The Story of My Parents

Tales of Grandpa Eli

(Part 1)
belong to a family that in these times would be called dysfunctional. Things were quite different back then. My parents met each other for the first time at a party given by Mr. and Mrs. Avaskar, my mother’s parents in which the all the members of Bene Israel community in Calcutta were invited. The Avaskars had purchased a new flat in Park Circus. My father’s family was among the guests. My father pleaded a previous appointment but his father determined that he would accompany them even if it was only for half an hour. He complied rather grudgingly. This changed when he saw Leah, who would later become my mother. An electric current passed through his body leaving him momentarily immobile and tongue-tied. The appointment with his friends was forgotten. He watched her from a distance. He did not have the courage to approach her. They had not been formally introduced and he had no excuse to speak to her. By the time the family returned home his mind was made up. He told his father that he had met the girl he wanted to marry.

My father worked for an import and export firm. His salary was large enough to support a wife. He had been promised a promotion so he knew he could support children as well. Grandpa Eli listened to his son’s arguments in favor of setting a wedding date as soon as possible. He thought matters over. My father was a bit young for the responsibilities of marriage. On the other hand he might meet a girl outside the community and want to marry her. My mother was a pampered child used to having her own way but she had the advantage of being Jewish. Grandpa knew the girl and her family. He did not have to make any inquiries about them. He simply went up to my mother’s parents with an offer of marriage for his son.

My father had been struck by her beauty. She dressed stylishly but modestly and carried herself with dignity. Grandpa Eli knew no reason to prevent a marriage between them. She had never been seen with a man who was not a close relative. There was no gossip in the community or with his friends about her. She had done well in school. He reasoned that children born to her would have the advantage of genes that gave them intelligence. She would teach her children at home and give them an advantage over their classmates. He waited impatiently for his father’s return from her home although he was sure that the proposal would be accepted.

Grandpa Eli had not remarried after the death of his wife, my grandmother. He would have preferred his daughter Erusha to be the first to marry but my father was the eldest child so it was not an unreasonable request. Immanuel was the second son. Nobody got along with him. Grandpa Eli had tried to involve him in everything the family did but Immanuel remained the odd man out. The other children did not include him in their frequent discussions or ask him to accompany him to places they went. Immanuel never said anything and that disturbed everybody. He did not talk much and hardly ever expressed an opinion. The family never knew what he was thinking. When he smiled they believed it to be sarcastic or cynical. Erusha was the third child and Joshua was the fourth. He was still in college at the time of my father’s engagement. Sipporah was the youngest. She had been a toddler when her mother died. Immanuel had cared for her when their father was at work. She was the most antagonistic towards Immanuel. Sipporah was the youngest. She had been a toddler when her mother died. Immanuel had cared for her when their father was at work. She was the most antagonistic towards Immanuel. She did not realize how much she added to the tension between him and the rest of the family. She believed that she was protecting her father. Although Immanuel did everything he could for her she could not stand the sight of him. Grandpa Eli’s family was not as dysfunctional as my immediate one but it had its tensions and underlying currents.

Very soon after my parents’ marriage I, Samuel, entered this changing world. It was around that time that grandpa saw Erusha outside a cinema house with a group of other young men and women. One young man in particular seemed to be paying her more attention than he would have liked. There were no Jewish youth in the group. Grandpa had no reason to upbraid his daughter but he began to worry about the future of his daughters. Sipporah was headstrong and would do whatever she wanted. He decided that the time to move to Israel had arrived. Grandpa spoke to the family that evening. My father told me about this meeting. He and my mother were opposed to the move. The rest of the family thought it a good
idea. He looked at Immanuel questioningly. This son seemed undecided. “You know that I’ve promised never to leave the family,” Immanuel said. Sipporah wanted him to explain his words but Grandpa Eli restrained her. “There is no need for argument. The decision has been reached,” he said. “I will fill the forms tomorrow. I’ll ask the landlord to make a new contract in David and Leah’s name.”

Grandpa and the rest of the family immigrated later that year to Israel after Joshua got his degree. My father and my mother, with me in tow, did not follow for another ten years. I still have memories of Park Circus, my school and of my friends there. They were very happy years.

Grandpa Eli was given a flat in Ramat Gan. Since he had worked in an ordinance factory in India he was given a job with an ammunition factory close to Tel Aviv. Immanuel became a career army officer. Joshua began to sail with Zim, Israel’s merchant shipping company as a ship’s engineer. Erusha had worked as a secretary in Calcutta. It was not difficult for her to find employment. Grandpa had made the move at a time when it was still easy to find work in Israel. Sipporah was doing her army service when we arrived.

By the time our family came to Israel the clerks in the Housing Ministry had no flats to offer immigrants in the central area. The only housing available was in new settlements. My father and my mother accepted a small flat in Dimona, a town in the Negev desert. It was on the fourth floor of a building that had no elevators. The only work my father could get in that town was in a factory that made aerated drinks. Mother searched for work. Eventually she accepted the position of chambermaid in a four star hotel on the Dead Sea. Father believed the work to be beneath her dignity but she reminded him that all work was dignified. Her strongest argument was that we needed the money.

My mother did not have to wait with other people for public transport at the bus stop. A van from the hotel picked her up from the entrance to our apartment block every morning and brought her back in the evening. She left before I awoke. My father left soon after. I was left on my own for most of the day. It did not take much time for me to become quite wild. School presented challenges I was unwilling to take. The language was new and difficult to master. I seldom did my homework because my parents could not read and explain the lesson I had not fully understood in class. Hebrew was hard for me but it was much more difficult for them. The teachers in school never punished us if the work was not done. In India, I would have been caned and then obliged to stay in Detention Class to complete the homework. I stopped taking school seriously. I had not learned much in India either. I scraped through each year at the bottom of the class.

My mother’s beauty led to trouble at home. She had not used make-up or cut her hair short in India. In Israel things were different. The majority of the women painted their faces. They did not consult their husbands and seek their permission for everything they did. Women sat together in coffee houses and went to the movies together. They joined women’s groups that discussed each other’s problems, exercised, learned Hebrew and went on trips — all without their husbands. Their opinions were not the same as those their husbands held. My mother reveled in the change but he did not like it. It undermined his authority. She cut her hair and then told him that it saved her time getting dressed in the mornings. When she came home she did the housework in a hurry and went out to the club. She did not spend her money only on household expense but used a part of it to buy new clothes and make up. She sometimes had foreign money in her purse, which she had received as tips. He began to suspect that she was having relations with the rich foreigners who stayed in the hotel. She did not have to keep up with the latest fashions or use makeup for her husband.

Mother kept the foreign currency in a jar in the kitchen cabinet. She said that it was a saving for a trip abroad, which she intended to make with us. One day my father counted this money and was surprised at the sum total. He confronted her. He claimed that the other maids did not earn as much in tips as she did. She explained that she had been saving for almost two years. He
calmed down after a while but he could not put his suspicions to rest. He began to pry into everything she did, sneer at every opinion she had, go through her bag and cupboard and ask the husbands of other women whether there had really been a club meeting. Mother usually found out from the women that he had been questioning their husbands. She accused him of causing trouble for other women as well. It was not long before he began to raise his hand to her. After one argument she gave up her job at the hotel. She was fed-up with finding excuses for bruises and black eyes. Father was pleased in the beginning. He believed that he had simply asserted his manhood.

Matters at home did not improve. We were in debt within a few months. She refused to go to work again. She reminded him that he had kept insisting that he was man of the family. As man of the family he was supposed to support his wife and child. The notes I brought home from my teachers added fuel to the fire. He refused to sign the notes. She took my side. She began to sign the notes before he saw them.

Mother began to stay in her room. Dishes collected in the sink. She spent most of her time sleeping. When she came to watch television with us she was usually dressed in an old shapeless dress. Her hair had grown longer and it hung uncombed around her face. If I did not cook there would be no dinner. Then he would lose his temper. I was the one who had to go to the store for milk and bread every morning. The rest of the shopping was also my responsibility. It was done after school. I hated my parents and my home. I wished I had never been born.

One day Father announced that we were going to visit his father in Ramat Gan. Grandpa Eli, my uncles and aunts had visited us a few times but we had not left Dimona. I was excited. My father usually worked shorter hours on Friday but this Friday he took the day off. The journey was arduous. We had to rise early and walk to the central bus station. Then we changed busses three times, first at Beersheva, then at Tel Aviv and then in Ramat Gan. I was pleased when the travelling and waiting for the next bus finally stopped. Mother always got sick on a bus so the intervals were somewhat welcomed by her. She was pale and shaking by the end.

Grandpa asked my father to say the Kiddush prayers but my father refused saying that grandpa was the oldest male present. My mother prepared the meal because grandpa’s children did not live at home. They all arrived for Friday prayers and dinner because we were visiting. Usually they visited him one family at a time. Their children were younger than I and they made quite a racket in the small flat. I felt sorry for the neighbors. Sipporah, Grandpa’s youngest daughter was in the army and was based somewhere in the Galilee. She did not spend every weekend with her father. Erusha had married and she lived in Ramat Gan not very far from grandpa.

After Immanuel read the Grace after meals, my father spoke about the true purpose of our visit. “Daddy, I want to leave Samuel with you,” he said. “The boy is going to the dogs in Dimona. I am afraid that he will become like his mother.” He gave my mother a contemptuous look and she hung her head.

“You should not talk about your wife in that manner,” Immanuel rebuked him. “Settle whatever problems you have among yourselves, not in front of us especially not in front of your son. He will never respect his mother if you don’t.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” my mother sprang to my father’s defense, “Samuel did not have much of my attention. His schoolwork is poor and he has begun to smoke. We know that drug peddlers hang around the schools. Someone might slip something into his cigarette and he will get hooked. We fear for him.”

“We are counting on you to keep him for at least a year. We have brought his clothes,” he said to grandpa.
I now understood why we had carried such a large suitcase. Anger began to rise within me. Nobody had asked my consent. This was not India where children were sent to boarding schools, made to live in other homes, or given in marriage without their consent. I refused to agree. “I won’t leave my friends,” I began.

“You will do as you are told,” grandpa said. “If I had known that your parents were having such a bad time I would have brought you here earlier. You will stay with me until your mother returns and your parents can cope with you.”

“Good thing, we’ve only one child,” my father tried to joke, “or you would have had more kids to put up with.”

My mother gave him a sour look. My birth had been a complicated one. She had not become pregnant after it. “You can’t manage the one we’ve got,” she said spitefully. She believed that her husband blamed her for not having more children.

“Or control my wife either,” he returned.

“That’s the problem. You want full control over everybody’s life. Try to trust others for a change,” she said.

I retreated to the room I was to share with my parents that night. I pulled the door shut behind me, kicked off my sandals and got into bed without changing into my nightclothes.

“Look at yourself. How can I trust you?” Father was almost shouting. I pressed the pillow over my ears. Harsh words from their quarrel and grandpa’s calm voice trying to mediate between them still came through to my ears. I began to sob for the shame of it all.

The next morning everybody behaved as though nothing unusual had happened. We went to the local synagogue and returned to a cold meal. In our house my mother kept food on a hot plate throughout the Shabbat. Grandpa did not even have a big Shabbat kettle for hot water. He believed that we could do without tea or coffee once a week.

We sat out on the balcony waiting for the sun to go down. My parents would return only after Shabbat was declared officially over with the Havdalah prayers. They would not reach home until midnight. A cock crowed somewhere and I perked up. The sound reminded me of India. Grandpa Eli saw me and smiled. “I’ll tell you about a rooster I once had,” he said.

Immanuel wished us a hurried goodbye and left before Grandpa could begin narrating the tale about his rooster. It was the first of many stories he told about how he met and married my grandmother.

**Banta**

Grandpa was what my father called, “a bit of a bullshitter.” He told his grandchildren wonderful stories with such a straight face that none of us knew whether they were true or not. It was difficult to prove that his stories were a bundle of lies because there were always elements of truth in them that could be verified. The one person who knew the entire truth was not available for comment. My grandmother had passed on...