be plain to see—how tall you are, the curl of your hair, or the shape of your hands—but it is there, under your skin, carried with you even when you thought you cut the threads that bound you to it. *Sanam Maher is the author of The Sensational Life and Death of Qandeel Baloch (Aleph Book Company)*