

Sanam MAHER

Being True to a Story

In the 14 years of being a journalist, only twice have I tried to tell the complete story of someone's life. In both instances, my subjects were women. I had known the first one my whole life, my mother; and never met or interacted with the second. My work on them was linked intrinsically and would inform my approach to telling a true—a real—story, even though I did not know it at the time.

In July 2016, I was commissioned to write about my mother. She had five daughters and was the first woman in Pakistan to become a maxillofacial surgeon—the first in her family to pursue an education and career to the extent of leaving her home country to study and work abroad. She did it all while struggling with addiction and mental illness. I wrote the piece with her permission and interviewed her several times. I joked that I hardly needed to do that because I had been doing in-depth research for this piece for 30-something years. But the truth is, the details eluded me. In small acts of self-preservation over the years, I had erased much of the record of who she had been and all that she had done, and now I could not rely on her to be a reliable narrator of that record, to help me piece it together. Our conversations felt rushed. There was so much I needed to know. It felt like the first time we were meeting as adult women. But this was only a brief period of clarity for her, and she relapsed soon after. The resulting piece was not just about the stigma of mental illness and addiction in a conservative culture but also an elegy—the person I had known and loved was gone. A stranger had taken her place, and that felt like the most real, undeniable fact, the only thing I could write about with certainty. My first lesson in creating a record: the missing pieces, the erasures are all an crucial parts of the story if you let them be.

That story did well enough to catch the attention of editors who offered me a book deal. Ten days later, a young social media celebrity named Qandeel Baloch was killed. She was a rebel: the first in her family to live, work and earn the way she did—leaving a village in southern Punjab and becoming a household name across Pakistan. We were consuming every photograph and video of her, and we thought we knew her. As it turned out, her real name was not even Qandeel, and she had hidden almost all the details of her life while managing to become one of the most well-known faces in the country. I immediately knew I wanted to work on her story. Over the coming months, I hoarded information about her, meeting anyone that had even the briefest interaction with her, poring over her videos, tweets, pictures, and diary entries. It took me some time to realize that the story I wanted to tell was not the “real story” of Qandeel but that of her audience—those who were fascinated by her but took pleasure in her brutal erasure. The curated persona that had held us in its gaze was as important as any biographical details I had scavenged.

I am a reporter, and it is my job to find the truth in any story—any situation—any place. Okay—let's think of the facts reporters have told you—an American audience, about the place I come from and the people I know. “A poor chaotic country of more than 200 million” led by a “craggily handsome,” “former cricket star,” and “playboy-turned-politician.” After September 11, 2001, we were a “hornet's nest,” “the ally from hell,” “the most dangerous nation in the world.” My home city of Karachi is more likely to be the subject of a travel advisory than a guide: in 1947, the *New York Times* scoffed that “all of Karachi looks like the wrong side of the railroad tracks,” and by 2012, *Time* branded the city “Pakistan's dark heart... dangerous, chaotic, ungovernable.” Somehow, we get by.

In the time of social media, I believe everyone can tell their own story. As we learn about narratives that have been pushed to the margins, erased, or falsified, and are in the process of rewriting our

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histories, we must ask ourselves whether it is more important to promise “the whole truth and nothing but” or to acknowledge our limitations and to try and write what means something to us. The pretense of objectivity has been abandoned. We are part of the stories we tell—why pretend otherwise?

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