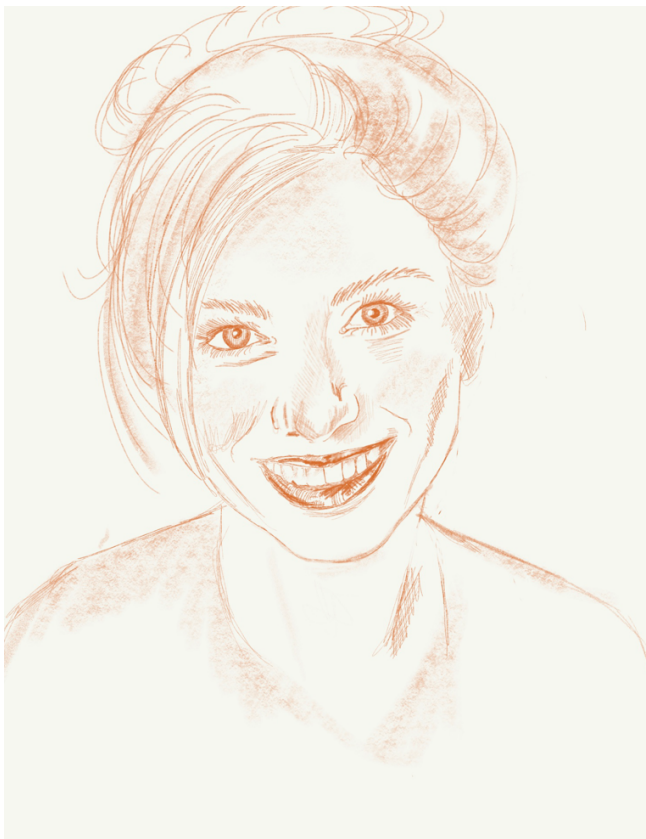


*Written by Lilan Laleh Lemouchi*

*The Growth of Care: from root to bloom  
Reflections on a dialogue with my auntie Bitá*

In Mashhad, Iran, forty-nine years ago, seeds of care were planted in the soft, tranquil heart of Bitá as she was born into our big world. As she grew, her culture surrounded them with eager handfuls of soil and spilt generous cups of water onto their roots. This nourishment raised her. Iran taught her how to cook, dance, and fill her belly with flavours of love; it was where her Mama and Mamani showed her how to be a mama, where her baby girl was born. It was the site of vibrant life and passion for her heritage. However, a powerful patriarchal fog encompassed her family and the sociopolitical sphere of her life, under which those seeds of care morphed into something troublesome for Bitá. This care paradigm is what we delved into in our discussion.

The revolution interrupted just as Iran was beginning to hear women's voices, and its story of womanhood was not one that Bitá could become herself within. Soon, she found it difficult to find any trace of herself in this notion of care; it was servitude, care from the head, "caring to

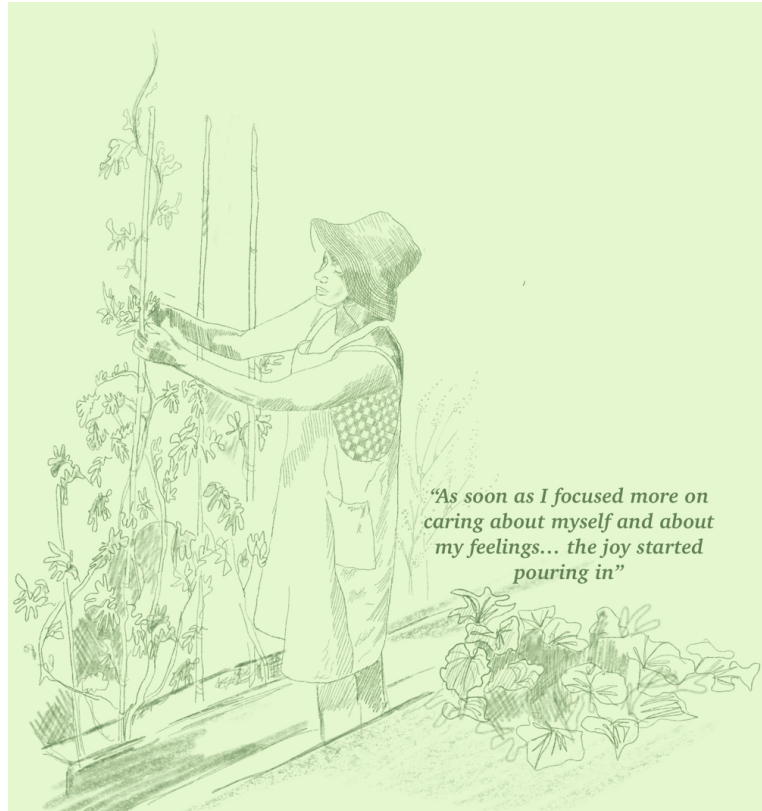


please," she reflected, "not from the heart". Expectations of femininity and nurturing became a force of oppression upon her personhood. As Scheyett (1990) notes, women have to care about and for people in all directions; beyond emotionality, care for women can become "non-optional, unrecognised, unrewarded labour that ... restricts self-exploration and self-determination" (Scheyett, 1990, p.34). In the tight enclosure of patriarchy, care becomes oppressive, and in the suffocating hands of capitalism, it becomes exploitation. This oppression is elusive; it has roots in our emotions, hearts, and definitions of certain acts and feelings. As Sara Ahmed (2017) reverberates from the second-wave feminist movement, "the personal is political... patriarchal reasoning goes all the way down, to the letter, to the bone" (p.4), to the soul.

*Image: hand drawn by myself, 2022.  
'Bitá's Portrait'*

Bitá watched her Mama's rebellion against this: her dissent led to further subjugation. So, seeking a different future, Bitá left.

MacRae (1995) describes "caring as a route to self-meaning" for women (p.149). Looking past patriarchal enforcement, caring and giving imbue lives with a deep sense of purpose (MacRae, 1995). Bitá and I agreed that caring is "the force towards happiness and healing for all



*"As soon as I focused more on caring about myself and about my feelings... the joy started pouring in"*

in our society". However, we also discussed how women and girls are educated into altruism from a young age but rarely taught to receive, something I could deeply relate to. In Bitá's first-ever series of self-serving decisions - moving to London, leaving her husband, changing careers - she realised the power of her care as she enacted it more intentionally. She met herself for the first time. A different kind of society was giving her the space to reexamine those original seeds she had been growing, and rediscover what giving and loving means in a new, less patriarchally dominated context. Ever since I was a teenager, watching Bitá meet and nurture herself has been an enlightenment into a kind of liberated womanhood that I had not seen before. So many

older women in my life remain subdued, silenced and scared to act subversively against patriarchal norms. Bitá shows me how much beauty there is waiting for me in that act of resistance through re-channelled and rebellious care.

What Bitá noticed about England is that here the malformed masculinities and pressures of patriarchy hurt people just like anywhere else. Patriarchy may look and act different, but the scars it leaves on everyone are the same kinds of marks of repression, oppression and sadness that Bitá had seen on herself, her family and her society in Iran. It transcends genders, geographies and generations. This intersectional awareness shaped her present-day definition of feminism, oriented around care, love and reclamation, but most essentially: balance. For women to be free from the caring paradigm, others must learn to care and reverse the act of giving. Feminism for Bitá is about learning to receive, from herself, the universe, people around her, whilst giving from the heart, instead of enacting a nurturing that empties her. This interpretation inspires me beyond words.

Bitá's care garden transforms as she transports it to different atmospheres and nourishes it with waters from new and curious streams. It grows bountiful the more she finds a balance between closing her gate to sit alone in the sunlight soaked greenery and inviting people in to eat from her ripe tomato plants and drink from the honeysuckle's stems. "Isn't this life," she giggles, "changing from one shape to another whilst our essence, our roots, stay the same."

*Image: hand drawn by myself, 2022.  
'Bitá and her tomato plants'*

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