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Foreword

by Bruce Pandolfini

One workday Saturday afternoon, seemingly eons ago, after I had given a lesson at the Marshall Chess Club, I was introduced to a young woman who had been analyzing a chess game by herself in the club tournament room. Shernaz Kennedy, long after leaving India, fresh from her days at school, was a candidate master with a winning personality.

It was clear she loved chess and was a devoted student of its grand ideas. Little did I realize that she also was a teacher, and in a few years I would be teaching with her at various private schools throughout New York City. I would soon find out something else. She was Bobby Fischer's close friend.

Now she has written a memoir, and it's about that friendship with the American chess genius. In a personal account, Shernaz delivers one conviction and anecdote after the other, affording entree into Fischer's variegated mind and private life. Fashioning observations, chessic and cultural, she takes the reader on a journey from ambitions of girlish adolescence to the maturing fulfilment of lifelong quest. There are stories here you won't find anywhere else and they naturally lead to questions.

Shernaz wrote Fischer a fan letter. He almost never responded to fan letters. Why did he write back to Shernaz? What kind of advice did Fischer give her anyway? How did it help her improve her game? What about those handwritten Fischer letters? What stirred him to take the time to write them, what were they really like, and how many were there? When did Fischer start calling Shernaz at all hours, veiled in strange settings, from distant parts of the globe? Probing further, how bluntly did Fischer speak about his rivals, his politics, and his secret beliefs? Let's not leave out his taste in foods and clothes. Was there a lot of that sort of talk as well? What about more critical decisions? Did he always consult Shernaz prior to making them, such as when he was preparing for his 1992 match against Spassky? All things must come to an end, even majestic interactions. Before Fischer sadly left us in 2008, was he thinking of Shernaz when he famously said that nothing is as healing as the human touch?

Loosely paraphrasing T. S. Eliot, while leaving out Michelangelo, this leads us to an overwhelming question. What was it that brought them together so closely? You can decide all the above and more for yourself by

reading Shernaz's confidential narrative. Questions and answers aside, she does tender a singular perspective on the Fischer years, on the big and small of an eccentric virtuoso, and on their distinctively different channels of friendship. Peruse and enjoy.

New York City, October 2025

CHAPTER 1

First Moves

My introduction to the game of chess came unexpectedly one evening in my home in Bandra, India, when I had just turned four years old. My lively Uncle Pesi had joined us for dinner, and while my mother fussed in the kitchen over the serving of the steaming jardaloo pudding, my father and uncle huddled over our Russian chess set. Typically, my father would drive us in his old De Soto to my Uncle Pesi's villa in Aare Milk Colony, where my brothers and I would escape to the lush gardens and lakes. Other close relatives and friends would meet us and all children would play *gili danda*, using sticks that we found. The older boys would organize a cricket match and the parents would sit on a banquette with mattresses atop, playing flush, a form of poker. We were a fun, rowdy and competitive lot.

Tonight felt different. My brothers escaped to the kitchen to drag Langra, our one-legged cook out into the garden at Palm Court. Palm Court was our home with a walled garden and a deep well. Attached to that was a smaller well with a pump we used to water the garden. We were fortunate the land sustained an abundance of fruit trees, including guava, coconut, banana, and huge *sekhani singh* trees in this arid climate of India. Fragrant Mogra flowers and Easter lilies encircled the well, and bougainvillea climbed from the pots to the walls. Towering over our paradise were the beautiful palm trees for which our beloved home, Palm Court, was named. It was our sanctuary.

My brothers delighted in their conspiratorial plots as they badgered Langra into telling them a scary story or four. These stories revolved around Gurkhas, robbers, thieves, and *bhoot* (ghosts). Langra held his own court in our dark garden. My brothers were captive listeners to his every word, but for me, my sanctuary was now filled with darkness. The shadows of the trees, stirring and rustling in the breeze, made me bristle with fear. I was only four years old and still believed in ghosts and shivered as every passing crow cawed.

That night I preferred not to be frightened by Langra's tales, but stayed behind and stood on my tippy toes to watch my father and uncle move pieces around the chess board.

Their play was relaxed and friendly, and when my father won, the two genially shook hands with one another. Eager to be part of the fun, I asked Uncle Pesi if I might play him. He readily assented and carefully positioned me atop a cushion that he placed on a dining room chair

– and that's when the excitement began! Selecting pieces at random, I moved them enthusiastically around the board, noticing as I did that Uncle Pesi's facial expressions changed dramatically and that he seemed to consider my moves to be very good indeed. I reveled in what I thought was my newly discovered ability for as long as my short attention span allowed, and then, imitating my father, arbitrarily declared, 'Mate!' I clearly had no clue of what I was up to at my four years of age, but I was intrigued nonetheless. They included me as if I were a seasoned player, and I loved having my own audience.

My work complete, I scrambled down from the 'high' chair and demanded to play with the new Mary Queen of Scots doll I had been given for my birthday.

The very next day, I rang the bell of my neighbor, Uncle Mehli, a co-pilot for Indian Airlines. 'Melvin or Reggie, Reggie or Melvin?', he teased, asking if I wanted to marry Melvin, his older son, or Reggie, who was just a little younger than me. Ignoring his question, I wandered off to the boys' bedroom and patiently watched Melvin and my brother Khushroo play chess.

Terry Aunty (the Indian way of saying Aunty Terry) was in the bedroom, too, giving Reggie a bath with a red bucket of heated water mixed with cold water from the null (tap). Reggie was naked, but unlike everyone in my family, not shy, and I barely noticed him. I was more interested in watching the way the chess pieces moved and in listening to Khushroo as he pointed out how the knight moved. I watched the entire game, and within no time at all I learned how to play.

Growing up, I often heard the story of Minoo, a country boy from Poona, who wanted to look his very best for a date with a young lady but was embarrassed by the condition of his shoes. In trying to resolve the problem, he decided to borrow a pair of shoes from his father, but wasn't able to muster up the courage to ask for permission. He simply put the shoes on his feet and walked out the door. Luck didn't smile on poor Minoo; the rains came, and the shoes got horribly wet in the kichal (muddy waters from the monsoons). When he returned home, he feverishly scrubbed the mud off his father's shoes and threw them into a bhatti, an outside brick oven, to dry. I could only imagine the shock that came over Minoo's face when he opened the bhatti some time later. His father's good shoes had shriveled up! They had not just dried, but cooked!

The foolish boy in that story was Minoo Mistry, my Dad, and he not only survived my grandfather's predictable wrath, but learned from his unfortunate experience and went on to become one of the most distinguished pilots in all of India. When my Dad turned seventeen, he

informed my grandfather that he was going to join the Air Force. His news didn't go down well. It was my Grandpa Motti Pappa's dream that Dad would get a full education before he chose a career, especially one that seemed so risky and that no one in the family had ever tried before. Dad enlisted anyway and flew for the Indian Air Force during the China-Kashmir War in 1942, piloting both of the fighting planes of his time, the Hurricane and the Harvard. In 1948, he became one of Air India's first pilots under Indian aviation pioneer J. R. D. Tata, and in 1955 he had the high honor of flying India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. He had quick reflexes and nerves of steel, critical attributes for pilots landing Dakotas, Vikings, Constellations, 707s and later 747s, and was recognized by his fellow pilots, pursers, and air hostesses for his soft landings.

When Dad turned twenty-six, it was time for him to take a bride. Dad would have preferred to ask to marry Mum's older sister, Dina Aunty, but she was in love with a ship's captain. As the story has been passed down, when Mum, Dad, and Dina went to a movie together, Mum was absorbed in the movie when Dad suddenly reached over and held her hand, a gesture she didn't find at all unwelcome, even though she snatched her hand away sometime later when she bent down to put her empty popcorn bag under her seat and discovered that Dad was holding Dina Aunty's hand, too! From that day on, Dad was known in my Mum's family as a lady's man – a reputation he found highly amusing.

Whenever Dad visited, Mum's mother, Sanem Mummy, would clap her hands and insist that she come upstairs to spend time with her betrothed. It saddened Mum to lose her independence, but arranged marriages were the custom, and she was obedient. She and Dad married when she was only seventeen and, according to Mum, the two of them played chess on their honeymoon in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). When she beat Dad, he playfully hit her on the head with the cardboard chessboard. When I asked Dad if this was true, he said that she kept taking her moves back!

By the time she turned twenty, my mother had given birth to two boys, first Xerxes and then Khushroo, with just two years between them. Although I have only known her as the matron and pillar of our family, she says that back then she still felt like a child herself. When she needed some time alone, she would close the dining room doors so as not to be disturbed by her husband or screaming babies and to eat a mango in peace.

I was born in 1954, the same year our young family moved to Palm Court. We had been living in an old white apartment building on Hill Road that was owned by the Irani family, but my father was doing well.

Adsher Irani offered him Palm Court, which seemed ideal in every way. Our home sat across the street from a green pasture that had two little cottages for shepherds who herded their sheep and goats – the perfect place for my parents' growing brood to run and play. It provided us with a large living room, dining room, three bedrooms – one with a small dressing room, a long passageway leading to the kitchen, a pantry, two bathrooms, and a *mori* (wash room) where the *ganga* washed our clothes.

For several years, the smallest of these rooms, my mother's dressing room, fascinated me. This was where my mother kept her makeup and shoes, and in spite of being told not to play with her things, I couldn't resist their allure. One day, after I had been secretly enjoying the attractions in this fantasyland, Mum looked at me and said sternly, 'God has told me that you've been playing with my make-up!' It was an astonishing pronouncement, and I couldn't imagine how Mum and God had conducted this dialogue, not realizing that the brilliant red lipstick around my lips was a dead giveaway.

It wasn't the only time I took Mum too literally. More than once I heard her say that when I was born, she was thrilled I was a girl. If there had been another boy, she had joked, she would have thrown him out the window. I didn't give much thought to the story until one day, after Khushroo and Xerxes and I had been running around in the open fields and the boys had been trying to stuff a lizard with tobacco that they had collected from discarded *biddi* (hand-rolled cigarettes) in an effort to make it dance, Mum surprised us with the announcement that she was pregnant. The news got around quickly, and everyone began asking me if I wanted a brother or a sister. Knowing Mum's sentiments, I wasn't sure what to say. Only when Perin Bhiwandiwalla, an aunt who lived on the top of Pali Hill, came to our house one afternoon and told us that Mum had delivered a baby boy, did the answer come to me. I was thrilled to have a new brother and I could not wait to hold him and feed him and play with him.

We rushed to the hospital and went straight to Mum's room, where things instantly became worrisome. Mum and a little monkey of a baby were lying in bed, wrapped together in a white sheet and looking totally helpless. Suddenly, I remembered the unsettling stories Mum had told me about how my grandmother, following Zoroastrian custom, had blocked my Mum's ears and wrapped a tight belt around her waist so she wouldn't get bloated after Xerxes and Khushroo and I had been born. I became frightened for my mother and my new baby brother. Fortunately, it wasn't long before my fears were soothed. Thanks to the sound advice of our dear Aunt Maneck, who was a modern, intelligent,

CHAPTER 7

‘Hi. This is Bobby.’

When I was a young girl, my mother invited a palmist to visit her at home. After he finished pouring over her hand, he looked at mine and told me that the red birthmark on my right thumb meant that I was extremely lucky. This news delighted me. It explained why I was always so lucky at school in London and in India. As I worked my way up in the competitive chess world in India and the United States, every now and then, I would wonder if my wins were an expression of the luck the palmist had seen. Or my own will to win. As I became engrossed in caring for my beautiful new baby, my sense of what was important shifted, and it became clear to me that my good fortune was in being Pria's mother. Everything else paled in comparison. I still played Scrabble and backgammon with Alan when I needed to unwind, but I didn't even care to look at a chess board. The game that had intrigued me for so long now held no fascination.

It was in this state of maternal bliss that Ruth Haring reached me one August afternoon. We hadn't spoken since the championships in Utah earlier that summer, so I was surprised to hear from her and even more surprised to learn that she was calling because Bobby Fischer had been staying with her and her husband GM Peter Biyiasas in San Francisco. Bobby had asked if the Shernaz Kennedy whom she had played in the Women's Championships in Utah might be the young woman from India who had written three letters to him back in the seventies. When I told Ruth that indeed I had sent several letters to Bobby when I was a teenager, she asked if it would be OK to give him my phone number and address. Without hesitating, I assured her I would be glad to hear from him, although from what I had heard about his reclusiveness, I hardly dared imagine that he might actually get in touch with me. I was reading a magazine article on all the most famous love letters of the world. Napoleon and Joséphine, Abélard and Héloïse, Anthony and Cleopatra, and listening to classical music. Attending every whim of Pria's. My ambition in life was to be the perfect Mother. Reading to her, stimulating her by talking to her all of the time. Nursing her most of the time.

Shortly after Ruth Haring's call, a letter arrived from Claudia Mokarow, a name that meant nothing to me. She cryptically stated that her boss wanted me to send ten of my games – ten wins and ten losses – and

stipulated that they be mailed to her address in Pasadena, California. I knew that Bobby lived in Pasadena and promptly selected four wins from the Women's Invitationals in Utah, six from key games in other tournaments – including my win against GM Andras Adorjan in a simultaneous – and my draw against GM Lev Alburt, and ten losses in dead even positions against Masters. I sent them to Ms. Mokarow's address, so nervous what her 'boss' would think when he looked over them. Highly worried, actually. Little did I know then that Claudia was from the Church of God and that Bobby had innocently given her his entire prize fund from the 1972 match in exchange for being allowed to stay on their premises for the rest of his life. If I was naïve, I had met my match!

It was a baffling development. It made no sense that my chess-playing hero should suddenly want to get in touch with me right at the point that I had decided to drop out of chess and enter the 'real world', just as my mother had always wished.

Unfortunate timing or not, on Thanksgiving Day the phone rang, and Alan answered, speaking briefly to the caller and then quickly passing the receiver to me, as he explained that the person on the other end refused to give his name. I was in the midst of preparing a bottle for Pria after her bath and had just followed the ritual my Mother had taught me. Massaging my Pria with Johnson's baby oil, exercising her legs over her forehead and her arms across her shoulders – she would ooh and aah – and then preparing her bath on my bed with hot water, baby Magic with zinc oxide in her bath, Johnson's baby shampoo and fresh water to pour to keep her clean and smelling sweet.

'Hi. Is this Sher nez?' a suspiciously familiar voice asked.

Pria fussed, anxious for me to turn my attention back to her, so I balanced the receiver between my ear and my left shoulder and gave her her warm bottle, having squeezed the air out of it, and answered with a simple 'yes'.

'Hi. This is Bobby', the man on the other end replied brightly.

I had played through this moment countless times in the theater of my mind, but, no longer the starry-eyed girl who had studied all of his games and striven to be like him, in chess principles and over the board, I couldn't allow myself to think that it was Bobby. My response was calm and mechanical, absurd really.

'Happy Thanksgiving. How are you?'

I, who love to chat, was actually tongue-tied. For the very first time in my entire life.

His reply was quick and proper. ‘Thank you. The same to all of you. I am fine, thank you.’ ‘Doing great, actually’, he rambled on enthusiastically. ‘I am in Palm Springs now. What were you doing? Have I interrupted anything?’ I had just read that he frequently visited Bob Hope there.

‘I was just taking care of Pria, my baby. She’s only two months old. Just gave her a bath and her Tri-Vi-Sol vitamins.’ Quietly and gently, I slipped Pria into her crib and sat cross-legged on my bed so I could talk more comfortably. I looked at the pattern of the white bed sheets with navy blue specks. I told Bobby that I generally nursed Pria, but after a bath, to put her in a deep sleep, I would give her a bottle. I was grateful that my room was all clean and dusted but he could not see that.

‘Sher-nez, how exactly do you pronounce your name? Can you sound it out for me?’

Bobby had grown up in the same neighborhood as Bruce Pandolfini, the manager at the Manhattan Chess Club, and this was the kind of question Bruce was always asking people. Maybe it was the custom there to make certain of the pronunciation of someone’s name.

‘Sher-naz. Most people call me Sher-naz.’

‘So I’m saying it wrong? Correct me... naz, ...not nez. Right? And what does your name mean? I’ve heard Indian names usually mean something. Right?’

‘Right on both counts – naz, not nez. I told Jack Collins that it means “Queen of the Ocean”. That sounds better than what it really means. “Shah” means king.’

‘What does the second part mean?’

‘It’s embarrassing.’

I laughed nervously. This was not the way I had imagined a first conversation with Bobby would go. He waited for me to continue, undeterred by my stammering.

“Naz” means “chief woman in a king’s harem”. And then I added, ‘But I am Zoroastrian and I was named with a focus on “Sh”. My name needed to be starting with that syllable. Zoroastrians are not Hindus. We are the oldest religion in the world. Around 2000 BC.’

There was no admission of a prank call. I was on the phone with Bobby Fischer, World Chess Champion. He was respectful, but found it funny that I had been given a name with such a colorful derivation.

‘India has such a rich culture. In the U.S. we lack that. We are more of a modern race. A mixture of so many people coming into our land. There are so many Chinese coming suddenly. Tell me something about your culture. Tell me about your religion.’

'Well, Zoroaster was just a Prophet around 2000 BC, like Moses for the Jews, Vishnu for Hinduism, Gautama Buddha for the Buddhists, Mahavira Jain for the Jains. A lot of other religions seem to burgeon around the early 6th and 7th centuries BC. It seems that Zoroaster was the first monotheistic Prophet, who believed in one God. Prior to this people in Egypt worshipped the Sun God Ra. I personally am fascinated by Egypt. I studied all the Pharos from Tutankhamun and knew how much each brick weighed. I must have been Cleopatra in my previous life. These cultures worshipped rocks, the moon, the stars. Legend has it that Zoroaster fell into a ditch. For the first time, he experienced evil and was surrounded by demons. Then he heard God's voice. Telling him to tell his people to say this prayer, 'Ashem Vaho Vestam Vasti, Usta Asti, Usta Hamie, Adheshae, Vesta Ashem.' With these words they would be able to be protected and any wish they had would be granted. The followers also needed to wear a muslin vest with a pocket to carry their sins. And a thread around their waists and a topi on their heads. God would grant them all their wishes and they needed to go to King Cyrus in the Capital of Persia. And spread this religion. Zoroaster exclaimed that he was not a good talker and everyone would laugh and make fun of him. God told Zoroaster that HE would take it from there. With these prayers, the demons disappeared and Zoroaster proceeded to enter the realms of King Cyrus in Persia.'

'Hhmm... fascinating... continue.' Poor Bobby was totally wrapped, like the wedding guest in Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'...

'When Zoroaster entered Cyrus's kingdom and asked to speak to the King, the King said this. 'I have a horse that I love dearly. He seems to have a problem with his leg. He is limping. If you can cure my horse, I shall have everyone follow this religion you speak of.' Zoroaster was instructed by God to touch this horse's leg. God healed the horse and Cyrus kept his promise and spread this religion all over Persia. The religion flourished and there was great peace. Like in Greece, and in cultures all over the World at that time. the Persian Empire was flourishing.'

'Bobby, around 1000 AD, when Mohammed had started his religion, the Muslims invaded Persia, and the Zoroastrians were forced to convert. These fire worshippers carried their eternal flame and piled in boats and landed in Surat, in India.'

'Fire worshippers? What do you mean?'

'Ah, they kept an eternal flame going using sandalwood. To this day in our Agyaris, places of worship, the Dasturji's, the priests, all dressed in white robes, burn sandalwood. Bobby, you know why you won in '72, don't you?'

'What? No, Sher-nez, tell me why did I win?' Bobby was quite amused.
'I wore a white Kurta, my hair was down to my knees then, and I closed my eyes and prayed for you.'

'You did? So, I have you to thank for beating Spassky.' He grimaced.

'Yes. Absolutely, yes. God listens to all of my prayers. Always.'

'So, tell me more about this fascinating religion. Your religion.'

'It's just another healthy religion. The Zoroastrians are just like the Jews in New York. They are full of culture and believe in educating their children. If, say, the Russian Ballet company is visiting Bombay, it would be the Zoroastrians who first buy tickets.'

'You sound very cultured and educated. Now tell me about the civilization in India.'

I began telling him about the oldest civilization called the Indus Valley civilization around Mohenjo Daro and Harappa. Apparently, the Indus Valley was inundated at least seven times and archaeologists found civilization upon civilization as they unearthed layer upon layer. They seemed to have a very advanced sewer system.

Here was I, giving my chess hero a history lesson? What about the Bishop g5 variation of the Grünfeld Defense... How would he handle it now? But I kept silent.

Bobby had a very personal question for me. He said he was really curious about the birth of a child. Could I describe to him exactly how a woman felt when she started her contractions. What did the contractions feel like? More importantly, could I describe every detail of Pria's birth? From start to finish?

This was actually my new most exciting topic. I told him the first contractions started at 8:10. Very mild, and I described to him the Lamaze technique of breathing when the contractions were 20 minutes apart. My hands over my tummy, breathing in and out until the contraction passed. He was fascinated. Totally enthralled. I had told him that my Mother kept telling me that with her first baby her mother had made her go see a movie?? To walk before going to the hospital too early. I wanted to head toward the hospital without panicking. I began looking for a scarf, a pillow and the lollipops I was told to bring. I told him how my Mother had called my father in India and that I had overheard her tell him in Gujarati, that Shernaz thinks she is going on a picnic. Instead, I told Bobby, she said to me: 'Now darling, remember the poor women in India are working and when their labor pains begin, they go out to the fields by themselves, have their babies sitting "akru", squatting, deliver their babies and then return to work three days later.'

I took this very seriously and decided that I would be brave. Just like them. My mother knew how to play me!

'Bobby, I ripped out a picture of you from the book *The Games of Robert J. Fischer*. At Siegen 1970.'

'Why would you do that?'

'I was asked to bring in a focal point. For that I had this picture of a beautiful woman with a baby across her shoulder. But for some reason, I would get my will to be brave from you. I kept it silently under my pillow.'

'In the hospital, Long Island Jewish, the best maternity ward in Long Island, they had me monitored and strapped in with my legs lifted up and there were four or five beautiful nurses. One had a long blonde braid just as long as mine. It was amazing that before every contract came, they were able to warn me and we all did the breathing together. You know, Indian women are very shy. I had never changed my clothes in front of anyone before. We were taught that before the contractions started coming really close, like three minutes apart, it is like speed chess... You have to remember all the different breathing techniques, but when you are in the worst kind of pain, your coach has to hold your knee real tight.'

'Why? Why is that?' Little did I know that Bobby would remember this when he had intense kidney pain in the hospital in Iceland many years later.

'It deflects from the pain.'

'What do you mean? What do you mean?'

'I yelled at John, why he was holding my knee so tight, but instead of feeling that lightning pain go up and down my spine and back... Bobby, it was just like lightning going through your body. It was like you are being attacked all over the place and someone was throwing the kitchen sink at you.'

'Well, how did you feel at the end, when Pria came out? It must have been such a relief, right? I've seen it in movies.'

'Oh my God! When the baby slips out, it is such an amazing feeling of relief. I did not know that I must have pushed really hard, because everyone kept looking at my face, and I did not know that I had burst some blood vessels while pushing. Dr. Gittleson had said I was the bravest patient he had seen. I did not scream or yell.'

'Good you did not take any epidural or anything.'

'Well, they gave me a bit of Demerol to ease the pain. I had no idea that the doctor was delivering another baby in the next room! I kept asking for ice slips, as I felt so dehydrated, and was sucking on my lollipop and using the pillow on my back or side, wherever I was being attacked, hahaha....'

‘The scarf?’

He sure was listening to my stories.

‘The scarf? Oh, that. Yeah, I was supposed to tie my long hair up with that, but I just braided it and it was fine.’

What was happening? Instead of discussing an attack that could arise from an opening variation, here was I, totally discussing the pain variation of delivering a baby?

And on top of that I let slip some more personal information.

‘You know what I do not understand is that I had this beautiful blouse, which I wore with my jeans before my entire pregnancy, but strangely, after I had Pria it did not fit me anymore. So strange.’

Bobby had become my bf! I was not shy of him, and he cleverly analyzed: ‘Are you nursing your baby?’

‘Yes, absolutely yes. Did you know that the first three days your breasts produce something called colostrum, and that lines the baby’s stomach and gives her all the mother’s immunities. I absolutely believe in nursing, but my Mother advised me to also give Pria a bottle, so that at night I could have some rest. A nursing mother, I read, needs to feed on demand.’

‘Could it be that because you were nursing your baby, you could not fit into your pregnancy blouse?’

What? My chess hero had analyzed this before I could figure it out? Apparently, I was not the rocket scientist I thought I had become! How sad. Was I insane, discussing the birth of my beautiful baby and all about nursing with a man? He seemed highly sensitive and totally aware of what I had just been through. I also threw in stuff like a nursing mother, if she had eight babies, would she have enough milk for all eight just as long as she only nursed all eight babies? But mixing things up the way I did, I got punished. While Pria’s belly was full of formula for the night, my nipples hurt like crazy and that pain seemed more intense than delivering a child.

Bobby winced and said it was not easy being a mother for a newborn. I laughed and told him that my Mum kept coming up with Parsi sayings, like when you swaddled the baby real tight like the French nurses taught us. And when Pria was all stiff across my shoulder, she was called an ‘ubouh Parsi’, a stiff Parsi.

It took a village to get one little infant peacefully settled. I figured out a lot intuitively. No baby should ever cry. So, before giving her the bottle one needed to warm the Playtex disposable bottle up with the lid on upside down. And let all the air out so that the baby swallowed no air. And only then Pria would never ever cry once. I had mastered all of this.

'Did you learn anything Indian that American mothers do not know?'

Well, truthfully I had learned a lot by babysitting my friend Joan Saltini's infants, like changing diapers and talking to the baby, and when I could put the baby on her stomach. The Indian influence was patting the baby on her stomach on my lap and putting her in a deep sleep! Goodness, it was like mastering so many different openings. A lot of intuition.

For an hour and a half, Bobby peppered me with questions, and the longer we talked, the further he seemed from the anti-social, obsessive genius that the media had portrayed. Instead of discussing the complicated variation of the Sozin that he had invented, castling queenside, which Zaltsman had taught me twenty-two moves deep – the way I had imagined the conversation might go – he asked me question after question about myself, about Pria, and about her birth. And he was equally curious to find out about my family in India and my religion. Each of my answers generated more of his questions.

'So, who is this person who picked up the phone? And what are your plans for Thanksgiving?'

'That was Alan Kantor. He shares the apartment with my husband and me. He helps us with the rent. And we are supposed to go to my husband's parents' house in Northport for Thanksgiving dinner.'

'And what does your husband do?'

'He's a production planner for an electronics company.'

'So, tell me about your baby. Pria, right? Am I saying it correctly? Why did you name her that?'

'Aah, Pria! I had a dear friend from Calcutta, who was very beautiful. She had long black hair.'

'And what does her name mean?'

'Well, when you write a letter in Hindi, you begin with Priya, so I guess it means "dear one" or "loved one".'

I also had questions in mind about chess, and every now and then, I managed to squeeze one in.

'Hey, Bobby, I was actually reading a book about you, *Profile of a Prodigy*. Do you still study chess? And what exactly have you been up to?'

Instead of the intellectual exchange I'd been hoping for, he caught me off guard once again, warning that I wasn't to believe anything that had been written about him.

'It's all lies', he said vehemently. 'Some of these people think they are my friends, but they are not.'