

SHROUDS OVER EDEN

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the hurting women I have met and whose stories I have heard; whose tears have left an indelible impression on my heart. As I held them in my arms, wiped away their tears and listened to their stories, sometimes all I could do was listen. This book tells their stories, their heart's cries to be treated with love and respect.

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pages so that the reader could be blessed, encouraged or just informed. I thank Leslie Precht, Joanna Gill and Stewart Brown for editing my book.

Chapter 1 – Baraka Colony

'Home is where your story begins...' Annie Danielson¹

I grew up in Baraka Colony with its crowded, narrow, dirty streets and rundown homes made of brick and mortar left dilapidated after years of use and lack of finances for repairs. Decaying structures, which once stood tall and elegant, now crumble alongside shanties and lean-tos. See, that is my childhood home over there along the narrow path between the concrete and brick walls that somehow pass for a street. The street is so narrow that you almost touch passersby. This can pose a real problem in our community if the passerby is male because girls and boys who are not related to each other cannot touch. Taboos against touching are so strictly enforced in some ethnic groups in our colony that if a man and woman are to pass in one of our narrow streets, the man will turn and face the wall and wait until the woman passes by. This tradition is to show respect, for he should not even look upon a woman he is not related to, let alone touch her.

The name Baraka is ironic because there isn't anything blessed about this place. The buildings are old and crumbling, garbage lies in rank heaps on the streets. Rickshaws, bicycles and motor bikes weave in and around pedestrians. The narrow streets are always crowded with people, some going somewhere and others nowhere. Young men loiter in the streets smoking cigarettes or high-grade hashish (*charas*) and idle away their time. The smells of rotting garbage and open sewers invade the nostrils as one dodges garbage, piles of broken rocks or bricks and other obstacles. The one thing that can be said about this community is that it is not a façade. There are no aesthetic facelifts to hide the dread of going home to the dysfunctional life behind house walls. You might say that here, what you see is what you get; there is no camouflage, unlike what happens outside in the subdivisions where beautiful entrances grace the front of grand homes, but a walk to the back of the house reveals bleak peeling plaster covering the surface. Perhaps it is reflective of what goes on behind closed doors where violence against the weak and vulnerable also exists. Dysfunction happens everywhere in our society; but the rich masquerade it in swaths of posh dwellings, visits to beauticians and excessive wardrobes.

I find that nothing has changed here for decades. Oh yes, over time the people have come and gone, babies were born, the old died, and some escaped the squalor for a better life somewhere only to be replaced by others that couldn't afford anything better. But the values, customs and beliefs have remained for the next generation who have taken up residence in the old family home so that the same norms are repeated generation after generation. But more about conventions later. First let me finish my tour of this community I called home for forty-five years.

As I said, our house is down that narrow alley. Come let me show you my home. The gate hasn't changed in a hundred years; it still rests on one hinge and is desperately in need of paint. The once new key lock hasn't worked for as long as I can remember so padlocks come and go. In a place like this, gates must always be locked for fear of intrusion by unworthy sorts who will steal, kill or molest at whim. And as a woman it is absolutely necessary to lock the gate if by chance you are alone. I guess locking gates and doors is good practice in any country, but here women and children are most vulnerable to attack.

Past the gate you can see the tiny courtyard where life took place. My mother cooked on the dung- and wood-burning pit over there in the corner. The holes on the outside wall are still there, letting cold winter draughts into the one room that served as the bedroom and sitting room for our family of six. That small cemented four-by-four structure in the corner served as our bathroom. Oh, look! The washstand with its broken faucets still rests precariously against the wall. If you are wondering how six people slept in one room, well they did. Mats would be laid out on the dirt floor, side-by-side until almost the whole floor was covered in rough mats and one quilt. The smallest always had to share one of these narrow mats. It made for very close sleeping quarters.

But come, I must show you my favourite place of all, my very own secret hiding place. See that little crawl space next to the gate? We used it to store dung or wood for the fire and this is where I would crawl into when my father beat my mother, which was often. Sometimes he hit her so hard that her lips would bleed and her eyes would be black and blue. One time he even broke her ribs because he hit her so hard she fell against a wooden bed frame. Every time he hit her and I heard her plaintive wails, ‘No, no’, and her cries of terror, I would run to this place behind the pile of dung and wood, crouch down on my haunches, cover my ears with my hands and bury my face into my knees. As the terror in our courtyard continued, I would escape to the garden in my mind. It is here that the shrouds would be lifted to reveal a world I had never known. I would stay in the garden until the beatings stopped and my father either fell asleep drunk or stormed out into the street to meet his cronies. Then I would crawl out and go to my mother and comfort her, as only a child can. We would hold each other tight and she would stroke my hair, crying, saying, “Oh Sonu, everything will be alright,” even though we both knew that nothing would ever be right. She always called me by the nickname she gave me, Sonu. She never called me by my given name, Shagufta. I didn’t like the name Shagufta although it had a decent meaning: affection. She, and my friend Naila, and oh, yes, Mama in the big house, were the only ones to call me Sonu. Everyone else called me Shagufta.

Even as I grew older, before I got married and left home, I would comfort my mother, wipe her wounds, get her a cup of tea and then lie down beside her, both of us filled with sorrow and dread waiting for the next time it would happen again. You might well ask, why didn’t she ever leave this misery? But where would she go? And why would she leave?

It was unthinkable that my mother would have left my father. A woman must be under the roof of a male figure, father, husband or brother. Only bad, immoral women are not tied to a man. If my mother had left my father, she would have been considered a bad woman and everyone would have talked about her. She would bring shame to her parents. The honour she would bring to her family and to herself by staying is very important. Being someone’s wife gives a woman in our society high standing, it doesn’t matter whether she gets beaten or not, but she is a wife. That is what is so important: a matter of prestige. She would certainly have been unhappier if she had left. Secondly, who would look after her, financially, that is? My mother was uneducated, so she couldn’t get a decent job. She had little choice but to stay for the abuse; it made her a “good woman”.

The stairs up lead to another “residence” where another tenant lived. Come, let’s go up to the top. Be careful, the stairs are old, narrow and steep, and there are no railings to hang onto. Ah, here we are at the top, and here is the place in which our upstairs neighbours lived. Their residence wasn’t really that—just a large storage room on the roof; barely enough to make a sort of shelter from the rain and cold and the scorching rays of the sun. And because it is located on the roof and the walls are thin, their home was a summer furnace and a winter icebox.

The lady did her cooking outside here on an open fire. In fact, you can still see the black soot marks on the roof where she did her cooking. This fire area would also act as a place to circle around in the winter to warm up on cold winter nights. There is no bathroom up here, so we had to share ours.

Few in this colony owned their own place but rented from landlords who cared nothing about fixing a place up so it would be livable. Broken faucets and crumbling walls were not our landlord's concern. His only concern was collecting his rent every month. He never came but sent out servants to collect the rent. Because many in our colony earned so little, renters couldn't always pay their rent. This brought on the extra burden of living with the fear of eviction. Poverty has its many woes.

Up here on the roof you get a good view of Baraka Colony. Look around you—poverty and squalor surround you. This is one of the poorest communities in the entire city. Few are educated, so cleaning and menial labour jobs are generally the only kinds of jobs people here can get. Even who you are makes a difference in getting a long-lasting job with an employer who will treat you well. For example, see that bright pink building over there? That is where the old man John lived with his wife, seven children and aged mother. He worked as a sweeper in a government school. He didn't make a lot of money. It certainly wasn't enough to feed so many mouths, but it was a steady income. When he retired, his position was given to his eldest son. You could say that it is a kind of "insurance policy" that ensures an income comes into the family after retirement or the employee's death. A child in the family inherits the position. There is a sort of self-congratulatory smugness on the part of the rich that their charity has done the poor sweeper a great favour. Although this "retirement benefit" will help the family, this practice further entrenches that the poor remain in their assigned position in society. Upward mobility in this community seldom happens; the merry-go-round goes around and around where very few get off. Although people say that caste doesn't matter, that all should be treated equal regardless of caste, reality speaks a different language. Caste and religion determine who eats from which plates, who associates with whom, who marries whom, who works for whom and the list goes on and on.

Not only are we poor, but Baraka was and still is overcrowded, a slum that grows daily. Even today the numbers swell and overspill the tenement housing. Often families crowd into one room or build a lean-to in whatever nook or cranny they can find. Rural folks, desperate for a better life come to the city but often don't find their dream. One such person was Ashi. Her husband had married another woman and Ashi was unable to live with him any longer. She brought her four children to the city where every single moment of her existence was a struggle for survival. She found a small room in Baraka Colony and started life there as a single mother. Being uneducated with no employable skills, she took on cleaning jobs in people's homes. Sometimes she would try to hold down three or four cleaning jobs at a time and still find time to run her household and look after her growing children. Seeing the importance of education, she scraped, begged, borrowed and lied to put her children through school. At night on the way home after a long day of cleaning the homes of the wealthy, she would find bottles or other salvageable garbage to sell so she would have money to buy a few groceries for the evening meal. Oftentimes her cupboards were bare. Such is the plight of many who come in from the villages, especially single mothers who have been abandoned by their husbands for a younger bride.

But back to the family that lived above us—the woman was so sweet, always gentle, quiet and hard-working. She had to be because she and her husband had four children, and her husband, like many of the men in our colony, was a drug addict. Our country has more heroin

addicts than any other, and men also take opium, so it seems every family has an addict. She cleaned houses during the day and then would come home to cook for her husband and children. After finishing up household chores, often late into the night, she would embroider shawls for sale in the market. She made so little from these shawls that sold for exorbitant prices in the market, but she was thankful for the few coins she was tossed for her beautifully embroidered work. Sadly drug addicts need to buy drugs; it is their life, their passion, so he would ask his wife for money to buy heroin. If she refused because she had to buy food, he would beat her, take the money and go get his fix; no matter if his children didn't eat, but he got what was most important to him.

She was a very frail lady with a face like all the other ladies in our colony; dry wrinkled skin aged beyond her years, with eyes sunk deep into dark hollow sockets, sad, haunting eyes that spoke volumes about years of pain, hardships and abuses. If you were to touch her hands, the palms were rough and calloused from hard, menial work. She was the epitome of all the ladies in our colony.

Once when I went upstairs to play with the youngest daughter, I saw her husband passed out on the floor. As I looked at him, it appeared that he turned into a terrible monster. He was a locust with the face of a man but had teeth like a lion. On his chest was a breastplate of iron and a tail like a scorpion. That scene was so terrifying that I fled, stumbling down the stairs so fast and I dashed straightaway to my hiding place. It was so hideous, so fearful and so dark. What kind of spirit was this man? Or was this my imagination or was it real? Had I seen a demon?

Now let's walk around a bit so you can understand our neighbourhood better. Down this way to your left is the market. Shops fit into here and there with no organised street plan. No engineers came to survey and make a carefully laid out blueprint to be followed diligently by meticulous workmen. Such are the shops that haphazardly line the jumble of irregular streets sprung up overnight with no more thought into planning than that which was used to build streets. Years ago, streets in my country took shape around one shop and soon a village was born, then the city developed from there. Someone sets up a tea stall next to a grain merchant. Then the hawkers come and set up snack stalls and stores and so on and so on. Such is Baraka Colony, put together long before city building codes, bylaws and development authorities.

Some of the shops remain the same, not even changing hands; they stay in the family. If the parents have died, their children now run the shops. You can find anything and everything in Baraka Colony; ladies and gents tailors, vegetable and fruit vendors, small grocery shops, bicycle repair shops, furniture factories and shops—you name it, it is here. Oh, and there is the building where Sidra's dad ran a very successful meat shop (I'll tell you about Sidra later). Sidra's dad died years ago, so their son Arif runs it now. The quality and service aren't as good anymore. Arif is lazy, not hard working like his dad.

This hodgepodge of streets weaving in and out, going here and there, is home to every ethnic and religious group in our nation. Poverty is what draws all together, not necessarily in chosen companionship but out of the common bond of poverty in which we are lumped together. It sometimes makes for tensions in the streets because the brotherhood of man is non-existent in a state where conflicts are drawn on lines of ethnic and religious diversity. So, Baraka Colony has its quarters where one group will live together in an attempt for ethnic or religious commonality. But during the day, everyone spills out into the same streets. It really does make for a very interesting community.

Now if we go way to the end, you will see a government hospital, Godfrey's Hospital. People in Baraka Colony can't afford good doctors and medical services, so they go to these cheap

government hospitals; but the doctors aren't any good and they don't care. They don't get paid much at the hospitals so they all have their own private practices. That means they are often not on duty or are careless in their treatment of patients. Some of them aren't even real doctors. If you ask to see their papers from a good medical college, they wouldn't even be able to produce them. I know of one hospital called Surgical Hospital where the lady who claims to be a doctor has just taken a three-month basic health care training and now practices medicine. Of course, that means lots of malpractice, but they still operate. If the people you treat are uneducated and poor, how can they argue with the doctor? How can they fight the medical system? They are poor and illiterate and don't have enough knowledge or power to fight a faulty health care system.

So this gives you a glimpse into the colony, but I can't leave the Colony without sharing a bit about life outside of Baraka Colony. Our colony faces a place called Babloo Chowk where life is never dull—it, too, is crowded and teeming with life! Streets overflow with cars, rickshaws and donkey carts. The overloaded carts are too heavy for donkeys to pull but their masters don't care because they need to forge a living, and the poor donkeys are driven to an early death, or they end up so crippled and misshapen that they are no longer of use. The city had made the street wider so that it could handle more traffic but now there is just more traffic. Horns blare, people weave in and out of traffic and beggars hover over vehicles at every intersection begging for their daily income. The street hawkers call out their wares. Here's a cart with goldfish in clear plastic bags filled with water and tied tightly with string. Over there are vendors selling delicious snacks like *gol gappai*, *channa snack* and *samosas*. Fruit and vegetable vendors are everywhere, and cars park wherever the driver can find a spot, even out in traffic if need be.

Sometimes Naila, my best friend, and I would take a few coins and go to the chowk and buy some snacks, or we might meet some friends from the colony and laugh and talk and forget for a few minutes the reality of home. We would sit there and watch the passersby. One never sees girls dressed like in the movies because our community is very conservative. It is very important for women, especially young girls, to cover their entire bodies so as not to attract men. And you don't see young girls walking by themselves; that is what immoral girls do; so, the women on Babloo Chowk always walk in twos and threes.

When I was young, what really fascinated me about Babloo Chowk was seeing women drive. It was not the fact that they were driving but how they drove. They were so aggressive. One day a policeman stopped a woman about some traffic violation. She got out of the car and swore at him and threatened him and then got into her car and drove away. Another day Naila and I saw a lady park her car beside a man in the parking area. When she pulled out to leave, she scraped the man's brand-new car. He approached the woman about the damage, but she yelled at him and said it was his fault. When another driver came to support him, she said to the man, "Move or I will drive over you." She would have, too. Is it possible that these rich women who drive cars don't get beaten by their fathers or husbands? I mean they are the ones threatening the men in our society! Or do they vent their frustration and pain from the abuse they receive by hitting back at society with the power derived by driving a powerful machine?

Chapter 2 - The Garden

'The many great gardens of the world, of literature and poetry, of painting and music, of religion and architecture, all make the point as clear as possible: The soul cannot thrive in the absence of a garden'. — Thomas More²

Before I tell you anything more about Baraka Colony and its medley of residents, I must tell you about the garden, the one I sometimes fled to when life in the colony became too unbearable. It was so beautiful, enchanted really, when you think about it, because it was so different from my reality.

I think what was so surreal about the garden was the brightness, better than any sunshine, a soft, embracing warm sunshine that made you feel loved and wanted. The sheer beauty of the place was picture perfect, flawless, beautiful beyond description, a wonderland.

In the centre of the garden was a great white throne and One who sat on it. The throne was like white flames of fire and the One wore raiment of pure white, white as snow. This One had hair like white wool. The brightness from this One was so great that there was no need for a sun in the garden for the One illuminated everything. Thousands upon thousands of people were standing before him, singing joyous melodies. Every time I came to the garden I was mesmerised by the enticing light, love and power that emanated from this throne. It was majestic love enthroned!

This was not the only throne. There were two of them, the great white one for the One and a second throne stood on the right side of it. This throne was for Lamb who sometimes sat on it. It seemed he had a lot of authority. Usually though, Lamb could be found seated in the garden teaching children who had gathered round him or were seated on his knee. Adults, too, would be sitting around him, listening to his teaching. I saw some people from our colony there like Rabia, the little servant girl who had worked in a rich lady's house. The lady thought herself so mighty that little Rabia couldn't even sit on a chair. She had to sit on the floor to peel vegetables and do other chores. She even had to sit on the floor to eat while the lady's family sat on chairs. He must have known she was from the servant class, but here she was sitting on Lamb's knee. I also saw other people there that in my culture would never be allowed to sit with someone as grand and perfect as Lamb. There was a lady sitting and listening to Lamb who I learned about later. Her name was Mariam, who had seven demons in her until Lamb commanded them to leave her.

From the throne flowed a river, clear as crystal, so clear that you could see the jewelled rocks at the bottom. Hues of blues and greens, amber and coral dappled the river's bed. The water flowed gently over the rocks to a destination far beyond the eye; it was ever-flowing and never-ending. Multiple coloured fish swam effortlessly in its flow. The water looked so pure that one could drink from the waters without fear of becoming ill. It seemed to invite me to drink from its waters and as I bent down, drawing up the cooling water in my cupped hands, I drank deeply. Suddenly, I was different. Yes, it quenched my thirst but something else happened. It was as if the water quenched my soul. I felt more alive than I had ever felt before. I was flooded with a warmth and comfort of heart. It was as if the waters were more than water, they were alive with the supernatural. I don't know if that will ever make sense to you for it certainly never made sense to me. All I know is that infinite joy and peace touched my soul the day I witnessed that water. I never wanted it to go away.

Endnotes

¹ QuotesBook, Annie Danielson, <https://quotesbook.com/home-quotes/home-is-where-your-story-begins-1117.html>

² GoodReads, Thomas More, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/62521-the-many-great-gardens-of-the-world-of-literature-and>