

CONSIDERING
TOPICS FOR YOUR
OWN ESSAY

In one sense, the event Ellis writes about was tragic: The news his father broke to him was of an illness that led to his death a few short months later. Ellis tells us, however, that the event had an unexpectedly positive side effect: It gave him an opportunity to help his dad and get to know him in a new way. For your own essay, you, too, might consider writing about an event that had an unexpectedly positive outcome. Ellis's essay also suggests the possibility of writing about an event that challenged your preconceptions or prejudices. Ellis tells us that learning about his father's sexual orientation challenged his "own juvenile homophobia" (par. 3). As you consider these possible topics, think about your purpose and audience. What would you want your instructor and classmates to learn about you from reading about this particular event?



SAIRA SHAH, a British journalist and documentary filmmaker, won the Courage Under Fire and Television Journalist of the Year awards for her reporting on Afghan guerrillas fighting the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, as well as the Persian Gulf War and the conflict in Kosovo. She is best known in the United States for her undercover documentary films about the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, *Beneath the Veil* (2001) and *Unholy War* (2002), as well as for *Death in Gaza* (2004), about children caught in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The following selection, adapted from Shah's autobiography, *The Storyteller's Daughter* (2003), tells what happened when, at the age of seventeen, she visited her father's Afghan relatives in Pakistan. In an interview, Shah explains: "When I was growing up, I had this secret doubt — which I couldn't even admit to myself — that I was not at all an Afghan because I was born in Britain to a mixed family." As you read, think about the way Shah conveys her anxiety about her identity.

LONGING TO BELONG

Saira Shah

The day he disclosed his matrimonial ambitions for me, my uncle sat me at his right during lunch. This was a sign of special favor, as it allowed him to feed me choice tidbits from his own plate. It was by no means an unadulterated pleasure. He would often generously withdraw a half-chewed delicacy from his mouth and lovingly cram it into mine — an Afghan habit with which I have since tried to come to terms. It was his way of telling me that I was valued, part of the family.

My brother and sister, Tahir and Safia, and my elderly aunt Amina and I were all attending the wedding of my uncle's son. Although my uncle's home was closer than I'd ever been, I was not yet inside Afghanistan. This branch of my family lived in Peshawar, Pakistan. On seeing two unmarried daughters in the company of a female

1

2

chaperone, my uncle obviously concluded that we had been sent to be married. I was taken aback by the visceral longing I felt to be part of this world. I had never realized that I had been starved of anything. Now, at 17, I discovered that like a princess in a fairy tale, I had been cut off from my origins. This was the point in the tale where, simply by walking through a magical door, I could recover my gardens and palaces. If I allowed my uncle to arrange a marriage for me, I would belong.

3 Over the next few days, the man my family wished me to marry was introduced into the inner sanctum. He was a distant cousin. His luxuriant black mustache was generally considered to compensate for his lack of height. I was told breathlessly that he was a fighter pilot in the Pakistani Air Force. As an outsider, he wouldn't have been permitted to meet an unmarried girl. But as a relative, he had free run of the house. Whenever I appeared, a female cousin would fling a child into his arms. He'd pose with it, whiskers twitching, while the women cooed their admiration.

4 A huge cast of relatives had assembled to see my uncle's son marry. The wedding lasted nearly 14 days and ended with a reception. The bride and groom sat on an elevated stage to receive greetings. While the groom was permitted to laugh and chat, the bride was required to sit perfectly still, her eyes demurely lowered. I didn't see her move for four hours.

5 Watching this tableau vivant of a submissive Afghan bride, I knew that marriage would never be my easy route to the East. I could live in my father's mythological homeland only through the eyes of the storyteller. In my desire to experience the fairy tale, I had overlooked the staggeringly obvious: the storyteller was a man. If I wanted freedom, I would have to cut my own path. I began to understand why my uncle's wife had resorted to using religion to regain some control — at least in her own home. Her piety gave her license to impose her will on others.

6 My putative fiancé returned to Quetta, from where he sent a constant flow of lavish gifts. I was busy examining my hoard when my uncle's wife announced that he was on the phone. My intended was a favorite of hers; she had taken it upon herself to promote the match. As she handed me the receiver, he delivered a line culled straight from a Hindi movie: "We shall have a love-match, ach-cha?" Enough was enough. I slammed down the phone and went to find Aunt Amina. When she had heard me out, she said: "I'm glad that finally you've stopped this silly wild goose chase for your roots. I'll have to extricate you from this mess. Wait here while I put on something more impressive." As a piece of Islamic one-upmanship, she returned wearing not one but three head scarves of different colors.

7 My uncle's wife was sitting on her prayer platform in the drawing room. Amina stormed in, scattering servants before her like chaff. "Your relative . . ." was Amina's opening salvo, ". . . has been making obscene remarks to my niece." Her mouth opened, but before she could find her voice, Amina fired her heaviest guns: "Over the telephone!"

8 "How dare you!" her rival began.

9 It gave Amina exactly the opportunity she needed to move in for the kill. "What? Do you support this lewd conduct? Are we living in an American movie? Since when have young people of mixed sexes been permitted to speak to each other on the telephone? Let alone to talk — as I regret to inform you your nephew did — of love! Since when has love had anything to do with marriage? What a dangerous and absurd concept!"

brockford?

V. 15h

My Peshawari aunt was not only outclassed; she was out-Islamed too. “My niece is a rose that hasn’t been plucked,” Amina said. “It is my task as her chaperone to ensure that this happy state of affairs continues. A match under such circumstances is quite out of the question. The engagement is off.” My uncle’s wife lost her battle for moral supremacy and, it seemed, her battle for sanity as well. In a gruff, slack-jawed way that I found unappealing, she made a sharp, inhuman sound that sounded almost like a bark.

MAKING CONNECTIONS: SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

This essay is titled “Longing to Belong” because Shah is writing about a time in her life when she felt “cut off from [her] origins” and was searching for her identity (par. 2). Shah’s search took her to her father’s homeland, where she discovered that she did not want to fit in, after all. With other students in your class, discuss something you have learned about your own search for identity.

Begin by telling one another about an occasion when you tried to discover or recover some part of your identity — perhaps, like Shah, by visiting or researching a place you or your parents used to live. Alternatively, you may have tried to reinvent yourself in some other interesting or unique way — such as taking on a new hobby, trying out for a play or team, doing volunteer work, or actively seeking out new acquaintances. Together, discuss what you learned from this experience of searching for identity:

- How successful was your search?
- What do you think leads people to this kind of search? What led you?
- Clearly, Shah’s family, community, ethnic, or religious traditions affected her ideas about identity. What influences your ideas about identity?

ANALYZING WRITING STRATEGIES

Basic Features

● A Well-Told Story

Dialogue is a narrating strategy that helps writers dramatize a story. Hearing what was said and how it was said can also help readers identify with or at least understand the writer’s point of view and also give us an impression of the speakers. There are two ways to present dialogue: *dramatizing* or *summarizing* it.

Dramatized dialogue reconstructs what was said. You can easily identify dramatized dialogue because it uses quotation marks. Most writers (Brandt is an exception) include speaker tags identifying the speakers and describing them in some way. Here is an example:

It was a long time before he could speak. I had some difficulty at first recalling why we were there. My lips felt swollen; I couldn’t see out of the sides of my eyes; I kept coughing.

“You stupid kids,” he began perfunctorily.

We listened perfunctorily indeed, if we listened at all, for the chewing out was redundant, a mere formality, and beside the point. . . . (Dillard, pars. 17–19)