

Near The Mediterranean Sea



Rosina S Khan

-----Preface-----

This story is a rare one in my collections. It describes the bonds we grew with people foreign to us, yet kept sharing our moments with them until the very end. Yes, in short, it describes how our own family bonds got strengthened where we stayed for six whole months near the Mediterranean Sea. After that we were coming back to our country but our love among us, our love for those people and their love for us made everything so sad and sweet at the end, which makes it all an unforgettable and beautiful imprint in our memories.

- Rosina S Khan

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-----Off to Our New Residence-----

We have been packing all our stuffs into suitcases and boxes for days. Dad's job just got transferred. It was a hectic process and although Mom and Dad did majority of the work, we helped as much as we could although we were only children.

The big day arrived. We were about to make the journey to the new residence which was several kilometers away. Big, strong and sturdy friends of our family helped to carry our heavy boxes and suitcases to a waiting truck on the street. Finally the door keys of the house we were deserting were handed to the person in charge. We settled in a microbus that was also awaiting us. We let the glass windows down. Both the vehicles started moving, and my hair fluttered in the gentle breeze, ready for the adventure of staying in a completely new place.

I tried to imagine what it would be like. Would it just be like our old flat in a building? Or would it be on the ground floor? What would be the surroundings like? What would be our school like? Surely we would be going to school!! What would be our neighbors like? Would we be able to get good friends and playmates? A thousand questions came up to my mind. It was interesting to let my mind wander like that because now I realize I was not the only one thinking but all of our family members were thinking their own thoughts because calm and quiet prevailed the microbus except for the sound of the engine and the swishing of tyres on the streets.

-----The New Residence-----

It seemed like a long ride and we were getting impatient. We had homemade snacks on the way and still wondering when our destination would finally arrive. Yes, it was another half a kilometer, and we finally arrived.

Where the vehicles stopped was on a green grass playground and we looked around to find small prefabricated homes around on either side of a long pathway in front of the playground. When we got to the pathway, we got the real picture, and it was beautiful. The pathway was a long way, and on either side of it, were the homes. And where the pathway ended, were steps down to the Mediterranean sea!!

While we were wondering where we our home would be, the gatekeeper showed up coming with keys and when he showed our spot, we were more than amazed. It was the last home on the left where the pathway ended just a few feet away from the steps leading to the sea. Could we really be that lucky? Indeed we were!!

We went inside to find a tiny kitchen and an attached small bathroom and just two rooms, one of which would be for our parents and the other one would serve for my sisters and me both as a bedroom and a living room for all. How? The sofas were stretchable to make them beds and there were exactly three sofas, one a big one enough for three in sitting position and the other two for solo still while in sitting position.

While we were saddened at how tiny and limited our home was going to be, the outside scenery was more than enough to compensate for that. There were no friends of ours now to carry the heavy suitcases and boxes all the way from the playground near the main gates to our new home at the very end. We managed helping eachother as much as we could although it was very strenuous, pushing and pulling.

Sometimes feeling sad, sometimes thrilled in the new environment, little did we know that there was going to be a whole lot of love spreading around soon.

-----Dad Resigns-----

Dad started to look for a proper school for us. None were in the vicinity. But further into the city, although there were schools, they didn't turn out convenient for us because either we had to take courses we weren't interested in or there was no proper means of transport. So the smashing blow came out rather hard on us. We wouldn't have a regular school to go to. We were remorseful and cried secretly.

Dad probably guessed what we were going through. The very next day he resigned from his work of professor at the university. He announced the news to us while having lunch and that we only had to stay here for five more months and we would set off for our country where we could attend the school of our dreams. That certainly cheered us up.

Dad started coaching on our studies in the main areas: English, Science and Mathematics. We already had the required books; so it was ok. It was an intensive study. He always gave out the work we had to do in these areas the night before as he had to go out for work in the morning. We knew Dad cared and that he didn't want us to fall behind in our classes when we would finally attend school in our country.

Sometimes we got stuck in the middle of our work and couldn't continue. It really depended on Dad's mood whether he would solve it for us happily or show off his temper. That way we tried to hang on the following few months.

Studies were not the only thing we were going to do during the upcoming months. There were going to be a whole lot of happy moments during the months that were going to follow, and those were going to stick with us for the rest of our lives.

-----With Our Neighbors' Children-----

Till now I totally ignored talking about our neighbors and their children. Yes, the new area where we lived was packed with Russian families. Their children would show up in the morning, late afternoon and in the evenings. Because we studied in the morning and in the evenings, we made it a point to become more intimate with the children in the late afternoon. They looked so beautiful, and we were drawn to them. We started by giving out stocks of lollipops we had in our refrigerator, one per child everyday. And they did enjoy licking them. We played on a mat behind our garden with toys and stuffs and by and by, the children would come near us and eventually take part in playing with toys like dolls, cups and saucers and playing cooking utensils and others.

Soon we became more creative and made stuffs with clay, and they also thoroughly enjoyed creating from them. They had clay over all their hands at the end, and because their mothers would get mad at them, we made sure their hands were clean by helping to clean with soap and then they went off happily for their homes.

Soon we also started drawing pictures for them and they loved to color them and take them home and show their parents. They also drew and colored their own pictures. We also made purses, air planes, birds, gold fish, baskets, cranes and a whole lot of other stuffs out of paper and showered them upon the children. Parents stopped by to see what we were doing and went off assured their children were in good hands.

Next we started playing games with them- the ones we learnt at school from our previous place like Ring-a-ring-a-roses, I sent a letter to my father, Wallflowers, wallflowers growing up so high, and Farmer's in the Den. We sang the songs of the games and played the games with the children. The parents who understood English liked to stay around hearing us sing and getting our words of the songs.

There were swings, sand boxes and see-saws at the backyard. We played on them with the children as well. Our Dad liked to take photos of us with the children while we played. They were good times indeed!!

Our initial mission was fulfilled. We loved the children, and the children loved us. We were on intimate terms. What more could we ask for? Yet, there were happier days in store where we lived near the sea.

-----Celebrating Birthday Parties-----

Soon enough we were getting invited to the children's birthday parties. We wore our best, chose the best gifts and attended those parties and enjoyed with the children. The food menu was great with the decorated cake in the middle. It was nicely dented by the birthday person. The mothers also came along and although many of them did not know English, and we were just on the brink of getting a few words while playing with the children, we somehow communicated with them now, shrugging off our shoulders if we didn't get something at all and yet, life felt sweet.

As time lapsed, it was our little sister's birthday. Now it was our turn to celebrate her birthday. We made birthday cards and handed out to the children and although it was in English, we somehow conveyed the message in their language. So far so good.....

The birthday arrived and the night before we decorated the living room with balloons and decoration pieces. Mommy was busy baking cake, making sweet as well as hot items.

It was 12pm and the children arrived in a queue. Soon the mothers came along too. Our sister made a tiny cut into the beautiful chocolate cake. We clapped and sang the birthday song. Our sister got lots of birthday gifts which we opened up after the party was over.

During the party we not only enjoyed the food but also took photographs with the children and the mothers both inside the house and outside, with the sea in the background.

After the party, we opened up the gifts, and there was a picture of a teddy bear with a playing ball drawn by a renowned artist mother in the complex, and there were view cards and toys of all kinds appropriate for a new eight-year old.

It was indeed a memorable day, never to be forgotten with all the joy, merriment and laughter.

-----Watching Movies in the Complex Theater-----

We were invited by our neighbors to watch movies in the complex theater. So off we went. Although the movies were Russian, we took note of some of the words we had just learnt mixing with the children. But yet the movies were all a mystery, very difficult to catch the themes behind the stories and when they ended, at least I was more perplexed than ever.

We did not go regularly to watch but only once in a while. Evening times for us were supposed to be for studying, yet our dear Dad let us go sometimes for fun and recreation.

Russian families took plastic chairs with them along with blankets and put the blankets in folds on the chairs and then sat on top of them. It seemed a bit weird to us at first but it all became clear to us after we attempted to watch the first movie. They were usually two to three hour long movies and our backs ached while sitting on the wooden benches. It explained everything the way the Russians knew how to make them comfortable while watching the movies.

We saw the English versions of some of the movies on TV after we returned to our country but it was a different kind of bliss watching these then mysterious movies along with those families. They will remain as terrific memories for all ages to come.

-----Participation in Cultural Shows-----

My sisters and I were trained in traditional children dances. So we always looked for opportunities when cultural shows would be organized and then we would participate. It was most unexpected of us to hear the news of a cultural show to take place in the complex. And so when we did, we were excited to include our names.

The grand day arrived. Mom was busy with our makeup and costumes. I dressed up as a boy, and my sisters were dressed and ready too. When the children came and knocked on our back door, they were taken up by complete surprise at our new appearances. So our family and the children went to the show that had already started and we were waiting for our turns and Dad was ready with the taperecorder with batteries inside which would play the dance songs (This is the eighties; so don't be surprised if I didn't talk about a CD player.)

Our turn came. We went onto the stage in the theater hall. The music started up. And we performed to our best. We smiled while dancing and the audience smiled back. It was a success and everyone enjoyed it!! Next was our little sister's turn. She danced solo. When she finished, she was also applauded.

Then we went to another area of the complex where food was arranged after the show ended. There were all yummys to choose from and we were still in makeup and costumes but nobody minded neither did we. The food appetization soon ended. We exchanged thanks and goodbyes. It was going to be a lasting memory indeed!!

-----Learning to Swim-----

It was winter all along. I hadn't mentioned how the weather was all this time because I focussed on other areas. Yet, it was winter and especially by the sea, it was doubly colder than our initial place. We always had to wear overcoats the moment we went outside. Winter was gradually gone by the wind. Spring settled in and people in the complex started to test out the sea waters by dipping their feet in. The sea water scared me to death, and my heart went throbbing the moment an inch of sea water touched my feet when I went near the beach, not knowing swimming.

Still yet summer arrived. More and more people got into swimsuits and swam in the sea. We might not get another opportunity like this. So Dad asked Mom to sew swim trunks for him and swimsuits for the rest of us. Yes mom was pretty good at sewing anything, and also knitting with wool anything. It was her passion which was going to last for years ahead.

Pretty hot summer days were passing by. The trunks and swimsuits were ready. Dad chose a day for the dive. The day arrived. We, the girls wore loose midis; yet inside we were wearing swimsuits. Dad wore his perfectly fitting trunks. We preferred to wear hats on our heads as the sun shone directly on our heads.

I had never worn a swimsuit before and I was only 12, the eldest in the family. I wondered if it would be possible for me to expose my swimsuit in public. But it was Dad's order. That meant nobody could protest. So our troupe went down the stairs to the beach and found a comfortable place to sit in the sand at first along with other familiar people. My sisters took off their midis and were soon attempting to wet their feet in the water. My Dad was already swimming and so was my Mom. But I was still sitting on the beach, debating what to do. Taking off my midi seemed like the most embarrassing and impossible thing to do right there and then.

Dad came back to take a rest for a while, and soon he saw the poor me, and one strong glare from him at me did the trick. If my sisters could do it and so could I. So I took off my midi right then, not thinking much at all. I soon approached the

sea water smartly and wetting my feet. Yes, the worst was over, and the best was yet to come.

That was the first day near the beach. We had only one swimming ring and my sisters and I shared the ring on several days in a row and learned to float. Soon we could float on the water without the ring.

Many more days of attempts of swimming with and without the ring led us to our final target. I was the first to actually learn to swim without the ring. Seeing me, my sisters caught up with me enthusiastically. And our whole family bunch could swim now. It felt great.

My shyness disappeared completely and my sisters and I, along with Mom and Dad, swam and swam in the sea without going too far into the sea just to be on the safe side.

We noticed the burning sun rays and salt of the sea darkened our skin to such depths that our Dad and Mom decided we had had it enough and we had better stay out of reach of the sea.

The Russians were pretty perplexed why we stopped going to the beach. We gave varying answers because it would be difficult to explain to them because the sun and sea only tanned them and they liked it but we didn't. So that was it. The end of all enjoyment of the sea. But even so, the sea was going to be a blessing for us in many other ways until the end of our time near the sea.

-----Pleasures of Gardening-----

We had a beautiful garden in front of our home. In fact every home in the complex had a garden in front. We had tulip flowers, sun flowers and daisies. At the very front were hedges marking the boundary of the garden. Just behind the hedges was a mini tree that always hung pink flowers.

Dad and us would sometimes pull out the weeds and loosen the soil and water so that the existing plants and trees would remain in good shape.

Oneday, my younger sister and I got seeds of a pumpkin from Mom and dug up the earth of the garden to some extent and laughingly put the seeds in and the covered back the soil.

We kept weeding out and gardening when oneday all of a sudden, we noticed a tiny green seedling. At first we thought it was another weed. We tried to pull it out but it wouldn't come off, and then we remembered that we had dug in the pumpkin seeds right at that position. We were thrilled!! So we finally had a plant out of pumpkin seeds. The better news was that it was going to grow big and cover the majority of the garden.

Inspired we put lettuce seeds and pudina leaves seeds and let them grow. We took good care of the garden indeed!!

Soon the garden was giving us pudina leaves and lettuce and we made sure they were included in our daily meals. And the pumpkin plant had grown with big leaves stretching all over the garden. It didn't look that very neat like before, taking up majority of the space but then we noticed a tiny bud at one end. It started growing as days passed by and grew so big that now it was time to detach it and cook it and finally have it for our meals.

Mom remarked it was too big for the family. We all could never finish eating the whole thing and the refrigerator was quite small for it. So it was time to give away. Dad sliced the pumpkin into a good many four portions, a slightly bigger one for us and the other three not so small either. And Dad wrote on pieces of paper: "From our garden—Your neighbor". We gave away the three pumpkin slices to the nearest neighbors, and they were more than happy to receive them.

As days went by, another unexpected growing bud appeared; soon it turned to an oval growing pumpkin; the other one we had earlier was completely round. This time too it was a big one, and like before, we gave away slices of it to another set of neighbors.

Life seemed so sweet. Giving away the pumpkin slices was the best part, and the flowers that burgeoned in our garden simply added beauty to our home and surroundings. The pumpkin plant started withering away and we knew it would give no more buds and so we tried to clear it up at least the leaves, if not the strong stems.

-----Learning Tidbits of Russian Language-----

While we learnt to swim, participate in their cultural shows, celebrated birthday parties with the children, watched movies in cultural shows and simply spent time with them playing, we began to grasp the meanings of some of the words they used to communicate with us. Here are some of the tidbits of Russian language that we learnt:

Good Day
Dobrry Den'

What is your name?
Kak tebya zovut?

Let's go
Pyjom

Is Raman not in our team?
A Raman ni drudhit?

Rotate me locking hands
Dagaini mina

Where is Natalie?
Gde Natalie?

Pencil
Karandash

Let's draw
Davayte rizi valu

Water
Voda

What is this?
Chto eto?

This is ours.
Eto Mayya.

Swim
Plavat'

Thank you
Spasibo

Goodbye.
Do Svidaniya

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