

11: His Minor Years

SAM: Hello, Ghost Family. Welcome to *Family Ghosts*.

[FG Theme]

SAM: Back in 2012, Meara Sharma was traveling around India for a few months with her partner, Henry. And one day, in the city of Chennai, also known as Madras, they went to visit Meara's great uncle - who Meara had always called "Peripa."

MEARA: Peripa means "older father" — he's my grandfather's oldest brother. Peripa lived with his wife, who I call Perima, and his sister, Kunjathai. I was excited for Henry to finally meet them.

Henry: So we got to this apartment which was one apartment in a block of apartments. And I think we took an old elevator up to theirs. One of those elevators that has a grill you slide across instead of the solid doors.

In the house, the walls and floors were made of concrete. It was dark and austere. To see these three elderly people living there, in what vaguely resembled a prison cell, was a bit jarring. But there was some warmth: piles of books, the smell of spices, a big comfy couch. The three had been sharing a house for decades, and they always reminded me of the grandparents from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Mostly homebound, frail, nearly a century old...but they took care of each other, entertained each other, relied on each other.

Among them, Peripa was this monumental figure, a person who everyone in our family seemed to admire. He was tall and lanky -- and even in his 90s he had a graceful way of moving. I always thought of him as just a really upstanding man. He'd lived what seemed like a pretty conventional life: wife, four kids, steady job at a medical device company. But he had all these other interests. He was really good at chess. He was a math whiz. He spoke six languages, knew a lot about astronomy, poetry, history. There was always something about him that struck me as... special. Henry saw it too.

Henry: He had this great sparkle. This sort of twinkle in his eye.

So we sit down on the couch with some tea and biscuits, and start going through the usual pleasantries.

Henry: "how is everything? How was the trip? Where are you coming from?" And all the rest. And then got in to more personal questions about where you are in life, and what's going on. And that's where it happened.

Henry tells Peripa that he's been studying Arabic. And Peripa really lights up. He goes over to his bureau to get something.

Henry: A tiny notebook. It's about the size of two postage stamps. Probably two inches by one and a half. Something like that. Quite a thick kind of cloth binding. And it's on a keychain, it's that small. And the front, the cover is embroidered with sequins. Mostly silver and a few green sequins and little beads. So it was quite kind of shiny and sparkly. And it's empty except for in the first two pages, this slightly illegibly Arabic script that Peripa wrote in front of us when we were there.

I remember that moment feeling very charged. Like we'd been given a talisman. We said our goodbyes and got picked up by my uncle Kitchu. On the drive home, we told him about the notebook. He said, "Oh, yeah, Peripa was very good at Arabic. Didn't you know he had a Muslim lover?"

Uh, no... I did not.

Kitchu tells us how when Peripa was young man, he was a bit of a rebel. He ran away from home, worked in Bollywood, joined the army... and, he fell in love with a woman named Mehrunissa, from a Muslim family. Peripa's family - my family - are quite orthodox Hindus, so at the time the relationship was a huge scandal.

This was all news to me. I knew Peripa as stable family man -- wise, curious, engaged, yes, but not necessarily a rebel. I wanted to know this other side of him, this colorful past - a time before the dark concrete walls of his spartan apartment. I was intrigued.

And I wasn't alone.

Indra: You'd be playing, just come by and then you'd hear the elders talking about something that happened in the neighborhood or something that was not very comfortable in that community.

That's my aunt, Indra.

Indra: For example, there was one phrase with often occurred in my early teens would be [Tamil: Hope this isn't another Mehrunissa] Hopefully that's not another Mehrunissa story.

She says that we she was a kid, the story of Peripa and his Muslim lover was whispered about as a kind of cautionary tale.

But whenever she would ask, the whispers would abruptly end.

INDRA: That is nothing for you. Go away, go do your thing and okay, we forget about that.

[music out]

SAM: After Meara and Henry's visit with Peripa, they continued their travels around the southern part of India. They eventually made their way to Bangalore, to visit Meara's cousins.

Henry: And when we were leaving Bangalore to go over land on another long train journey, I remember cutting down things that were in my bag. And in the front of this little backpack that I was carrying were a lot of little bits and pieces that didn't need transporting to the next place. So, I took them out in a big pile and left them at the house of our hosts...And on the journey, on the train, I realized that I mistakenly left behind the notebook in that pile of belongings that I had left at the house.

MEARA: I was very sad we'd left the notebook behind. It felt like it was a real connection to Peripa, a little piece of history.

SAM: Meara and Henry returned to the US without the notebook. Henry tried repeatedly to reach Meara's cousins in Bangalore, and have the notebook shipped to them, but to no avail. Gradually, Meara resigned herself to the fact that the notebook was gone.

It was a long time before Meara was able make it back to India - six years, in fact. And during that time, Peripa passed away, at the age of 102.

MEARA: I finally went back to visit Peripa and Kunjathai, his wife and sister, at the apartment they still shared. They tell me about Peripa's death — how, on the day, he went through his usual routine - ate breakfast, drank coffee, read the newspaper, took a walk around the house. And then he quietly sat down on the couch, put his palms together in a prayer position, raised them over his head, and closed his eyes. That was his death.

So graceful and simple.

I start thinking about Peripa's so called rebel years, about which I still know only bits and pieces.

The following week, I travel from Chennai to Bangalore and visit the same cousins from 2012. And when I arrive, there's a package waiting for me. Inside, it's the notebook.

[music in]

The little notebook on a keychain, covered in green and silver sequins, with Peripa's writing inside.

SAM: From Spoke Media, and WALT, you're listening to *Family Ghosts*. I'm Sam Dingman, and this is episode 11: *His Minor Years*.

MEARA: It was an incredible confluence of events. Getting the notebook back felt like Peripa had kind of paid me a brief visit and dropped this off. Like he was telling me, go ahead, go forth... see what you can find.

SAM: Our story begins, after the break.

[AD BREAK 1]

SAM: Welcome back to *Family Ghosts*. This week, Meara Sharma is telling the story of her great-uncle, who she called Peripa - and a scandal that threatened to tear her family apart.

MEARA: Peripa's story begins in the city of Hyderabad in the early part of the 20th century. While most of India was under British colonial rule at that time, Hyderabad was its own kingdom, ruled by the Nizams — descendants of the famous Mughal Empire.

It was the richest of India's princely states.

JZ: The golconda diamond mines were there and a lot of those diamonds ended up in the coffers of the Nizams...

That's historian John Zubrzycki, author of *The Last Nizam: The Rise and Fall of India's Greatest Princely State*. Peripa was born in 1913, shortly after the 7th Nizam, Osman Ali Khan, came to power.

Osman Ali Khan transformed Hyderabad from a sleepy town to a modern city: building new universities, roads and dams, developing a reliable drinking water

supply, mandating primary education. He also ensured Indo-Muslim culture had a prominent place in the city.

JZ: Hyderabad always attracted the best, greatest, most talented muslim writers, artists, cultural figures in all of india. so it was quite an extraordinary place in that sense.

The Nizams were Muslims ruling over a majority Hindu population, but for the most part, there was a peaceful coexistence.

JZ: Osman Ali Khan said himself that the Hindus and Muslims are my two eyes. he didn't distinguish between his Hindu and Muslim subjects, at least in theory...Tolerance was reflected in the art and culture of Hyderabad.

In the midst of this moment of cultural flowering, Peripa was part of a particular group within the Hindu community - a Tamil brahmin family. Brahmins are upper caste Hindus, and they've historically worked in education or religion.

Indra: Peripa was born in very interesting times.

That's my aunt Indra again, Peripa's niece. She says that something remarkable happened when Peripa was young....

[music in]

...his parents left the small village where he and his four siblings were born, in the deep south of India, and came to Hyderabad, this foreign place that was not only far away, but ruled by Muslims. They were drawn by the prospect of work: the Nizam had been recruiting upper caste Hindus to work for the government, and Peripa's father got a job setting up schools and training teachers. The work was good, but integrating into this new world was challenging..

Indra: First, the food was different, so they could not eat or drink in each other's homes. The Brahmins, first of all, would not even eat or drink in any other community's home, let alone, a Muslim home where meat was eaten and cow and goat was eaten, so the utensils were polluted. While the Brahmins lifted the cup, but the cup never touched their lips.

Indra told me that the family's strict adherence to Tamil Brahmin customs resulted in a kind of self-imposed isolation from the Muslim community in Hyderabad.

Indra: ...you were greatest of friends, but you never ate or drank in their house. You never visited to sit down and that's the culture, so they needed the same kind of families to be a group of friends.

[music out]

And so the family lived on a street filled with other Tamil immigrants. It was a close-knit, warren-like neighborhood. In the mornings, after the women had cleaned and cooked for the day, they'd gather on someone's veranda and knit or sew and chat... There was very little privacy, and plenty of gossip. And as he got older, a lot of that gossip centered on Peripa.

Kitchu: I believe he was a really really fashionable person. He was always well dressed in a coat and a bow tie and a suit. He liked to be very smartly dressed.

That's my uncle Kitchu, the one who casually mentioned Peripa's scandalous past in the car that afternoon. Kitchu says Peripa was handsome, he rode a horse around the city, he loved writing and reciting Urdu poetry, speaking Hindi, socializing with Hyderabad's cosmopolitan set... I gather he was kind of a savant, a man about town. And he really pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable for a proper young Tamil man of that time.

Grandmother Pati: Oh, smoking, drinking, all kinds of things, illegal things he used to do.

That's my grandmother, who I call Pati. Her husband, my grandfather, who's no longer alive, was Peripa's younger brother. She says when Peripa was in his early twenties, their father lost his job working in the schools - and it's unclear why. My aunt Indra told me it's possible he missed a tax payment of some kind. But also:

Indra: One of the reasons they say is, at that time, the Muslim minority, who were becoming more and more militant, one of their members wanted that job.

And just as the money stopped coming in, he was diagnosed with diabetes, which at the time was often fatal. Peripa was the oldest son, but he wasn't inclined to take over any family responsibilities.

Indra: He never stayed at home. He was uncontrollable.

Peripa had just graduated from college, and despite his father's troubles, the family was willing to cut him some slack...for a while. There's a word that gets

used in Tamil: Minor. It's a relic of British influence in India, and it technically means 'the son of landed nobility.'

Indra: The minor sows their wild oats before they settle down to the family.... So those words were very popular, so they said, "Oh, it's his minor years. He'll come back."

Except, he didn't. He actually ran away, just as his father was descending deeper into illness. Peripa got on a train to Bombay. And somehow he managed to befriend a famous Bollywood screenwriter and director named K.A. Abbas.

According to my uncle Kitchu, Peripa's facility with language, particularly Hindi and Urdu, led him to tutor famous film stars in diction, or teach them the language altogether.

One of Peripa's tutees was Lalita Pawar, an actor who went on to have a 60 year career and become one of the icons of 20th century Bollywood.

[Clip from Lalita Pawar film]

This whole thing was a big scandal for Peripa's family. Good Tamil Brahmin boys don't go cavorting around Bollywood... especially when their father is incapacitated and the family needs them. And then, it got worse. The British were recruiting soldiers to fight in World War II. Peripa signed up.

Indra: Brahmans don't do that.

Again, my aunt Indra.

Indra: I mean, they don't join the army because a couple of things about armies was one is you have to eat other kind of food. The minute you ate non-Brahman type of food, like a meat or anything, you were already outcast those days. Somebody ran away to the army was like a totally wash out and you can kind of declare that person is gone kind of thing.

My uncle Kitchu said the family realized they had to do something drastic.

Kitchu: And they pulled a lot of strings to get him out of the army.

And pulling strings alone wasn't enough - my family knew Peripa wouldn't come back willingly. So they sent his brother in law on a rescue mission - he got on a train to what is now Pakistan, where Peripa was stationed, and tracked Peripa down. He demanded that Peripa come back to Hyderabad. Peripa agreed, but only because his younger brother, my grandfather, had gotten a scholarship to go study in England for a few years, and he wanted to see him off.

By this point, Peripa's father had passed away. And my grandfather, the second oldest son was about to go off to England. High time for Peripa to settle down and start earning. My aunt Indra says Peripa was at a crossroads.

[music in]

Indra: Peripa comes back, carefree young man who has lived in the movie world, who lived abroad, and did his own thing, managed to live for two, three years without his family's support, being asked to take over the burden of the traditional family. I don't think he liked it, I think he was still in the aura of all the things he had done.

And so... he took a different tack... one that, in the shadow of his time in Bollywood, seems fitting. He fell passionately in love with a woman who my uncle Kitchu described as "a princess."

Which...what?! A princess? I asked my grandmother Pati about this.

Meara: Kitchu told me.. was she a member of the royal family, or Nizam family, or something?

Pati: I think so. I think she's the member of a Nizam family because Nizam had 108 wives, you know.

Ok, so I guess that would sort of make her a princess. Her name was Mehrunissa. She was beautiful. Also, she was Muslim.

Pati: He will say, "I will go for a walk. I'll go to get something." And then, he'll walk off to that Muslim girl. And something will be disappearing in the house. He'll sell it and go off.

Meara: He'll sell it. He was taking stuff from the house?

Pati: Yeah, something from the house and like that.

So that was Peripa's scheme - he'd say, "I have to go run an errand," and on his way out, he'd swipe something from the family's house to sell, and use the money to go visit Mehrunissa.

Eventually his family caught on to what was happening. While Hindus and Muslims had long coexisted in Hyderabad, dating outside your religion — dating at all, really, was not a thing. And intermarriage? Absolutely not.

Peripa's family tried to reason with him - but my grandmother told me it was hopeless.

Pati: if they shout at him, he would walk away from the house, like that and all.

Peripa would simply wander away, ignoring the the family as they called after him. And then, one day, Peripa just didn't come home. He disappeared from the family... again.

SAM: Our story continues, after the break.

[AD BREAK 2]

SAM: Welcome back to *Family Ghosts*. This week, Meara Sharma is investigating the secret life of her great-uncle, who she called Peripa. Before the break, we learned that after fleeing his family once in the 1930's, Peripa ran off for a *second* time several years later, to pursue a relationship with a Muslim woman named Mehrunissa. And as we're about to learn, the relationship was even more serious than his family feared.

MEARA: According to my grandmother, eventually, Peripa converted to Islam, and he and Mehrunissa moved in together.

Meara: So they lived together?

Pati: That's right. They got a child. That's what somebody was telling.

Meara: So they lived together in Hyderabad?

Pati: In Hyderabad, near Charminar.

Charminar is the old city of Hyderabad, a predominantly Muslim area.

Meara: They lived together, and they maybe had a child?

Pati: They had a child, yes.

Meara: Do you know for sure?

Pati: Somebody told that.

I'm of the opinion that if someone mentions a child, there's probably a child. My aunt Indra is more definitive about this.

Indra: Oh, yeah, yeah, there was a child, definitely. Yeah. I think it was a girl. That's my thought on it, yeah.

So there was a child. As you might imagine, NONE of this - the marriage, the child, the conversion - was ok with Peripa's family. So their close knit group of Tamil friends finally banded together. It was time for another rescue mission.

[music in]

Indra: they got hold of help from some family members and actually went one day, dragged him out of the house, and brought him back home.

Mehrunissa's side of the family was, obviously, furious.

Indra: The brothers of the girl came knocking at the door with knives in their hands, saying they're going to take him....

Pati: We are going to kill him, So they hid him in a bathroom or in a lumber room, or something. They covered him with trash and all, and kept him for three days.

Pati says Peripa's family covered him in garbage to hide him. Indra remembers it a little differently...

Indra: My grandmother says, "I went into the garden to feed him in the night. We hid him in the backyard under the haystack..."

But either way, haystack or garbage pile, they kept him away from Mehrunissa's brothers. And then they snuck him out of the house under the cover of darkness.

Indra: they had to spirit him away from whatever means they could. The story I heard was he was taken away by some farmers going south.

This was all happening around the time of India's independence from the British, when Hindu Muslim relations were shifting dramatically. An extremist group that wanted Hyderabad to remain a separate Muslim country rather than join with the rest of India post independence, was gaining power. The Hindu population in Hyderabad was being targeted and driven out.

So Peripa's saga was unfolding in a fraught, uncertain political moment. And the family was genuinely concerned about a backlash. They feared that Mehrunissa's brothers might return to terrorize Peripa's two sisters.

Indra: And then they were worried, all the young girls in the house, they were be ravaged. So they had to pack the girls out to the village immediately.

Peripa's sisters went out to the village for awhile, and Peripa was safely ensconced in the Tamil Nadu capital Madras, far away from Mehrunissa.

[music in]

There's certainly sense of melodrama to all of this... especially because it is so deep in the past. But I just want acknowledge how traumatic this must have been for Peripa and Mehrunissa. They were young -- but they were in a real

relationship, they had a child, all despite their families' protestations. Imagine, then, being forcibly separated -- literally dragged apart. How unbelievably painful.

I don't know if Peripa protested. I don't know if he tried to escape back to Mehrunissa when his family hid him away. Maybe he was shocked into submission. Maybe he was just broken.

My grandmother once mentioned that a few days after Peripa was shipped off to Madras, Mehrunissa showed up in the Tamil neighborhood with their child. Apparently she asked for help, asked how to find Peripa. She was sent away. And this is where she disappears from my family's narrative of what happened.

[brief music transition]

Not long after, the rest of Peripa's family fled Hyderabad, fearing persecution -- some of it brought on by the political climate, and some of it brought on by Peripa. They traveled south to Madras. Peripa moved in with his older sister and his brother in law, who gave him a job at his medical device company. But even after they'd forcibly removed Peripa from the home he shared with Mehrunissa - or maybe because of it - the family was still wary of what he might do next. So once again, my uncle told me, they were forced to hatch a plan.

Kitchu: ...and then generally the solution for anybody who's at that time, or maybe even now, is to get them married.

In those days, the solution for young men who were behaving erratically was to, in the words of my uncle Kitchu, "Get them married." And Indra says they didn't have to wait long for a promising option to materialize.

Indra: Because peripa was working in a scientific organization, he had this BS degree and he looked very nice, wore Western clothes, and spoke English well. A very famous businessman wanted his daughter to be wed to him and Pati thought, "Okay, this is our savior."

Meara: Perfect opportunity...

But in spite of the degrees and the nice clothes, Peripa's reputation had followed him. The girl's father made an ultimatum.

Indra: That father of that girl said, "Okay, I know that you had trouble with this young man." After the wedding, apparently he said "Let him stay in my house. I want to educate my daughter, but I will make sure that he will have a good life and make sure that he doesn't get into trouble. But he has to come and stay in our house because apparently he didn't have a guiding principle in this house."

This did not bode well with Peripa's mother. A girl was supposed to come live in the boy's house, not the other way around. So Peripa's mother refused the man's offer. Which I found confusing - why wouldn't she just let him go? It was an ideal opportunity to settle him down. And wouldn't Peripa be anxious to get away from the family that had separated him from his beloved?

Indra: There was never any talk of whether he had a say in that matter. All it was was forever we would say Pati did not allow him to live in that man, the man's house.

Meara: Hm. I guess the idea of losing him was very powerful. You know, she really didn't want let him go.

Indra: They had already lost hm for 10, 20 years, they didn't want to lose him again.

The refusal to let Peripa live in his wife's father's house doomed the marriage - and before long, the couple got divorced... yet another huge scandal.

[music in]

So...the family needed to get Peripa married...again. Now that he was both divorced and trailed by the story of Mehrunissa, it was getting harder and harder to find prospects. His mother managed to find a distant relative, a woman named Lakshmi, who was in the midst of her own travails. She'd been basically living as an indentured servant in a wealthy family's home.

Indra: She and her three sisters were born into a family where her dad lost all the family money. Sold the land to go live with a prostitute. The word I use, "prostitute", is bad, somebody who was a dancer. So, he abandoned his children, lost all the money in gambling and whatever and loose living.

Lakshmi and her two sisters were divided up amongst the homes of people in the area, where they had some hope for a more stable life. But it meant that she and Peripa had something in common - nobody wanted to marry her, either. Which is how Lakshmi became Perima.

Perima was strong-willed - a notorious taskmaster from the beginning. She was determined to be Peripa's savior... to keep him in line. I imagine it was also about imposing order on her own life, after she'd dealt with so much as a young woman.

Not long after Perima and Peripa were married, tragedy struck again.

Indra: ...that same year, another very sad incident happened was Kujante's husband had committed suicide in the village.

Kunjathai, you might recall, is Peripa's younger sister.

Indra: And so they needed somebody to take care of all these problems and they felt Perima was the one to keep the family together.

After Kunjathai's husband's suicide, she moved in with Perima and Peripa. That's when they became the close-knit trio living together in that simple apartment.

Maybe it was the seriousness of that event — the suicide of his brother in law — that kind of woke Peripa up. Maybe he thought: my issues pale in comparison to this. Or maybe he'd grown up and was ready to settle down... or he was simply tired of fighting against his family and the world he was expected to fall into. Whatever the reason, this is the moment where he began the life I knew about. He had four daughters. He kept working at the medical device company. He lived with Perima in Madras for the rest of his life.

I ask my grandmother if Peripa stayed in touch with Mehrunissa.

Pati: I don't know anything about that.

Meara: Did he used to talk about it?

Pati: No. But while talking, he'll say, "If I had been with the Muslim girl, I would've been very more happy than with you. I could've made some chicken and..."

Meara: He'll say that to Perima?

Pati: Yes, to Perima.

It's kind of surprising, hearing that Peripa would joke with his wife about Mehrunissa... how he would've been able to eat meat if he'd been with her, how he wouldn't have had to follow all those strict Hindu traditions.

But it's also heartening. It suggests to me that even though that history was largely suppressed, it was still there. Their relationship was able to withstand it. They could acknowledge it, be a little light about it. It makes me think that it wasn't all just functional.

That they were able to see each other for who they were.

But still, for years after, there were anxieties. Our family never had gatherings in Hyderabad - they were scared that Peripa would be recognized on the street - that Mehrunissa's family might come after him with knives again.

[music out]

For most of my life, I knew nothing about Peripa's past. He was always the family man, the patriarch. And then when I started to discover this other side him, his desire to strike out on his own, do something different... I was in awe. This young man, growing up in a tumultuous era, in an extremely orthodox family, trying to do his own thing. Break with tradition, make his own rules. How bold... how admirable.

I think when I began this story I was seduced by this idea -- that he was this free spirit, but born in the wrong era. It was a way for me to connect with him. I saw myself in him. But the more I learn, the more my feelings about him keep shifting. He left his mother and his younger siblings behind when his father was jobless and dying. He caused all sorts of fear and angst after he married Mehrunissa, and then he didn't seem to own up to his decisions. Did Peripa truly want to carve his own path? Or was he just reckless? Did he really want freedom? Or was he too overwhelmed by the responsibilities that were landing on him... and just, closed his eyes? Ran away?

And what about this child...what happened to her?

SAM: Coming up, Meara searches for the aunt she may or may not have. We'll be right back.

[AD BREAK 3]

MEARA: I wouldn't even know about Peripa's story if it weren't for that off-hand remark made by my uncle Kitchu. As my aunt Indra said, it was pretty much the same thing for her when she was a kid...

Indra: you'd be playing, and then you'd hear the elders talking about something that happened in the neighborhood or something that was not very comfortable in that community. ... For example, there was one phrase with often occurred in my early teens would be [Tamil: Hope this isn't another Mehrunissa] Hopefully that's not another Mehrunissa story.

Peripa's life became this cautionary tale, but one that was never fully explained.

Meara: Of course all families have that tendency to suppress, but do you think that there's something unique about the kind of family that we're a part of like Tamil Brahmin in particular?

Indra: Well, Tamil Brahmin are a unique group. The I would say personally, we are in a way arrogant about our intellect. You automatically you're supposed to be good

*in learning, good in science, mathematics, good in the arts. You knew how to sing.
You knew how to dance.*

But no amount of status can shield a family from scandal.

[music in]

Indra: Like all families, like all men come, everybody has the red blood, but really none of us have blue blood, so there are skeletons to hide. There are stories to be not aired. There are stories to be aired and shared with others, so I think we are just another family, but Tamil Brahmins tend to whitewash the old stories or the negative stories.

It all harkens back to the experience of Peripa's family when they first moved to Hyderabad from their small village in southern India... that forced isolation experienced by so many Tamil Brahmin families.

Indra: They would go work in these offices as clerks and masters and assistants doing what the white man wanted, but the minute they stepped back into their home, those clothes that they wear to these officers were discarded to be kept separately. They took a shower back. Their old clothes of through them have started putting back the forehead mark, and they immediately transformed into the household of the Tamil Brahmin, so in order to earn money, you are ready to step out of the door, go do these things, but you always came back to the fold of the household, sat on the floor, ate your food from a banana leaf and sort of recited your sacred hymns and observed all the sacraments of the Hindu family.

This kind of family comes first attitude... this pull to the home base, to tradition, to the norm... it runs deep. It's really the most important thing. And it means people are unlikely to spill the beans about something a little more deviant, especially if it means tarnishing that high-achieving reputation.

[music out]

I keep coming across this. Every time I ask the older generation about Peripa's past, particularly about Mehrunissa, and the lost child, they brush it away.

[Tape in Tamil]

I send uncle Kitchu to talk with Perima in Madras.

He asks her about other weddings before hers with Peripa, and she says she doesn't want to talk about it. It's old stuff, it wasn't a big deal. Peripa was a great person. He did so much. We don't need to talk about that.

So... the likelihood of finding Mehrunissa or her descendents is looking increasingly bleak. The marriage between her and Peripa was likely performed in accordance with Islamic law, and wouldn't have been recorded by the state of Hyderabad... and even if it was, this was pre-independence India. Those records are probably long gone. But there is one thing that keeps coming up in conversation...

[music in]

Indra: I'll see if I can find any of Thatha's papers and we can find out, yeah.

Meara: So this might be in those letters?

Indra: In those letters, correct, correct.

Thatha is my grandfather, Peripa's younger brother. Thatha and Peripa were close - it was Thatha's departure for university in England that lured Peripa back from Pakistan the first time he ran away. Indra and my mom, Nalini, seem to think that Peripa probably wrote to Thatha in detail about all the drama with Mehrunissa.

Nalini: They would talk to each other in Urdu and write letters to each other in Urdu because they both grew up in Hyderabad and were educated in the Urdu language.

Maybe in those letters he says her full name, or where she lived exactly, or who her father was -- anything that might help me find her, or her child, today.

Nalini: I mean if you find some of those letters that would give us more clues as to where she lived or maybe the address, return addresses. That definitely we could gather ... put together a lot of clues and track them.

First, my grandmother says she thinks the letters are in Boston. So I do some digging.

[Tape of basement rummaging]

No luck.

My mom says, maybe the letters in India with uncle Kitchu! I ask Kitchu.

He says no, nothing here. I think they're in Salt Lake City with your aunt Indra!

In my gut I feel like this is a wild goose chase. But I decide to make a trip to Salt Lake City anyway -- if nothing else, I get to visit my aunt.

Meara: Ok let's see her. Medical records. State bank of Hyderabad....

I spend about two days going through box after box of old stuff.

Meara: Pension, rubix cube. Printouts of every email he ever wrote basically.

By the end of day two, I'm really starting to question whether these letters actually exist. My aunt Indra finds me...frustrated.

[music out]

*Meara: He kept literally everything he has, all of his medical records, every pension for every single thing, every piece of paper that he ever appeared on, and yet-
Indra: I think these old letters may either be still in India, and if it was left in India, the next set of people who cleaned up after him might have thrown it away thinking it's unimportant, or they might have said, "Why rake up these old stories? Who's interested in it?"*

Maybe these letters were full of information, information so threatening that were deliberately destroyed... part of that great tradition of selective memory. But I'm not convinced they'd be that useful anyway. They seem too good to be true. A silver bullet that tells me everything I need to know. But conveniently... no one can find them! They're a perfect way to hide the story while pretending not to.

[music in]

I think back to that visit to Peripa in 2012, a year before his 100th birthday, three years before he died. I remember feeling that even then, so near the end, he had a force. Henry noticed it too.

Henry: It was really touching. Here was this man in his nineties, quite hunched over but dedicated to passing on this message in the notebook. And his excitement and joy, making the connection was really palpable.

I don't know why Peripa had that notebook handy. It was really a bizarre object, almost too small to be useful. But there it was - a sparkly little notebook, and on the first page, that bit of script Henry couldn't quite decipher. That day, despite

his frailty, Peripa had the energy to run over to his bureau, scribble a few lines, and give us this parting gift.

While I wasn't making any breakthroughs in Salt Lake City about Mehrunissa's identity, I *was* finally able to identify those lines of Arabic Peripa wrote in the notebook.

The inscription reads:

Zindagi ka saaz bhi Kya saaz hai
Bujh raha hai aur be awaz hai

It turns out this is an excerpt from an Urdu poem, which was adapted to become song lyrics in a 1930's Bollywood movie. The movie tells the story of ill-fated lovers - and the woman's name is Mehrunissa.

[music in]

When I discover this, my mind begins to race with questions.

What was Peripa trying to communicate? Had this story been on Peripa's mind his whole life, no matter how much he seemed to have shut himself off?

By now it was clear that the chances of me finding Mehrunissa - or the child she and Peripa might have had - were slim to none. Whatever evidence might've existed had long ago been lost.

But maybe I can take some meaning from the lines of poetry themselves. The translation is:

*This song of life, oh what a melody it is
Even as it ebbs, it makes itself heard*

[music out]

One afternoon in my aunt's library, on a last ditch search for the letters, I come across a small black album. It's full of really old photos. They're black and white, and only about 3 inches by 2 inches. There are pictures of my great grandparents in Hyderabad. My grandfather's younger siblings, playing in the courtyard. My grandparents' wedding.

And then finally, a photo of Peripa. He hadn't been in any of the group shots. But there he is. He looks about thirty. He has a strong jaw, and he's wearing circular glasses. He's striking. He's staring at the camera, leaning back slightly, like he's got something to say but is holding it in.

I wish I could just hear all of this from him.

But to hear my Aunt Indra tell it - even if Peripa were here, I don't know how much he'd tell me about it.

Indra: ...when we knew Peripa in the later years, he never spoke about it, that's all he would do. He would chew tobacco and say all that's old story. There's no need to repeat, that's all he would say, That's a famous phrase in Tamil. I'll say it in Tamil. It's so melodious, "[Tamil]", that means, "It's all gone. Why worry about it now?"

Meara: This idea that Peripa ... a switch flipped and he was like, "Okay, I'll just do it. I'll just accept this other life."

Indra: Yeah. As if he gave up all his dreams, all his personality, all his traits, "You want me to be this. I'll be this."

And that's the complicated portrait I'm left with - this image of Peripa as a young, flamboyant, adventurous spirit who goes off and does all this stuff...and the person that he ends up being.... Upstanding, gray, strong, very thin and reserved. That's how I remember him. And clearly there was something underneath that was different - that little spark. But Indra told me it wasn't easy for him to keep it alive.

Indra: I don't ever remembering him going out with friends or doing something else that was not part of the family need. It was Peripa who said, "Oh we'll go to this wedding, we'll go to this get together and you shall come dressed like this". She'll say, [Tamil], which means don't go into your spiels and stories there, keep quiet. And he kept quiet. I always wondered if he started chewing tobacco as an excuse to keep quiet. I never knew it, but there was a tale saying that he would come home drunk and Pati would nurse him back from his stupor and feed him, and then he would vanish.

Meara: Yeah he shut off a part of himself.

Indra: He shut off a part of himself. At that time he didn't have the means to fight it anymore, he just gave up. And maybe giving up worked out alright because the family was not bad, they survived the did well. So why not. Do you think it would have been happier living in that household with a Muslim family and changing his name and doing his thing, maybe, maybe not. Would he have hankered after the traditions of his

old home, maybe, we don't know. Who are we to judge which is the right fork you take in the road?

[music out]

Indra has a point. And yet - I can't help feeling like the road Peripa ultimately traveled was not the fork he chose. It was chosen for him - over and over and over again.

I keep wondering if Peripa was somehow attached to the idea of his life resembling a Bollywood movie. Maybe that's why he moved to Bombay and worked in the film industry when he was young. And maybe it's why he held onto those romantic lines of poetry... like they were his mantra. I mean, his story has a classic arc. Boy from a conservative family breaks free... learns the ways of the world... gets a taste of pleasure, independence, freedom.

His family tries to pull him back, but he's already fallen in love... with the wrong person. Chaos ensues.

[Bollywood tape]

Except in the Bollywood version, Peripa and Mehrunissa definitely would've ended up together. In the closing scene, there probably would have been a big green meadow set against mountains and lakes. The couple would've run toward each other, met in the middle, embraced amid the flowers. Dancers would've popped up, out of nowhere, and performed an elaborate musical theater number. There would have been several costume changes.

I think about the last time I saw Peripa, in that grey, austere, concrete walled apartment. It's a very different image from the Bollywood story his life could have been. But I don't want to pity him. He made his choices. He helped create an amazing family. He touched a lot of people.

Meara: How do you think ... what do you think my generation should take from Peripa's story? What can we learn from it?

Indra: One thing is the family obligations, don't forget them. They have sacrificed a lot to get the generations up and going. Your question is always, "Why didn't Paripa

protest and do what he wanted, the free bird thing?" But among our communities, this obligation, what shall I call it? Along with rights come responsibilities. Sometimes the responsibilities are overwhelming, but they are tried and true and have been practiced.

Meara: Yeah, I totally hear that. But at the same time, I think something that I take from Peripa's story is I feel a connection to him precisely because he seems like he wanted to do things a little differently. He had some level of drive to do things differently, to experiment. For me, I feel like I'm growing up in a different time where it's actually much more feasible for me to pursue what I want to do and how I want to live.

Indra: You have the means and you have opportunity.

Meara: Yeah, and I also, in a way, I have the privilege of doing that, and I feel like I need to seize that privilege and use it.

[music in]

Indra: Each generation has what we call as, oh, that's a very nice Tamil word for it [eley] or the "edge", the boundary for ... we all keep crossing boundaries to expand our world. That happens to every generation. The boundaries are different. Then when we read old history, old tales, we actually color those histories and tails with the boundaries of this generation and make it all look very nice and rosy. But what we don't grasp is the great thing that happened was those boundaries were different. The communication was different. Therefore it was a great thing that they did, right? That is the important story. Yeah, they pushed the edge.

I'm not sure those lines of Urdu poetry in the notebook are the right epigram for Peripa's life. In the end, there's a different pair of lines I keep coming back to, from the novelist Kazuo Ishiguro: "There was another life that I might have had, but I am having this one."

[music out]

[FG Theme in]

SAM: *Family Ghosts* is hosted and produced by me, Sam Dingman, with Odelia Rubin, Jennifer Lai, Jacob Smith, Lindsey Kratochwill, Jenna Hannum, and Janielle Kastner. Our story editor is Micaela Blei. This episode was mixed by Evan Arnett, and featured original music by Ben Levin. That voice you heard singing in Urdu at the end is Shilpa Ananth. Fact checking by Greta Rainbow.

Executive producers for season two are myself, along with Keith Reynolds and Alia Tavakolian at Spoke Media. For bonus material from this story, and all our stories, please visit our website, familyghostspodcast.com, where you can also sign up for our email list, the Ghost Post. If you'd like to follow our show on Twitter and Instagram, you find us at famghoshow - that's f-a-m-g-h-o-show. Stay tuned after the credits for a sneak preview of next week's show - and thank you for listening to *Family Ghosts* - where every house is haunted.