In the footsteps of love

Shubnum Khan goes for a walk with grandad and finds streets filled with pain and joy

ABAJAAN'S hands are where this story begins; weatherworn and wrinkled, they're a map rich with the history of time. These are the hands that held the railings of the gangplank as he boarded the SS Takliwa in 1936 to make his way across the Indian Ocean to South Africa; it is these hands that held the wet body of his first child born on African soil; and it is these hands that he thrust in the air as he told stories of courage and morality to his grandchildren gathered around him.

Today it is these hands that finger his tasbeeh lightly as we make our way to town by taxi. For more than half-a-century, Osman Khan, my 93-year-old grandfather, has been navigating the streets of Durban's CBD, first as a young newly wed, then as a widower and now as a great-grandfather.

"I used to take a bus before; the green mamba," Abajaan says to my friend and I, who are sitting squashed next to him. "Now I take the taxi — it's faster but the music is very loud." It costs R7 to go to town from the suburb of Asherville and all the while my grandfather keeps his fingers on his tasbeeh, repeating God's attributes, as the speakers blare some rap song about babes and honey.

Almost 60 years ago he was a travelling salesman carrying a briefcase filled with samples of lace and ribbon through these same streets, persuading shopkeepers to order his wares. He wore a red fez and a blue blazer with a fountain pen tucked in the top pocket and he walked with the confident gait of one who had just completed his first Dale Carnegie course.

"Town was different then," says Abajaan. "They had iron trams — they were only for white people but there were three seats for non-whites and sometimes if we squeezed together, about eight or nine of us could fit." We leave the suburbs and enter the outskirts of the CBD. The paint on the buildings is faded, walls are sprayed with graffiti and brightly coloured clothes flap out of windows. The gradual decline of many inner-city zones is a common tale but today I hear it first-hand.

We jump out at West Street, now known as Dr Pixley Kaseme Street, and Abajaan gets down to business, manoeuvring through crowds and vendors fanning themselves behind piles of blackening bananas. "There were only white people here before. They had all the big shops, especially in West Street.

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Black people had to have a permit to be in town or they were sent back."

He says it's the complete opposite now. "There are no white people here anymore. They all moved to Umhlanga and those places. Now there are a lot of foreigners. And the shops have changed too. More cellphone shops," he says, pointing to Pakistani stalls.

"And more hairdressers." He indicates the tents on the pavement with their drawings of hairstyles. "That's the big thing right now," he says, as someone tries to press on me a pamphlet about how to bring back my lost lover.

Our first stop is a bookshop, Adams, his favourite place, he says. As a store

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that's just celebrated its 150th anniversary, it's probably a stable sanctuary for Abajaan in this rapidly evolving concrete jungle. He walks around the shelves with a certain affection and I understand that my love for the written word is born from him.

Abajaan's shelves at home are piled high with books and he has a particular appreciation for personal development. *Stop Thinking, Start Living, Psycho Cybernetics* and *The New Way to Relax* are some of the titles on his bedside shelf, well worn and underlined with all sorts of notes in English and Gujurati written between sentences and in the margins. He keeps a dictionary at his bedside to help decipher the more difficult words he encounters.

"I like books on psychology," he says as we wander through the aisles. He also reads the Quran, books on spirituality and children's stories. I have fond memories of perusing his shelves for Enid Blyton titles or Casper comics.

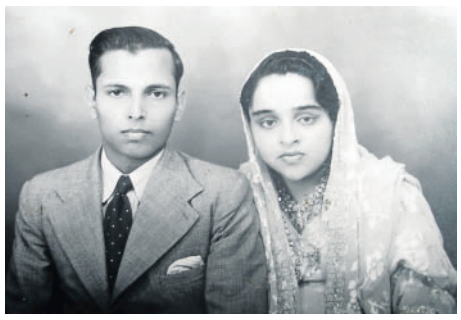
'This man has fixed my watch so many times, but he won't take any money!'

Despite his small build Abajaan cuts a striking figure in his short white *kurta*, snow-white beard and skullcap. As we walk through the streets, people call out, greet and wave. It is a testament to how well he is known that when my friend asks a hawker selling stitching how she can contact him if she wants to place an order, he nods to Abajaan and says, "I don't have a phone, but ask that baba, he will know where to find me."

Abajaan's friends are the children and grandchildren of his friends who have passed on and they offer us tea, hot chips and small anecdotes about him. He introduces me with a certain pride and I wonder who is feeling more honoured to be next to the other. I meet distant family members who lament the loss of family bonds and explain family trees in detail. In Madressa Arcade, the narrow bazaar lane of the Indian quarter that's filled with trinkets, tailors and apparently the best dried monkey heads (that I never find), we enter the small shop of a watchmaker. My grandfather laughs, "This man has fixed my watch so many times, but he won't take any money!" The man talks about my uncle, a doctor who died more than 10 years ago from cancer. "We still remember him," he tells me. "He was a generous man who treated most of his patients for free. Recently I fixed his son's watch and I thought at least I could do something for him. He left a legacy behind. The same as your grandfather will. No one forgets such people."

When I ask Abajaan why he keeps returning to town, he smiles. "I like to walk," he says simply. "It keeps my mind busy and it keeps me occupied." This reminds me of what Haruki Murakami says in his book, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*: "Being active every day makes it easier to hear that inner voice." Whenever Abajaan feels unsettled he will pace outside the house to clear his mind. "Also," he adds, "I like walking because it gives me purpose — I can buy things for the house myself." This is typical of my grandfather who has remained independent. He has always been a quiet, unassuming man and he seemed genuinely shocked when I asked him if I could join him on this trip, as if he didn't expect to be important enough to be noticed. He never complains or asks for anything, except occasionally a helping hand with the shaving machine when it's time to cut his hair every few months.

MEMORY MARKET: Left, Osman Khan in Madressa Arcade; above, with the writer and a shopkeeper relative Pictures: SAFIYYAH PATEL



CHANGES: Osman Khan and his wife Zubeida in 1946; Khan in 1978 in Durban

"Your father used to work there," he says, pointing to the building down the street as we stand outside Bombay House. "He and your uncle started the Islamic Tape Library in 1973 and when he became an architect he moved his office there. Now everyone is gone," he tells me as we walk past the regal Grey Street mosque. "They prefer to be near home in safer areas."

When I ask him what his secret to good health is, I assume he will attribute it to constant walking or reading or having faith, but he merely smiles and says, "I prayed to God not to make me *mohtaj* [burden] on anyone, and I think he answered this prayer of mine."

As we prepare to depart I think of what the man in Madressa Arcade said about the legacy we leave when we die. I think about the people who keep our memories alive. The people in the streets or behind shop counters who remember us with love, who fix our children's watches in our honour, despite the time that has passed and the changing landscape. I think about Abajaan and how his wrinkled hands, gesturing in the air as he told us stories every evening, will live in my memory forever. And I realise that Abajaan will continue to move through town long after he is gone, when those who care for him remember him; when they stop to reminisce about the young man selling ribbon who became the old man in white who walked confidently through the streets.