

Haram Means It's Forbidden

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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Date: 6 February 2022

This thesis consists of a mixture of English, Afrikaans, Cape Slang, and Arabic words. Refer to the glossary on pages 147 – 152 to help you understand certain aspects of the novella.

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PROLOGUE:

There are five concrete steps before me. I trek up each one, with my eyes downturned. Right foot first – I’ve always whispered that to myself before entering any mosque. My gaze is still hazy. I made a lot of mistakes last night, and, honestly, I should not be here at mosque, but my feet have compelled me. In fact I’ve made a lot of mistakes over this past few weeks. Weirdly, being here at the entrance of the mosque brings me comfort.

As I enter the mosque, the tall wooden doors greet me with peace but there were many times that I didn’t feel welcome here. Behind me, pasted on the door, is the Arabic transliteration of the *du’ah* one says whilst entering mosque, so I turn around, and silently sound out each syllable.

Allahoem maf tahlie abwaaba rahmatieka.

I look around. The mosque is filled with faces I’ve seen my entire life – the men who regularly attend our neighbourhood mosque here in Woodstock, Cape Town.

When I was younger, I had learned from my uncle, *Boeta* Rashied, that whenever entering the mosque, one must perform a special *salaah* – to greet Allah and the mosque. I kick off my flipflops – never go to mosque with expensive shoes, irrespective of the occasion – and I place the flipflops within one of the square wooden shoe shelves. I’m not supposed perform any *salaah* in this current state, but, as I’ve said, I’m compelled.

I whisper another *du’ah*, looking into my cupped hands and commence my wudhu. The tap is opened slowly. Water is a blessing from Allah, it must be used sparingly. One. Two. Three. I begin washing my hands. *Bismillahi rahmaan niraheem*. Everything is done in three, just as our Prophet Muhammad, *Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam*, had done in his life time. One. Two. Three times. I gargle my mouth. “*Bismillahi rahmaan niraheem*,” I remind myself to whisper it softly between each action. Slowly I clean out my nose. Splash the water on my face. Right arm. Left arm. All done in three. The *wudhu* is a meticulous ritual that must be done correctly. Forehead. Ears. Right foot. Left foot. I must be clean when I stand in front of Allah – physically and mentally.

After I complete my *wudhu*, I motion towards the *salaah* area of the mosque. The carpet of the *salaah* area, which is made up of many rows, still smells the same after all these years:

there's a mixture of incense and vague stench of feet. Within each row of the carpet are designated rectangular blocks for one to stand in and pray, and inside each rectangular block is a geometric shape resembling the holy *Masjid al-Haram* in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. There is something about stepping on the carpet of any mosque that puts my feet at ease. Perhaps these unique carpets are designed to remove the pain from our bodies that seeps out from our feet? I don't know what the trick is. But, nonetheless, as I look down, I realise that I am stuck. I cannot complete my *salaah*, as the memories of these past few weeks, both wanted and enclosed, rush before my eyes.

Allahu Akbar. That is all I need to say. It's so easy to perform this *salaah*, or greeting of the mosque. All I need to do is raise my hands, touch my earlobes with my thumbs and wrap my arms over my torso and utter *Allahu Akbar*! But I can't. I'm plagued with guilt.

I probably look like a fool just standing here, doing nothing, so I glance around the mosque to distract myself. The green carpet and beige wood actually complement each other well – this is me trying to distract myself and shake off my nerves.

My name is Muhammad Gilbert, I'm seventeen years old, Coloured, Muslim, and of Cape Malay and Arab descent. If anyone knew the truth about me, I'd be considered an abomination for all the *haram* acts that I've done. So, here as I stand, in this mosque, I begin to reminisce to how, in these few weeks, my whole life changed.

This is my story.

CHAPTER ONE:

I'm getting too old for this!

It was the first time that realisation occurred to me, as Zaynab and I were watching her favourite romantic comedy called 'Can't Hardly Wait' for the hundredth time!

It may seem odd that I call my mother by her first name, but I swear, I have a lot of respect for her.

Zaynab named me Muhammad, and yes, as most Muslim parents do, I was named after our beloved *Nabi – Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam*. The name Muhammad derives from the Arabic word *hammad* which means "to praise". Aside from hearing my name reverberate from her sharp tongue, especially when the sky changed from blue to light purple signalling that it was time for *Maghrieb* and that I should not be playing outside, I often received her praise.

In fact I made it my duty to always garner praise from Zaynab. I ensured that I attained good grades at school and *Madrassa*. It was incumbent for me, as a then young Muslim boy and living in our home, to complete my five daily prayers on time, as well as reading the holy Quran, regularly. Never did I backchat her, even though there were many times that I could feel quick responses dangling at the back of my throat whenever she reprimanded me. Lastly, I promised to never leave her... like my father did.

From the age of eleven I could read the holy Quran, as I started *Madrassa* when I was in Grade 4 – that was late compared to other children; but it benefited me, as I was old enough to grasp the complexities of reading Arabic – my third language. We were also taught at *Madrassa* how to perform our *salaah* correctly, eventually being taught how to lead the *salaah*. That, once again, garnered a lot of praise from Zaynab, as I was able lead the prayers at home.

But there were times that I would see melancholy in her eyes. The older I grew, the more I physically reminded her of my father. Apart from he and I sharing the similar arch between our shoulders and back, we also share one face. It was as if Zaynab did copy and paste version of him knowing that he would eventually leave her. I've also received his large childlike chartreuse eyes and from glancing at old photos of him, I've noticed that my sleek dark hair, straight eyebrows and large oval face was similar to his, too.

As I thought about Zaynab and the quiet life we lived, she and I relaxing on one of the settees in our open-plan lounge, staring at our tv screen, once again, I realised, *I'm getting too old for this!*

“Look at his mousy blond hair, Muhammad. I’ve always liked that hair colour,” that’s how she would start when the main character, portrayed by Ethan Embry would pop up on the screen. With her over-sized mug in her hands and the aroma of Five Roses tea wafting around me, Zaynab would go through a checklist on what she liked about Ethan Embry. I had to just sit and listen – *every time!* I wrestled with always wanting to tell her that there was nothing special about Ethan Embry and his hair that couldn’t decide if it was brown or blond, but I never did.

I knew the plot of ‘Can’t Hardly Wait’ back to front due to the many times we watched it on one of the channels of our satellite tv called “DSTV”. Because she was in her early 30s, Zaynab was still childlike. She identified most with the teenage characters on screen, despite her being an already grown working woman. What made Zaynab love ‘Can’t Hardly Wait’ was that she, just like the character portrayed by Jennifer Love-Hewitt, made the mistake by dating the most popular guy at her school. In her story [spoiler alert], the popular guy got her pregnant in their final year of school, resulting in my existence. Additionally, and just like in the film, Zaynab had a cute nerdy guy that liked her, but she never took any notice of him, so, at the end of ‘Can’t Hardly Wait’, when the nerdy guy finally gets the girl of his dreams, she would swoon and cheer at the tv screen – because what if she too had that happy, cliché ending

“And look at his pretty blue eyes. Imagine someone looking at me with those kind of eyes,” she’d continue, taking many slurred sips of the tea that had no sugar and only a teaspoon of condensed milk in it. It was the year 2012 and my mother still thought that blue eyes and blond hair was the ideal beauty standard!

“Awww! Look at his bright smile, and listen, he has a lisp... too cute, man.”

Why did her ideal crush have to be a man-baby?

“You see, Muhammad, that’s my celebrity crush. He’s cute, but not overly cute like that boy all the youngsters are crazy over... What’s his name, man? The one in ‘High School Musical’ that you always use to watch on Disney Channel,” I pretended not to know, just as I hid my true opinions on Zac Efron from that movie.

Then, Jennifer Love-Hewitt would pop up on our screen. “Isn’t she beautiful, Muhammad? *Ja, ja*, I know what you’re going to say... *shukran*, she does look a lot like me.” Perhaps, when Zaynab was a teenager, but those days she hardly looked like Jennifer Love-Hewitt. “Oh, why doesn’t Amanda [Jennifer Love-Hewitt] notice him? She goes for the dumb popular guy... but *ja*, man, I can relate to her. Your father was *mos* a popular rugby player. All the girls wanted him, but he chose...” her words would break off. I knew exactly what she was thinking. Because as I said, she did and said the *same* thing whenever we watched the *same* movie. Instead of finishing what she wanted to say, she would just continue to sip at her tea and place her focus back to watching the movie.

Whilst watching her watch ‘Can’t Hardly Wait’ for the hundredth time, deep down I felt a lot of sympathy for my mother. Throughout my childhood, and throughout her lonely adult life, she wailed time and again to me, “Muhammad, you’re my sanity!” Every boy needs their mother and there were many times that I felt my mother needily needed me, but being dubbed her “sanity” was a lot of pressure.

That night, as her eyes shone brightly as she stared at the tv screen in the darkness of the lounge, for the first time I hoped that one day she would find her a significant other to make her eyes naturally light up.

Was it always going to be this way?

Was I going to take care of her, when she would no longer be able to take care of herself –

“You see, Muhammad! That’s the kind of love you should get for yourself,” my thoughts were interrupted with the *same* speech, at the end of the *same* film, and I would respond with the *same* rehearsed line that knocked me out of my sympathetic daydreaming.

“Yes, Zaynab. I’m excited to fall in love one day,” I chose my words carefully.

“Maybe you and that Jamielah girl are destined to end up together now that high school is almost over just like the two of them!” she added, as she pointed to Ethan Embry and Jennifer Love-Hewitt. I didn’t respond to her, because I didn’t want her to interrogate me about Jamielah – a girl in my class that I think I started to like. Deep down I felt like it was just all a lie. Maybe I started chatting to Jamielah in that way, because I was tired of Zaynab asking me when I’d get a girlfriend. I just wanted to keep Zaynab happy; in fact, I always wanted her to be happy.

Deep down I had a big secret and I knew she wouldn't look at me the same if she knew the truth.

If she knew, I would not be her "praiseworthy" son that did well at school and that completed all his prayers on time, any longer. If she knew the truth she would disown me, just as many *saaliagh* Muslim mothers have done ... but I pushed those thoughts away, in a faraway corner of my mind.

CHAPTER TWO:

The following evening when I stepped through the front door of my cousin Kaashief's house, as always, Boeta Rashied, Kaashief's step-father, was motoring up and down. I bumped into him just as he exited the main bedroom.

"*Maaf, my boytjie,*" he spoke to every boy or man like that, despite their age, "I'm looking for the mics."

"*Asalaamualaykum, Boeta Rashied!*" I announced, as I reached out my right hand to greet him.

"How's your Mummy doing? Did she work today?"

"She's doing well, *alhamdulillah. Ag, Boeta Rashied knows mos* how it goes with..." but before I could continue to explain Zaynab's absence, he was already at the end of the passageway.

As I followed him to the lounge area, Boeta Rashied was busy fiddling with the DVD player. I was about to make my way to the yard when Aunty popped up from behind the kitchen counter.

"Muhammad! Come give your Aunty a *drukkie! Sjoe,* you are looking more handsome every day, just like your... I mean my side of the family."

"*Shukran, Aunty,*" she always made me feel awkward when she wanted to mention my father.

"Help me here with the salads, *kanallah,*" but before I could politely decline, and slip to the backyard where the actual party was happening, a large salad bowl was dumped into the cup of my hands. Deep down I wanted to tell Aunty to ask her husband to help her instead, but I didn't have the heart to. Besides, Boeta Rashied wasn't the ideal person to ask for help. He always became easily distracted when asked to complete a task.

With Aunty continuously chatting and Boeta Rashied still motoring through the house, my head spun around like hot and cool air spinning around on a playground that forms a miniature tornado. Thereafter, Aunty gave me a list of duties.

"Skim the cucumber with a fork; wash the lettuce; remove all the seeds from the tomatoes; add more vinegar to the beans salad; crack the boiled eggs and cut them for the potato salad; strain the screw noodles," her imperatives piled onto me. Perhaps Aunty knew that I was the only one that would be willing to help her.

“Aunty, I’m coming back now,” I announced, as I was tired of her antics. I placed the fifth salad that she handed to me on the counter and charged into the yard.

That night, the yard was dimly lit with yellow fairy lights. Due to the party décor, the yard looked different to the space Kaashief and I had played in as children. The yard was once the place that Kaashief and I made sporadic holes to shoot our *gatties* in. Kaashief used to win all my *gatties* due to his long shots with his strong pudgy fingers. During hot summer days, Boeta Rashied would fill the abandoned bathtub that was in their yard with water from the hosepipe. Kaashief and I would pretend to be like Spongebob living in a pineapple within our own version of Bikini Bottom. There were days in which the yard was also our sport’s ground where we practiced our cricket skills, basketball shooting, and rugby passing. I could still vividly picture many of the memories within the three corrugated walls of the yard, but with age, the space became forgotten, and Kaashief and I started playing in the street. So, there I stood that night amazed at the ambiance of the yard, unaware that my whole life was about to change at my cousin Kaashief’s seventeenth birthday *braai*.

Tradition was important in our closely-woven family. Aunty, my father’s sister, made sure that we did things in routine. Thursday nights would be our night of *thikrullah* at their home. Every Friday after the *Yaumaul Jumu’ah salaah*, we would also have lunch at their house – Aunty worked half day on Fridays to cook for the men in her life. Saturdays we go to the beach, or drive to Hout Bay for fish and chips, or in winter we’d go watch a local rugby game at Green Point Track. Sundays, whether Zaynab off from work or not, we had lunch at my house. And, every year, for my cousin Kaashief’s birthday, we would *braai* in their backyard.

Not only was Kaashief my only cousin from my unknown father’s side, he was very much my only friend. Since childhood, he and I had been inseparable. Kaashief always played the role of my older brother, even though he was only older than me by three months – a fact he continuously bragged and shrieked about when we were younger. I hid behind his tough and abrasive exterior, because I had been smaller and daintier than the other boys. Ultimately, I would do anything for him, and he for me.

“Awe, Muhammad!” yelled Kaashief, as I stepped into the yard. “*Ouens*, meet my brother from another mother,” Kaashief explained to his group of friends, including his

girlfriend Laylah who was weirdly mixed in as being one of his *ouens*. I also felt a cringe when he used the cliché “brother from another mother” saying to describe how close we were, so I just nodded in silence whilst I stood with them around the *braai buk* unsure what to say, looking up at the fairy lights that Boeta Rashied had installed years back.

Many of the lights were already fused, but aside from the missing bulbs, here and there, the yard had a unique flair to it. To start something and never finish it was Boeta Rashied’s worst tendency. Throughout their two-bedroomed house was a lot of unfinished business: the automatic gate outside their house still didn’t work with the buzzer, so the gate always hung open; Aunty’s not so new tiles were still stacked near the front door, waiting to be cut and fit in its various intricate places in its not so new house; Kaashief’s cupboard doors in his room were still not nailed in – the list rolled on and on; but despite all the incomplete work, I preferred being at Kaashief’s house than my own.

With the warmth of the fire glistening my cheeks, and the pitter patter of the conversations mixing in with the burning sound of the Blitz firelighters, I noticed Aunty waddling into the yard with a bucket of marinated meat that consisted of lamb chops, chicken pieces and sausage. She ensured that there was more than enough meat at the *braai*, specifically for Kaashief as he was the glutton in the family.

“So what do you think of this weather, it was hot earlier and now it’s cold,” I reckoned casually. Kaashief had schooled me before on various conversation icebreakers. He always encouraged me to be social and to talk more to strangers, but I don’t think I said it loud enough, as the group didn’t even take any notice of me. They were all continuing to listen to Kaashief’s story. He always had something funny to share. I felt out of place amongst people that I didn’t know.

Unlike Kaashief, I was socially awkward and I didn’t have friends. He was loud, popular and could speak to anyone without nervously running scenarios in his head like I did.

I diverted my gaze back to Aunty.

In and out. In and out.

Aunty was up and down between the kitchen and yard, busy placing the large array of salads on a makeshift table created from an old wooden door and placed on two slightly ill-balanced trestles. I felt bad for her, so I went back to help her carry the salads, whilst Kaashief and his friends poured more charcoal and threw pieces of wood into the *braai buk*.

When I returned to the yard, after I was officially done helping Aunty, from time to time, she would still come back to the yard to either inspect the fire, check up on the salads, and most importantly, give her seventeen-year-old baby sappy kisses – not that he looked like any remotely close to a baby. Despite the similarities of the features of our faces, Kaashief was much larger than me and everyone else that surrounded him. He had big biceps, a boastful torso and round potbelly that he often hid by sucking in too much air. Aunty mentioned many times that Kaashief resembled more to my father than I did. I hated when she said that, because my father belonged to me and not to Kaashief and Aunty. She would always claim him just because she had spent more time with him. I was jealous of the knowledge and the moments that Aunty shared of my father. I wanted what she had, what belonged to me, but as time went by, and I grew older, I let go of the pain of being fatherless.

With my mind drifting away from the group, I noticed a stranger sitting alone in the corner of the yard. He was oddly away from everyone else. The stranger was fiddling with the head of his *okah*.

With my arms folded behind my back, I made a mental calculation of everyone at the party. He was the only person that I hadn't met yet for that night.

“Kaashief, why's that *bra* sitting alone in the corner?” I quizzed.

Layla jumped in explaining that he was her cousin and how the rest of them didn't feel like smoking from his *okah*.

Because I couldn't see his face properly, I found him compelling. All I saw was a dark figure, with a sleek scissor-over-comb haircut.

Who is that?

Why is he alone?

I nearly blurted out what I was thinking.

After some time, the stranger came out from the corner to join us at the fire that was being tamed. Kaashief dipped his pudgy fingers in a cup of water and sprinkled droplets over the tower of flames. From the lower flames, I watched the fire dance across the stranger's face. I stared at him properly for the first time which resulted in me swallowing a gulp of air that was mixed with smoke.

His face opened up to me and I noticed that his sharp pointed nose reminded me of downward facing arrow. Over his nose was a scar that made me inquisitive. I wanted to know how that scar got there. I wanted to know more about him. I wanted to know who took care of him. In his dark eyes, I also noticed specs from the flames appear and vanish. Then, I inspected

his strong hands that dangled at the end of his long chiselled arms – for some weird reason I was intrigued by him. He also kept laughing loudly and boastfully at the jokes and banter that bounced around. In fact, he filled the open air with his exuberance and that's when I noticed his broken smile, that lingered too long at me – he was like the Joker with grin that was both scary and inviting.

I let my eyes roll up and down his body. His jeans were tight – a skinny fit that was becoming popular for boys too; and he wore a printed sweater t-shirt with a cardigan over it that loosely embraced his body. His collar bone pierced me and I noticed a mole at the meeting of those collar bones.

He then asked Kaashief for a lighter and proceeded to walk back to his *okah*. On an impulse, I followed him to the corner of the yard, initiating that I wanted to smoke with him. We sat around on plastic chairs, using our toes to balance ourselves on the uneven floor of the yard. He asked me to hold the unlit coal with his tweezers, as he held the flame of the lighter under the coal. We both watched the sparks shoot out of the coal, before I placed it on the head of the *okah*. He handed Kaashief's lighter to me. Before I could announce that it wasn't mine, I felt a trickle from his finger that lingered on my hand a little longer than it should have. I watched him inhale long puffs and exhale grey clouds from his mouth, as he heated the pipe with his strong lungs. Whilst listening to the bubbles of the *okah*, I savoured the roughness of his finger's trickle on my hand.

We didn't talk much as I had hoped, but I didn't mind, as his uninviting persona drew me in. Passing the pipe to me was our only interaction. I was too nervous to initiate any sort of conversation. Although I wanted to blurt out some sort of small talk, the words just hung at the back of my mouth on my small tongue. He, on the other hand, scrolled through his Blackberry. I wanted to sit longer with him, but before I knew it, he just stood up and joined the rest at the fire again.

As the *okah* was dying out, I smoked slower in that corner, so that I could watch him without anyone watching me.

“Kaashief, Muhammad and friends, come inside! It's time to sing happy birthday!” called Aunty whilst she stood on the step between the kitchen and the yard entrance.

We all herded into the house and thereafter huddled around the coffee table in the lounge to sing for Kaashief. I couldn't stop staring at the stranger. With the echoes of "May Allah bless you" ringing in my ears, I realised that I too was being gullible and overly infatuated after seeing someone that I liked, as many of the characters did in the films that Zaynab and I watched. I too was over examining his features and obsessing about him.

Did I turn into Zaynab, gushing over a cute guy?

My life was obviously not a film, and more importantly... I didn't want to think about any *guy* in that way, even though I really couldn't help myself, so I forced myself not to look at the stranger anymore.

"*Kom, julle! Dit is nou karaoke tyd,*" howled Boeta Rashied who had been waiting for the opportunity to begin the karaoke session all night. Aunty hopped up from the settee and raced towards the entertainment set. She did everything slowly, but when it was time for dancing and singing at parties, Aunty was quick-fast.

Whenever Boeta Rashied handed Aunty the mic, we could always hear her intense breathing, as she patiently awaited the song to begin. Her go-to song was 'The Greatest Love of All' by Whitney Houston which turned into 'The Greatest Butcher of All'. Each time she murdered that song, Kaashief and I tried our best not to let our laughter bomb out from our throats. Always, when Aunty reached the climax of the song, "...find your strength in loooooove" Kaashief and I would run to her, slide on our knees and excitedly clap for her. She always giggled it off shyly, despite knowing that her coarse voice, damaged from all her Rothmans' cigarettes, was nothing like Whitney Houston's.

"Testing... testing... one, two, three, *four,*" followed Boeta Rashied. The mic would always screech when it was his turn to sing. He started his comical version 'Oh! Carol' by Neil Sedaka. Instead, Boeta Rashied changed the name in the lyric of the song, that was initially dedicated to Carole King, to "Oh! Tiema" in dedication to Aunty. Kaashief and I joined in with Uncle Rashied's antics. We did our little back up dance with Boeta Rashied in which we rolled our shoulders and snapped our fingers to the beat. Finally, he ended the song with an unnecessary exclaim of "Cha Cha Cha" on the three bangs at the end of the song.

I stood up to fetch me another *boerewors* roll when from behind me I heard a heavy grip of the mic. As I turned around, it was indeed Kaashief that took the mic to sing the original version of 'I Think We're Alone Now' by Tommy James and the Shondells. I returned back to

where I was initially sitting. From the edge of the settee, I listened to Kaashief's impressive vocals swooning Laylah. For years Kaashief had been singing that song, but with the stranger in my company, the words of the song took on a whole different meaning for me.

It was my turn to sing.

I signalled for Kaashief not to give me the mic, but, before I knew it, he forced the cordless mic into my left hand. Boeta Rashied had also already placed the Fleetwood Mac karaoke DVD into the player. He never accepted anyone's refusal to sing. The music from the DVD started playing. I tried to croon everyone with the lyrics, "Now here you go again, you say, you want your freedom..." I kept my eyes closed throughout the song, because I had only previously sung in front my family. I also didn't know what the stranger's reaction would be. Luckily, I knew every word, melody and movement of Stevie Nicks' voice in that song. By the end of the performance, they all surprisingly clapped for me. I peeped around the room. The stranger was clapping too, and smirking at me!

His name was Riyaaz Salloway, and, like I said, I was unaware that my whole life was about to change.

When I returned home from the party, Zaynab was sitting on one of the settees in our lounge. I caught her holding an old family photo album. She had the same guilty look on her face that I had whenever she caught me glancing at old photos of my father.

Instantly, I was disappointed.

Sixteen years later, Zaynab was still longing for my father – the man who abandoned us.

As the story went, in the 90s, it wasn't a good look for any family to have a child born out of wedlock. In Islam, premarital sex is deemed *haram* and a grave sin. My father stemmed from a well-respected religious and wealthy family in Woodstock, Cape Town. The fact that their only son impregnated a young girl was not a good look for his parents. All their disdain and hatred fell upon Zaynab, instead of my father. She was deemed a "*jintoe*" amongst many other derogatory terms by his parents – yet ironically she did not conceive me on her own. To them, Zaynab was a "*jas*" girl that corrupted their son whilst trying to trap him and gain both

his money and social status. That was not true. Zaynab loved my father deeply, and, just like that, before I was born, my father's parents impulsively moved him and their business away to Johannesburg to escape any ridicule.

“Muhammad, how was the party? Did you make any new friends?” Zaynab inspected, as she was also trying to hide the photo album under one of the fluffy mismatched pillows of the settee. It was a futile task as I already caught her. I proceeded to sit next to her and handed her a *barakat* that Auntie had packed for her. With zeal, she accepted the paper plate that was filled with different *braai* items and salad. Zaynab nibbled at the sausage and potato salad, as she hopped against the pillow, again trying to hide the photo album.

“What are you hiding there, Zaynab?” that was my attempt at relieving her from her misery.

She knew that she couldn't hide things away from me, so she defeatedly took out the album. I watched her hide her circling tears, as she paged through the photo album. With soft caresses, Zaynab outlined the faces of her deceased parents, *Rahmatulla Alay Hum*, whilst exclaiming how much she missed her own mother and father. She paged through different pictures of me throughout the years, expressing how cute I was.

“Am I not cute anymore?” I joked. My attempt at making her smile worked. Her lips manoeuvred into a grin, but still, I could see her hiding her pain.

“Of course, you still are, my dearest son. You have always been my sanity, and one day you are going to make some girl very lucky one day, *insha'allah*,” she said with pride.

She continued to scroll through the different pictures, reminiscing about her past life and her hope for my future, whilst I sat listening to her, scared of the unknown.

CHAPTER THREE:



Riyaaaz Salloway: I hope you don't mind me adding you on Facebook?

That's how it all started. A simple message in my inbox. A statement that ended with a question mark – perhaps deliberately placed there to confuse me.

Like most nights, I couldn't fall asleep. In the darkness of the night, I was lying in bed trying to divert my thoughts away from the *braai*. The insomnia crept in, again, whilst I watched the traces of light from my shutters continuously appear and disappear on my room wall. I could feel his presence next to me; I could feel his rough trickle on my lonely finger.

Instead of blocking him out from my brain, which was my initial instinct, I decided tap onto my inbox. With the screen light of my BlackBerry shining in my eyes, I saw his name in print for the first time. Having him consume so much space in my mind was weird, because he and I hardly spoke at the party that night. I also felt uncomfortable yet intrigued because guys didn't message each other on Facebook. Something was off about the Facebook inbox, so naturally the alarm bells were clanging.

Did he notice me in the way that I had noticed him?

I flashed through the stranger's profile. By scanning his hundreds of pictures, I allowed my mind to wonder.

Could it be that he is gay? I shouldn't have thought that about the stranger who wanted to be "my Facebook friend".

He didn't appear gay at the party, and if he had, Kaashief and his friends would have mocked him. But who was I to tell? Apart from the few flamboyant guys at school, that I made sure I didn't make any eye contact with, I didn't really know any gay guys.

Maybe I just wanted him to be gay? So that there was a possibility that he and I could be together?

I didn't know what to think.

As I scrolled through more pictures, I began to get lost in him. I wanted him. I thought about his broken smile, and his dark lips.

What would it be like to kiss another guy? That specific thought was tired already from all the time it spent jogging across my mind.

Two men together romantically or sexually is *haram*. As a Muslim I would be ridiculed by both my community and Allah, so I never acted on my instincts. Neither was I sure if I liked both guys and girls. I didn't know if I was gay. Or bisexual. Or just confused. I had started getting to know Jamielah a few months prior, but I wasn't sure if I actually wanted to be with her. And although I found girls attractive, sometimes, in the corner of my eye, I would stop to stare at other guys. It was a confusing situation. Sexuality was confusing, so for years, I did what I could do best – I suppressed all those feelings.

Sometimes, I would wish to be normal like the other sixteen-year-old guys that enjoyed playing rugby and soccer, and bragged about their big accomplishments of getting with girls through tacky pick-up lines. Instead, a deep part of me felt as though I was infested with mould that I couldn't get rid of. I feared that nobody would understand me, or that nobody could help me clean the mould. It had always been hard not exploring every part of my authentic self. And, as I lied in bed that night, after my returning home from the *braai*, the darkness of the night consumed me. With the screen light of my BlackBerry bouncing in my eyes, I remained confused.



Riyaz Salloway: I hope you don't mind me adding you on Facebook?

I must have stared at the message for about an hour. I didn't know what to reply to him. Each time I would type something, I would just end up deleting my words.

Type. Delete. Type. Delete. Over and over.

I wanted to know more about him, but I knew that it would be *haram* to act on those vile intentions. A big part of me wanted to ignore everything that I had learnt at *Madrassa* about homosexuality being *haram*. I wanted to tell him that I liked him. I erased away the inhibitions that I possessed, roughly, as I would've done to get an A4 piece of paper clean again, and I sent him a casual reply – unaware of where things would lead...

The next morning I woke up to a bomb of Facebook notifications. Throughout the night, the stranger had liked all my pictures on Facebook! I didn't understand what was going on. When somebody bombs another's Facebook notifications, by liking all their pictures particularly, it meant that they wanted that person to know that they liked them – that was an unwritten rule on Facebook.

For the rest of that day, at school, I felt mixed emotions, re-reading our short interaction online, as well as thinking about the night we had met. At every chance I got, I scrolled through the pictures on his profile – incognito, of course. I made extra sure that nobody around me saw what I was doing.

There was a weird feeling in my gut.

I kept checking my phone in the corner of my blazer. It was the final week of school before our September third-term school holiday, and as we were wrapping up the final sections of our syllabi, I wasn't even paying attention in class. *The Great Gatsby*, Algebra or whatever else we revising that day was not important to me. Instead, I enjoyed being lost in my thoughts about him. There was no need for my mind to be present at school. Most days I floated around through the corridors with my mind absent from my surroundings anyway – that day was no different.

Life as a teenager was difficult. I wondered if the hundreds of students that passed me daily, walking briskly and smiling through their low whispers, also had difficulty existing. There were moments when I wished that I could cease to exist; there were moments when I was indeed happy. As I said, life as a teenager was difficult.

So, I decided to check his profile again, lifting my BlackBerry in the corner of my blazer, during the last period. All I wanted to do was go home and lie in bed and curl into nothingness! Finally, after hours of agony, he replied, asking me for my BBM pin. I swear that my heart nearly jumped up my oesophagus, through my mouth, and out of the large wooden sliding window of the class.

After a few days of chatting and getting to know each other, Riyaaaz told me that he liked me. I continuously re-read his long essay-like explanation on why he felt that he deserved

to be with me – a part of me was so awestruck, yet I was initially sceptical as I thought it was all just a prank. Liking someone over the phone didn't seem probable, so I didn't get why he made that confession.

But what if I had begun to like him too?

Two guys couldn't be together. I thought about it a lot in a faraway hidden space in depth of my mind. We were Muslims, and Muslims cannot be gay!

Riyaz wouldn't take no for an answer though. He just continued replying with reasons on how he and I could make things work... how two guys could be together. He had done it many times before, and all I needed to do was trust him. All he wanted was to see me again and kiss me for the first time. All his replies felt weird yet euphorically consuming. His words devoured me, greedily, and I enjoyed the moisture of being savoured by him.

At the back of my mind, the thought of kissing another guy jogged around again, but I couldn't shake off the fact that he and I were Muslim. Gay acts of lust were forbidden and dirty. How was I going to ever stand in front of Allah again knowing that I had wilfully committed such a dire sin?

So, I didn't know how to respond to Riyaz. It wasn't an everyday occurrence to have a guy randomly message me on Facebook, wanting to be with me, however, a week later, Riyaz was standing in the passage of my front doorway.

There were five melodious knocks at my door: three slow bumps and two quick taps. I took my time to open. I didn't want to seem overly eager. At first, my hand stopped before I could turn the brass doorknob. With a slight exhale, I opened the door. He awkwardly greeted me. Through custom I shook his hand. A weird feeling passed through my hands. It wasn't electricity, nor love at first touch, but in that moment, I could feel that there was a some sort of connection between us.

The sunlight was piercing that day. As he stood in the doorway, there was a bright white light streaming behind him – that made him appear to be this dark figure. After we walked down the corridor and sat on the settees, I noticed his clear and glowing olive skin. His hair once again fell meticulously into precision which supported his strong well-structured face. When he smirked at me, I was reminded that his smile was broken. His teeth were mismatched, but they somehow fell into place – oddly, his broken smile suited him. He was indeed more attractive in the daytime in comparison to when I first saw him at the *braai*.

For all the years I had been forced to watch romantic films with Zaynab, I learned through watching her that there was a false idea of love at first sight. She and I would often joke about what it would be like when I'd eventually meet the love of my life: doves would be hovering above me, chirping mellifluously along an unintelligible melody; the ground beneath me would silently shake as I looked into *her* eyes, mesmerised by the presence of *her* beauty; emotions possessed deep down inside of me would flow out, and spiral around *the girl* like a cool summer's breeze dancing with the heat – instead, the silly fantasy that Zaynab and I joked about didn't match the moment I met Riyaaaz. So, I ran through her checklist one last time and for many obvious reasons he did not fit the profile. I was okay with that. I didn't have any grand expectations and I was certainly not expecting to fall in love with him.

As we were sitting in my lounge, on opposite settees, we awkwardly sat in silence. With my right leg balanced over my left and my hands on my right knee, I sat up straight on the edge of the settee trying my best to think of interesting things to say to him. He, on the other hand, was resting to the back, with his one arm placed on the armrest. When he and I were chatting to each other via BBM things were not awkward; we shared things about ourselves with ease.

“It's weird hey, just last night we were chatting and now you're actually in front of me,” I tried to break the ice.

Riyaaaz eyes met my gaze. He turned red instantly. From that moment, the conversation started to pick up. His words glided off his dark, wet lips with ease. Between the exchanges of our plans for the future and the laughter about the crazy things that was happening in the world, the more he spoke, the more I began to admire him. He was no longer mysterious and silent. I knew how he viewed the world. Being around him made me dizzy. It was as if I had just hopped up and down on a jumping-castle and after getting off, my body felt as though it was still jumping.

All the tingles inside of me eventually stopped because our conversation was cut short by the banging of Kaashief at the front door. I quietly began to panic after I heard him calling out for me. Each day, Kaashief and I, along with a few of his friends, would hang out and play dominoes on my stoep. I, being completely distracted with Riyaaaz, had forgotten about the ritual. I fetched the dominoes from my room and gestured for Riyaaaz to follow me. He seemed calm and unaffected.

Outside, on the stoep, Kaashief and his friends had already set up for the game. By set up it was just a flat wooden square placed on top of my plastic bin. The narrow road, where my house is situated in Woodstock, was busy as ever. Cars were constantly rolling past trying not to knock against other parked cars, passers-by were shuffling with heavy Shoprite bags, children merrily played games in the street, and then there were us. We huddled around the black plastic bin, ready for the game. After the exchange of pleasantries, which was actually a big cluster of different voices saying, “*Awe*” – the local greeting in Cape Town that is pronounced “aah where” – I was becoming more anxious, because I feared that Kaashief would want to know why Riyaaaz was visiting in Woodstock without bringing his cousin Laylah with him.

Luckily, Kaashief didn’t question us. He was too fired up and ready to start the game of dominoes. Riyaaaz and I were partners in the game, I couldn’t let him play with Kaashief or one of his other friends as they became highly competitive to the extent of many fights breaking out.

Eventually, the score became “four love” and after one last round Riyaaaz and I lost. The next group of partners joined the game and Riyaaaz and I moved away from the makeshift table. I could see that he enjoyed his time. He seemed calm and relaxed about the situation. I, however, was crippled with worry. Whilst we were playing, he would glance up at me from the dominoes that he held in his hands and he would wink. He was like an inquisitive meercat.

Don’t act gay! Don’t act gay! I began secretly to chant that mantra in my head. What if one of the others caught him or caught on that there was something between us? My insides were kneading around with anxiety.

Don’t act gay! There was that word again. *Gay!*

Well, am I gay? What does that even mean... to be happy right? Okay... Cool... Let me stick to that definition and gay means –

“*Muhammad*, how could you lose that game? Couldn’t you see your partner had all the sixes?” snapped Kaashief as he clapped his fat hands together, trying to get my attention.

“Huh? What do you mean?” it was hard to concentrate.

“Your *partner* man,” continued Kaashief. He kept emphasising on the word partner.

“Yay, what’s wrong with you! Stop daydreaming! I’m trying to tell you that Riyaaaz could’ve won the game if you made *al kant ses*! You played *kak* man!” scorned Kaashief, always being too passionate about the game of dominoes.

After many rounds of dominoes and the interchanging of partners, Kaashief and his friends left to go to rugby practice. As each one of them stepped out from the stoep and strolled away, the nerves that had been crippling inside of me seeped out of my body. I could finally relax again. Riyaaaz and I could speak properly, without being interrupted or pretending. Unfortunately for us, Riyaaaz had to catch a taxi to go back home.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Riyaaaz asked with his eyes growing wider. “Would you like to go bowling with me? It could be a proper first date...” he paused. I thought hard before he continued to speak. “Well, no pressure, but if you’re up for it, I’d like to take you out on proper a date.”

I agreed to the date and I watched him trail up to the Main Road – again unaware of the new journey my life was going to take.

The following morning, I got myself ready to go to Stadium on Main in Claremont. I hopped onto the first bus that was going that way and between each bus stop and red robot, I found myself more excited to see Riyaaaz. He had woken something distinct inside of me. For the first time, I wasn’t anxious to see him and neither was my mind plagued with unhealthy thoughts of what could potentially go wrong. After about fifteen minutes, I was in Claremont and I motioned toward Stadium on Main.

When I arrived at the entrance to the arcade section, Riyaaaz was already waiting for me, holding two neon green wristbands. I didn’t expect that he would pay for me, but I nonetheless appreciated his kind gesture. We swapped our shoes for the funny-looking bowling shoes before making our way to the lane farthest in the corner. Aside from the one lady behind the beverage and snack counter, we were the only people at the bowling section. I was surprised that the area was so empty, as it was the September holidays.

I liked that the bowling area was brightly lit with the walls painted in contrasting purple and green hues. On the walls were funky paintings of bowling balls and pins that were surrounded by shocks of electricity. My name appeared first on the screen and I bent over to pick up one of the bowling balls. I hadn’t even paid attention to the numbers on the balls, because as I lifted one, I realised that the bowling ball was too heavy for my scrawny arm. Despite the weight, I tried not to let it show to Riyaaaz. As I stood with the bowling ball dangling

at my arm and aiming toward the pins, the moment felt so surreal – I was on my first-ever real date.

For the first few rounds Riyaaz and I both didn't knock any pins over. In fact both of our co-ordination was way off. I thought that he invited me bowling because he was good at it, but he clearly wasn't and I liked that he didn't care about not getting any strikes. Between the wooden bowling lane and the thin black gutter were strips of neon lights that changed colour. We presumed that the changing neon lights were there to guide us, but that didn't even help because each time when we thought that the balls were going to hit a strike, the balls would somehow curve over into the thin black gutter. But as I said, hitting a strike didn't even matter, because we both just laughed it off or encouraged each other to get it right in the next round. It was evident that Riyaaz enjoyed being around me and I enjoyed being around him too.

“You know, I've never been on a real date before,” I uttered, but the loud music overhead drowned my words. When I was around Riyaaz, for some odd reason I felt most compelled to reveal things about myself that I generally wouldn't reveal to others. I didn't even feel embarrassed by that confession. As I repeated myself, uttering the confession a little louder, Riyaaz's eyes lit up or maybe it was all the different lights, neon lights and colours that shone around us that made me think that his eyes did. He smirked at me and placed his arm around my shoulders to give an almost half hug – that was done in a quick motion. As I knew that he was worried that the lady behind the beverage and snack counter was perhaps watching us, but she wasn't. She was too busy counting the different drinks in the transparent Coca Cola fridge.

“So you've never ever been on a date? Like not even with a girl?” questioned Riyaaz after his another failed attempt at bowling.

“That's correct. Never ever... I guess I'm like Drew Barrymore in 'Never Been Kissed' – although I have kissed girls before... if that makes sense,” my added explanation made me realise that I used the wrong film reference.

“Who's Drew Barrymore?” he asked, as he shrugged.

“Woah, how do you not know who Drew Barrymore is? Haven't you never seen the film 'Never Been Kissed'?” that film was another staple that Zaynab and I had watched so many times. I could imagine her wailing in disdain had she heard Riyaaz's comment about Drew.

“Well, all I know is that I’d like to kiss you one day,” Riyaaaz said it so casually as he stepped away from the lane. It was my turn to bowl again, luckily at the right time, because I didn’t know what to tell him after that.

Things were all happening so fast. I had run the idea of being on a date with a guy in my mind so many times, and there I was, on an actual date with a guy that wanted to actually kiss me. Just like that, I knocked over five pins. It wasn’t a strike, but it was an improvement. Finally there were numbers on the scoreboard and I was confident that I had impressed Riyaaaz.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” my confidence must have grown bigger, because I don’t know where I gained the bravado to ask him that. “Would you like to come visit me again?”

There were three slow knocks I heard on my door that was followed by two quick taps. I knew whose knocking it was. Riyaaaz was once again at my door! It was the third time we saw each other that week. There was so much familiarity that had grown between us during that short time. Even the air that surrounded us was also well acquainted with each other. There was so much that we shared with each other over those few days, yet there was so much more that we didn’t know about each other. As the door closed behind him, Riyaaaz leaned towards me to kiss me on my cheek. I didn’t expect him to do that, but I didn’t complain either.

I invited Riyaaaz into my room, ensuring that I kept a distance between us: he sat on the mini couch and I on my bed. My room was still a bit dirty. I liked that he didn’t care – there wasn’t enough time to clean that day. There were mugs over my bedside drawer, the oval mat on the floor had not been straightened, books splayed over my bed, but, luckily, I had thrown most of my clothing in my cupboard.

Although the sun was still shining outside that day, there was a strong breeze among us that crept through my window and danced in the space between him and I. I once heard that it’s always best to go on a date during spring when the air is not too cold and the sun is not blazing – more unwarranted advice from one of the many romantic comedies that Zaynab and I had watched before.

As he sat across me, he smirked at me again, although that time he was more suggestive. There I sat with a handsome guy in front of me with hundreds of thoughts sprinting through my mind. I wondered what he was thinking and as the conversation died down, we both knew

it was a signal for the obvious. Between our silence, I noticed that he was staring at my lips. Each time I caught him, I took dry gulps of air.

“I want to kiss you right now,” he slurred and in the next moment, he pounced forward onto me with his lips locking onto mine.

That was my first time kissing another guy and I couldn't tell if I liked it. I didn't have that much experience with girls either, but I guessed that a kiss was a kiss irrespective of the gender.

Out of nowhere, Riyaaz was lying on top of me. Suddenly, the soft mattress I curled up on each night on, felt hard beneath me. He groped my body and moved around on top of me as he moaned. We must have been kissing for minutes on end. I occasionally opened my eyes to watch him. He looked weird. The movements of his body didn't match mine.

He then took my hand and placed it on his pants.

Was I supposed to feel the quality of the material?

I realised what he was doing after I felt a block like object, and no, it wasn't his phone.

It all felt weird again, I wanted to enjoy it as much as I enjoyed talking and being around him. I didn't know how to feel. And just as his hand was creeping up my groin, I knocked his hand away from me. Things were moving too fast. Or maybe my body did that reflex as I could feel that he was about to touch me.

“Let's stop,” I uttered.

He climbed off of me and laid himself beside me. For the first time, I willingly stared at my ceiling, looking at the inconsistent smooth and rough paint brush strokes. I felt his finger trace the on the openness of my palm.

We were both staring at the ceiling. There was nothing special about the moment. Everything had escalated quite quickly with Riyaaz: he was first an unknown stranger at the *braai*, we started to chat on BBM, he then said that he had liked me, rocked up at my house, we went on our first date and after a few days of us talking about our lives – *the awkward kiss!*

My mind was too busy, I couldn't shut it off; I couldn't shut him out. The thoughts in my head raced like a taxi speeding down the lower Main Road.

“I realised that Zaynab is working early today and you need to go,” I didn't know if he could tell that it was a lie, but I just needed to be alone.

CHAPTER FOUR:

The following morning, I woke up to the voice of the *mu'athien* – the man who announces the *athaan* over the speaker at mosque for the entire neighbourhood to hear. It was *Fajr* and it meant that I needed to get up from and kneel before Allah. Every Muslim that becomes *baliegh* is required to perform their *salaah* five times, each day. The deep voice of the *mu'athien* reverberated through Woodstock daily. Because we lived so close to the mosque, I could always hear the *mu'athien* breathe in-between each Arabic verse that he recited.

I woke up thinking about Riyaaaz and the day before. A part of me could still feel his lips on mine. I could feel his presence in my room.

There I was, confined beneath the four walls of my bedroom, thinking about the sin I had committed. *Homosexuality is forbidden in Islam!* The thought would once again not leave my mind. Deep down inside the core of my being, I felt sick. Disgusted at myself! Disgusted at the act of kissing another guy!

Did life always have to be this hard?

I remembered how in mosque Sheikh Khaleed would usually say that the best of us are those that overcome their temptations, but when I was around Riyaaaz there was nothing *haram* about what I was feeling.

As children we are taught right from wrong. At *Madrassa* our *Mualim*, who also happened to be Sheikh Khaleed, would relay to us the teachings of the Quran and how we needed to live our lives according to Allah's decree. We were told that gay people would burn in the fire of *Jahanam* – and that statement was forever branded in my head.

Would I be sent to Jahanam if I continued getting to know Riyaaaz?

I knew that I didn't want to spend the eternity of my afterlife burning.

I didn't know if it was worth it to spend more time with Riyaaaz.

When I first started high school, I suffered from depression. It was a big adjustment to move from primary school to high school, because I was alone and didn't have friends. All my classmates (that I had spent nine years with) moved up to high schools in the CBD of Cape Town, whereas I stayed in Woodstock. Even Kaashief (my closest ally) and I were also separated for the first time. He was the one to cover up for me whenever others verbally bullied me. Without him at my side at high school, I felt most alone.

For my entire life I always felt as though I never fit in. I wasn't like regular boys, but at least I had a cousin that encouraged me to like the things that other boys did... so I tried, but by the time I got to high school it was as if I couldn't conform any longer. That's when I started to feel as though I was becoming unhinged.

I stopped talking.

I was scared that if I attempted to make friends, everyone else would realise that I was a fraud – that unnatural thought caused my heart to constantly rattle. Most days I felt as though I couldn't breathe. I was also too scared to look people in the eye and I did my best to focus on my schoolwork.

As my academic performance increased each day, my social skills were depleting. And (as time moved on) I stopped eating. My body turned into a shell and inside that shell was nothing. Each day my thoughts spiralled out of control. I realised that I was suffering from anxiety. To make things more difficult for myself, depression was added to the mixture.

Each day, I tried my best not to cry, but I was depressed because I didn't recognise the person I had become. It was not like me not to talk to anyone. Whenever I looked into the mirror, I was greeted by my bones. There also was a strong stench of melancholy rotting beneath me. I tried to explain to Zaynab what I was feeling, but she wouldn't take my explanations seriously.

There were days I contemplated taking my own life, but suicide, like homosexuality, is *haram* in Islam. I was too afraid that if I took my own life, after death I would open my eyes to the fires of *Jahanam*. Eventually, I knew that I was going to wallow away into the darkness, so I figured that it was best to find solace in a higher power. I knew I needed to speak to Allah, and slowly, I started to regularly perform my daily *salaah*.

Salaah is what saved me from my anxiety and depression. Islam saved my life. I knew that by putting my faith in Allah my heart would become stronger and that my mind would be freed from all the pessimism and loneliness. Little by little, after each prayer, I gave my heart to Allah and the anxiety and depression subsided. Although I still felt different in the new environment at high school, I realised that things could only get better for me with Allah at my side and life was not that bad as I made it out to be.

After each *salaah*, Muslims recite various *du'ah* and affirmations that is usually done with exclaiming gratitude towards Allah (our creator, and the creator of the universe) along with sending salutations to the Prophet Muhammad (the final messenger of Allah). All prayers

and recitations are completed in Arabic, so I had to memorise the English translation to know what I saying to Allah. There was one *du'ah* that struck me, and it begins with: *Allah humma innee a oethu bika minal hammi wal hazan* – in English that means, “Dear God, I seek refuge in you from anxiety and grief.” I said that verse whenever I felt the tremors of anxiety shatter through my body. Each time that I performed my *salaah*, specifically in the position of *sujood*, I could feel the darkness leaving my body.

So, that morning, I just lied in my bed, listening to the final verses of the *athaan* thinking about how *salaah* had previously changed my life before I shifted my thoughts into a different direction. As the *mu'athien* completed his duty, and I heard the sound of the mic being switched off, I contemplated continuing on the path of righteousness. That was the first time in years that I had ever second-guessed praying to Allah. In fact, I became angry with myself. As much as I wanted to stay in bed and go back to sleep, I knew that I couldn't turn my back to Allah.

I forced myself to stand up!

I crept to the toilet and completed my *wudhu*. I slipped my *salaah thobe* over my body and rolled my prayer mat towards the *qiblah*. My next move was to exclaim my *niyyah* in Arabic prescribed specifically for the *Fajr salaah*, but it was as if the syllables were stuck under my throat. I tried my best to complete my *salaah* that morning, but I couldn't.

I knew that I needed to face Allah and apologise for kissing Riyaz... but I couldn't.

I stood on the prayer mat, wanting to explain myself to Allah, as I knew that Allah would understand and forgive me... but I couldn't.

I wanted to tell Allah that being with Riyaz was a one-time impulsion... but I couldn't.

I rolled up my mat, placed it back into my cupboard and I took off my *thobe*. Then, I crept back into bed – indeed turning my back onto Allah.

CHAPTER FIVE:

A few months before Riyaaaz entered my life, I had started growing close to a girl named Jamielah. Jamielah oddly joined our school at the beginning of that year. She was viewed as an outcast, because everyone found it weird that she had started at a new school in Grade 12. I must admit, I too found it weird that she changed schools in her final year. I even allowed myself to be misconceived by the gossip whisking around the corridors. There were rumours that she was hiding something, but nobody nonetheless had the courage to ask her what the reason was for the change of environment.

At first, I didn't take much notice of her, even though I should've. She was an outcast just like me and I could've reached out sooner to her. During class time, we would talk around each other, not paying attention to the things the other had said. Most days we would either pass each other in the corridors, at break time on the field, or on our way home through the laboured Queen Victoria Main Road – but, that was it. We were also friends on Facebook, and aside from a like or two on each other's pictures, we were basically strangers.

Just like the meaning of her Arabic name, Jamielah was indeed “pretty” and “graceful”. I especially liked the fullness of her lips that was placed firmly under her little button-like nose. Although she was the new girl in school, I didn't immediately start daydreaming about her – like the overused plot line of some of the high school films Zaynab and I watched. My liking toward her grew steadily.

As time passed, I found that she and I had many similar views during classroom discussions. From her loud earphones, I would overhear her listening to the same Indie Rock music that I liked. Coincidentally, she also moved into the vacant home next door to Kaashief. Whenever I visited his home, and I happened to be smoking a cigarette on his stoep, Jamielah also happened to be outside smoking and staring up at the sky. We would have minimal meaningless conversations from the adjacent stoeps, and, at some stage, I asked her for her BBM pin. I don't know what possessed me to do that. From that moment, Kaashief always teased me for constantly chatting to Jamielah. Which prompted Boeta Rashied, Aunty and even Zaynab to think that she was my girlfriend – I never confirmed or denied it.

All the Jamielah hype died down during the September exam period and even more so after I met Riyaaaz. Until there she was one day, standing on her stoep as Kaashief and I walked up the stairs that lead to his home. She was staring up, blowing puffs of smoke at the sky again when we interrupted her thoughts.

“Muhammad, why don’t you and Kaashief come over later?” she begged with her big eyeballs prominently rolling all over me.

I agreed because I needed a distraction.

Kaashief and I walked up the front stairs of her home and we stood on top of the stoep waiting for her to open the front door. Throughout that day, my mind battled with the duality within me. Although it was awkward, I definitely liked kissing Riyaz and I also wanted to get to know him better, yet I felt disgusted. To make matter worse, at the back of my tongue were remnants of his saliva which made me feel even more guilty and sick. Riyaz didn’t want to wash away and I felt disgusted in myself for savouring him.

Why couldn’t I just let myself enjoy the moment?

Instead I allowed circling thoughts in my head to confuse me. I also felt guilty for missing my various *salaah*, but I couldn’t find it in me to face Allah after what I had done. Therefore, when Jamielah invited us over, I knew I could try to clear my mind.

After knocking for the second time on her glass door, Kaashief and I looked around awkwardly as we waited for her to open. Her home was almost identical to Kaashief’s, except her exterior looked dilapidated. There were many cracks and patches on the walls, leaving some of the bricks of the walls bare and the paint of the house was faded. As I familiarised myself with the surroundings, Jamielah opened the glass-wooden door and popped up in front of us with keys jiggling at the gate’s key hole.

As she made her appearance at the gate, I realised that I wasn’t feeling shy as I had always been around her. For the first time, outside of school, I was in her personal space. I liked that I could feel the admiration she had for me from her round doll-like eyes.

As the rusted gate creaked, I realised that I had been staring too long at Jamielah, who was waving her scrawny fingers at me for both Kaashief and I to follow her into the house. We walked down the passage which prompted the glass ornament cabinet (that was at the end of the passage) to shake. That made me tip-toe down through the rest of the passage, afraid that I would break the wood of the floor if I stomped too confidently in her home. Her home smelled of *miyang* and Stuyvesant cigarettes. Weirdly the smells had a welcoming effect on me. Kaashief, on the other hand, was demure and didn’t utter a word. He was yet to tell me why he didn’t feel welcome...

Before we proceeded to sit in her room, Jamielah stood in the passageway and instructed us to walk ahead and greet her parents in the lounge. Nerves pumped into my bloodstream. I then looked down and watched the wooden floor of the passageway change to the patterned linoleum floor of the lounge. My nerves were, however, futile, because both her parents hardly paid attention to Kaashief and I. They were both too busy watching the soapie ‘7de Laan’ and dipping hertzoggie biscuits in their tea to even look up at us and acknowledge mine and Kaashief’s loud, “*Asalaamualaykum!*”

Her mother was sitting hunched, preying on the tv-set, and her father was sitting in a slouched position. They both nodded at our greeting, still without looking at us. We still stood there in silence, unsure what to do. After a few awkward and long seconds, when the tv adverts popped up, in unison they let out an inaudible, “*Wa Alaykum Musalaam.*”

Kaashief and I left the lounge, and returned to the passageway of their home. Jamielah’s fingers instantly glued into the spaces between mine. She dragged me to her bedroom.

In the room were a few other unexpected guests – later that night Kaashief would tell me that there were always many teenagers and young adults in and out of their home. I mingled with everyone as best as I could. The room was weirdly divided into two sections: the one side was Jamielah’s and that was where Kaashief and I proceeded to sit; the other side was occupied by Jamielah’s brother, Haleem, and his friends.

As drops of sweat formed in the palms of my hands, I continued to be calm by observing my surroundings. Their room was painted two different colours: half fuchsia pink and half baby blue, with a thin strip of cream masking tape down the middle. At the opposite end of each of their beds were matching black single cupboards – the black wood was filled with doodles, graffiti, and names that were written in tipp-ex. There was only one window on Jamielah’s side of the room. The late afternoon sun shone intricately on Jamielah’s face, as she sat against the wall with a pillow between her arms. I watched the sunlight bounce across the outlines of her face.

My eyes darted between Jamielah and her brother Haleem. With a long squint of an eye they could have passed for twins. Haleem too had round doll-like eyes and thick pouty lips. Aside from their sex, the other difference was that he was much lighter in skin tone than her. His skin was like a cup of coffee with too much milk in it. They also held an odd brother and sister love-hate relationship with their constant bickering ranging from comical to irritating.

From time to time, Haleem and his three friends would intermingle in our conversation. We shared laughs. We shared cigarettes. At one stage, Kaashief and I both needed a lighter. Haleem took out this oversized lighter from under his pillow and sprung up toward me. The

lighter was long like a ruler. I thought that it was dumb that anyone would buy a lighter that size.

“A lighter is the most stolen object in Cape Town, so that’s why I bought this long one so that I can keep track of it,” reckoned Haleem, as he extended his hands. I giggled a little, but Kaashief was still tight-lipped. I leaned over, lighting my cigarette when Haleem said, “Just watch your eyebrows.” He smiled at me, gazing deep into my eyes. I could feel something in the air.

Kaashief and I ended up staying there ‘til late that night – we were right next door to his house so it didn’t matter that we were out later than usual. In that short period of time, I started to re-grow the big liking I had to Jamielah. I especially liked the fact that we got to sit on her bed, openly, and that she was so close to me. The smell of her Lentheric Hoity Toity spray invited me into her and she chortled a lot at the stupid things I said – which made me feel good about myself. Our conversation was easy-going too, she and I didn’t feel awkward around each other. Her home felt like a home – I’m not sure if that makes sense, but, as I said, there was just a welcoming feel that I also liked. Being in her presence was calming, because she didn’t suck the air out of the room. The only time I felt uncomfortable was when her brother kept interrupting our conversation.

“Why were you on your phone the whole time?” I pressed Kaashief after we left her house and entered his. I was aching to know what he thought of Jamielah.

“Well what was I supposed to say? You and Jamielah were speaking the whole time. It’s not like I could’ve interrupted *yus*. Besides, I wasn’t comfortable. Her brother and his friends are *kak dom*,” he replied as he moved the cupboard-door out of his way so that he could access his hanging closet space.

“What do you mean? They’re nice,” I responded, but Kaashief gave no answer. He just took out a plastic hanger to hang his jacket and continued to ignore me.

We stepped out of his room to the kitchen to get something to eat. It was just after 12 o’ clock in the morning, so we quickly make snackwich with polony – the best quick fix to hunger.

Kaashief was distracted, so I asked him again what he made of the whole night.

“What was I saying again? Oh, *ja* ... Didn’t you see what her brother was doing whole time... rather stay away from them, *my broe*,” replied Kaashief as he ran the knife down the diagonal line of the bread to cut his snackwich.

“But I like her a lot, why would I stay away?” that was a lie, as I just wanted her to be a distraction from Riyaaaz. I needed Kaashief to give me some sort of confirmation that I was doing the right thing by focusing my time on Jamielah.

“Although there haven’t been that many, but you literally say that about every girl you meet...” he paused to drag a string of melted cheese from the opening of the toasted hot bread, “Plus there’s a reason why I didn’t want to take you there in the first place.”

“What do you mean?” Kaashief didn’t make sense, and he wasn’t getting to the point. After hearing what he said next, I just froze up – a cold South Easterly wind down my spine.

“Like I said, rather stay away *my broe*, because her brother is a *moffie*, and I can see that he *smaaks* you.”

In Kaashief’s bed, I couldn’t sleep that night. It was the mixture of him snoring next to me, and what he said about Jamielah’s brother, Haleem, that kept me up.

Her brother is a moffie...

moffie...

moffie...

moffie...

Kaashief’s words were breaking in my head like brittle glass falling to the floor. Over and over I heard him saying that dreadful word: *moffie*.

What was so surprising that he said it? Deep down I felt and knew that Haleem must have been gay, because of the way he was staring at me the entire night, but what was surprising was hearing my own cousin use that hateful word.

Her brother is a moffie...

Did he not know the implications of that ugly word? Had he known how much that word made me cry each night, he wouldn’t have said it.

If only he knew that when we were younger, I used to beg Allah to make me like the others boys and not a *moffie*.

I lofted my body and dragged my heavy feet and my heavy heart to the lounge, as I couldn’t bear to be around him. The lounge was dark and the only light I could see were the dim lights of the Mnet decoder that shone from tv cabinet. Out of nowhere I tasted a wet salty

feeling on my lips. I shouldn't have cried myself to sleep that night, but ancient wounds were re-opened.

The piercing sunrays hit through the lounge window and woke me up later that day. It was well over midday. I brushed my teeth, washed the sleep off of my face, cleaned myself with a wet cloth, and ate Pronutro porridge with milk that was edging on to its expiration date. I walked out to stand on his stoep to get fresh air and smoke a cigarette. Maybe I should've smoked a cigarette in Kaashief's backyard, because just as I lifted the cigarette to take my second drag, I heard Jamielah's shrill voice. Between her puffing, she replayed everything that happened previous night and how much fun she had. She wouldn't stop talking about my visit, which indirectly reminded me of her brother, and the *moffie* comment Kaashief had made. I wasn't ready to see her.

"Would you like to go for a walk, Jamielah?" my suggestion jumped out uncontrollably. I guess I just wanted to be away from Kaashief. Jamielah agreed and we walked around the neighbourhood. We walked past my house. I didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable by going into my home, so we continued to walk around Woodstock.

"Let's walk up to the Main Road," Jamielah said, with her eyes lighting up. Her mind was already made up and the next moment we were outside Shoprite. It was very cute actually. The more time I spent with her, the more I liked her.

The Main Road was once again buzzing with people. Street hawkers owned the spaces on the pavements, selling a wide array of different products. Taxi *gaatjies* shouted at Jamielah and I. They could see we were walking in the opposite direction, yet they still tried to convince us to take a taxi to Town. Little vagrants purposely knocked into us, wanting an odd R1 coin, and with every boy and girl that tried their luck, Jamielah would scrape around in her front jeans pocket to help them. There was a long queue on the side of the Shoprite for the people lining up to collect some grant money. We walked around them and entered the smallish supermarket.

"Why's does this place always smell like sour milk? I hate coming here!" I yelled out to Jamielah, but she just chortled, as she pulled me along, leaving my snobby comment at the entrance of Shoprite.

“Milk! You’re right! We’ve run out of milk! Come my husband, let’s go to the dairy section,” said Jamielah, hooking me in and off we walked through Shoprite with our basket. The husband comment made me cringe even though I knew she meant it as a joke.

“I see you’re adding a lot of stuff to this basket, and I’m the one who must carry it –” my arm was starting to weight me own.

“Ag, stop complaining, use your muscles!” Jamielah took her two hands and squeezed my left bicep.

“Not much, I know, but I’m getting there,” she looked over to me with her cheeks turning red. Eventually, we both got bored. I left the red basket (that was filled with random items) at the end of the luxuries aisle, and we both walked back to her home. We sat on the wall of her stoep, smoking more cigarettes, and watching the children play rugby in the street.

“So why’d you stop chatting to me?” Jamielah asked me out of the blue. She stubbed her cigarette on the wall beside her, letting the last of the smoke exit her nostrils.

“Well, you know how Grade 12 is, and I needed to focus on my school work...” I tried to conceal the truth from her as best as I could, as I obviously couldn’t tell her about Riyaaaz.

Imagine I had to say: *well Jamielah, I met a boy and I kissed him, so that’s why I stopped talking to you!* And even though his name didn’t leave my lips, he popped back into my mind, taking ownership all from over. With Jamielah’s hand still intertwined with mine, I could still feel Riyaaaz’s touch on me. All I wanted was for him to be gone just like the taste of him that had eventually faded away. So, I just let Riyaaaz linger in my head again, before I continued the conversation with “...Not everyone is pretty and smart like you, Jamielah.”

“I see what you’re doing there! I’m not complaining!” I noticed that she often spoke in an excited tone, about everything.

Jamielah and I continued to talk all afternoon. At different stages she encouraged me to look up and take in glimpses of the sky. We watched the sun change its position throughout *Dhur* prayer time to *Asr* prayer time, as we exchanged our hopes for the next few years that were to follow. I shared my dreams of having a career in art, and she expressed her trepidation towards applying at universities. I was about to tell her that she needn’t to worry, and that she would get placement at a university, when in that moment, Haleem interrupted us. We were still sitting on the stoep when he swished his way up the stairs and strutted past us. He just waved and then he quickly slipped through the front door.

“What’s up with him?” I asked her. Haleem didn’t seem like his cheerful self, well not that I knew him well enough, but he seemed different to the guy I had met the previous night.

“I think he’s shy,” Jamielah relayed with a slight chortle, her continuous laughing was starting to annoy me.

“Why would he be shy?” and as I heard those words creep out of my mouth, I knew automatically what she would say next.

“I think he likes you. He couldn’t stop talking about you when you left last night,” Jamielah chortled again.

Kaashief was right! Fuck man! Why is he always, right. I don’t think I can come here anymore. I wanted to forget about all this gay stuff, and now... Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

Perhaps Jamielah read my mind, because next she said, “I hope that’s not a problem? He’s my brother after all, gay or not.”

“Oh no... I don’t have a problem with gay people –”

“That’s good... Speaking of gay. Haleem and I were stalking your profile yesterday, and...” *Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! She know, doesn’t she?* My mind was not in a good space. “I see you know Riyaaz Sall–”

“No... I don’t really know him... He and I... met at my cousin Kaashief’s *braai*,” I couldn’t help but cut her off, but hearing his name made my insides blend together.

“I thought so,” said Jamielah. That felt like a good save! *Imagine she knew about Riyaaz and I?!* But I decided to play things cool. “Haleem also said that last night –”

“Said what?” I could feel a warm knot forming around my throat. My heart pumped and I was close to having a heart attack. Sweat circled at my temples and I dabbed it away whenever Jamielah wasn’t looking directly at my face.

“He said that he doubts you know Riyaaz personally,” said Jamielah. His name felt weird coming out of someone else’s mouth. It was like Jamielah shot his name out and it hit my right in the heart.

“*Ja*, he just keeps writing on my wall on Facebook. I don’t really know what to say,” I wanted to get up and leave, but her words were rapid. She didn’t stop talking, as if I was a criminal being interrogated on a cheesy episode of ‘CSI: Miami’.

“He does that a lot yes... I think he’s trying to see if you’re gay, but don’t worry. He’s stupid –”

“Trust me, he’s *kak* stupid, I would know...” out walked Haleem, interrupting Jamielah’s words. He must’ve been listening to our whole conversation.

“Oh, why do you say that?” *what did I get myself into?*

“Riyaaz was my ex-boyfriend, so trust me when I say, he’s *kak* stupid.” And once again, I thought that I was going to be sick.

I decided not to go back to Jamielah’s house that night. Kaashief and I were watching films, and because he sat on the far end of the couch, I could sit with my phone in peace without Kaashief’s eyes wandering all over my Blackberry screen. Riyaaz’s messages stopped flowing through as well. I left his messages unopened on BBM, neither did I respond to his posts on *Facebook*. I ignored Jamielah too.

Suddenly, a *Facebook* notification message popped up in my inbox. It was Haleem! He asked me to come over and visit. My fingers sped over my keypad and I responded immediately; I wanted to know what he was trying! I was getting know his sister, not him! So, I was confused as to why he thought it was okay to just message me. I jumped from the couch, and I told Kaashief that I was going over to visit them, and that he shouldn’t lock the door. Kaashief just shook his head, looking straight at the tv screen.

Their house looked different at night – a little creepy. When I reached the last step before the landing of the stoep, Haleem opened the front door with the torch of his Blackberry shining from his hand. It was as if he was counting my steps. The gate wasn’t locked. He stood in the doorway with his finger over his thick lips, before gesturing for us to creep past his parents’ room. Once he removed his finger, he smiled so hard that his cheeks and eyebrows seemed to be clinging together. I knew that I shouldn’t have visited them again, but I was curious. To have them both like me was exhilarating.

We crept down the dark passageway, and, once again, the creaking of their wooden floor was greeting me. Yet, it was as if I was in a totally different home. There were no loud voices echoing from the room like the day before. I followed him into the room. It was just the three of us. Jamielah was sitting with her back against the wall, hugging her pillow. As I entered, she threw her pillow one side, and embraced me when I sat on her bed. Haleem who was standing over us looked to his side. I think he didn’t want to see Jamielah hug me – I don’t know. He then joining us on the bed, and I was sandwiched between the two siblings.

Throughout the night, I caught Haleem staring at me. Everything was too coincidental. I had reached out to Jamielah to take my mind off Riyaaaz and the thoughts of being gay, only to meet another boy who was interested in me. With some lame excuse, I left their home after an hour. I needed to be alone.

When I got back to Kaashief's house, Haleem had sent me another message on Facebook. Simultaneously, I was chatting to Jamielah on BBM. The secrecy was addictive. He was much older than me, in his mid-twenties at the time, which made him about eight years older than my teenage self, and I liked that he had an adult view about life. I dug myself into a deeper hole by staying up all night by chatting to both of them.

The next day, I had to go back home, as the holidays were over. With school thankfully starting, I had an excuse to not visit them again. At school, we began our revision classes for the final examinations for Grade 12, and surprisingly Jamielah didn't attend.

One day, as I was walking out of school, Jamielah was outside waiting for me at the school gate. I didn't understand why Jamielah stopped coming to school, especially during that crucial revision period, or why she waited for me outside the gate that day. She could've easily sent me a message to meet her at her home, but I didn't question it and we strolled to her home.

Once we reached her home, she offered to make me 2 minute noodles. It was a fancy version as she cut up a mini-steak and sprinkled feta cheese in the bowl. After we ate, we sat a bit on the stoep and shared a cigarette. Jamielah then signalled for me to join her in her room. She pushed me onto her bed, and then she crept up on me. A kiss landed on my lips. She pulled herself away from me, and she sat up, placing her head in the palms of her hands. She shook off her shyness and looked at me again. In she went for me, again.

The second kiss wasn't long either. As she moved her tongue around in my mouth, I could tell that she wasn't an experienced kisser, well neither was I. I opened eyes as watched her kiss me. Her head bobbed from side to side. All I wanted was for things to be over. Things would have escalated much further, but then Haleem walked into the room. He looked angry, and I felt bad, because he and I were still chatting every night without Jamielah knowing. He walked back out of the room. Jamielah and I stopped. To make things worse, Jamielah said something that made me lose all interest in her.

"I think it's best that you and I stay friends," said Jamielah abruptly.

"Why?" was I could muster. I didn't expect to feel hurt.

"Because I have a boyfriend," she responded coldly.

I was shattered.

CHAPTER SIX:

One day, out of nowhere, Riyaaaz sent me a message saying that I was his boyfriend. He didn't ask me, he just proclaimed it. Weirdly, I went along with it. As funny as it sounded in my head, he and I became "boyfriend and boyfriend". Whenever I would later say that to myself, I couldn't take the title, nor him, seriously.

I wanted to be ecstatic about finally be with someone romantically, but as I was crossed-out the days on my calendar, counting down to the beginning of my final examinations, I had a resurgence of sadness. Indeed it was a familiar kind of sadness – the feeling that I couldn't shake off. Instead of focusing on Riyaaaz, and accepting him as my "boyfriend", I couldn't stop obsessing about Jamielah and her rejection. Riyaaaz was an afterthought. He and our developing relationship didn't matter to me anymore, because I allowed my sadness to gnaw at me.

Being with Jamielah was supposed to have been an experiment. I wanted to see if I was actually gay or not, yet developing feelings for her made me even more confused about my sexuality. My feelings thereafter grew into hatred. I hated Jamielah, yet I couldn't stop obsessing about her. I checked her Facebook profile, as much as I could. There were times that I even checked her boyfriend's profile too.

What did she see in him? Was he better than me?

Each day that Jamielah didn't attend the revision classes, I really hoped that I would see her Jamielah, but she didn't attend. Maybe she was avoiding me. Life seemed torturous. I wanted a definitive answer.

Am I gay or not?!

For the first time in four years I realised that my depression started kicking in again.

Then, at night I started to have this recurring dream. In the dream I was present at my *janaza*. I watched Boeta Rashied and Kaashief perform the *ghusl* on my corpse. Once the cleansing ritual was over, my corpse was shrouded in various pieces of *kafan*. My face was covered and nobody was crying for me, as my lonesome body lied in the *katel*. My *janaza* was a sad affair because in my dream only were present. Suddenly, I felt my soul falling was into the pits of *Jahanam*. I wasn't transported to our nearby mosque. There was no *salaatul janaza* for my shameful body. I didn't see Sheikh Khaleed and the other community member praying

for me and asking Allah to grant me *Jannah*. In my dream, I was immediately sent to *Jahanam* where I felt the scorn of the eternal flames literally burning me.

Instantly, I would shoot awake with my heart beating out of control. Whilst hugging my sweaty body and rocking back in forth in my damp sheets, I reminded myself that I was a Muslim. Yes, I very knew that homosexuality was *haram*, but I had nobody to speak to about it my feelings. I tried explaining to Riyaaz about how I felt (obviously being tight-lipped about the whole Jamielah situation) but he would just scoff things off with his toxic positivity. He would merely tell me that everything would be okay and that I had my whole life to figure things out. Despite him having such a similar story to me, he just wouldn't understand my turmoil. So, next on my list was to seek help from the school counsellor.

The school bell squealed to signal that it was time for the first interval and the rest of my classmates that attended the revision session that day stampeded out of the classroom, whilst I waited behind for the counsellor, Ms Fredericks.

As I stood waiting at my desk, I took my time to pack each of my stationary back into my space-case, pushing my pens up and down so that they all fit into a single file. My head remained bowed. Within my core I was building up the courage to reveal a secret that was making my heart mouldy – a secret that was plaguing my mind. Aside from Riyaaz, and the whispers I shared with my prayer mat after completing my *salaah*, I had never shared the truth about myself with anyone.

Ms Fredericks entered the class in a bang. She flung her Pick n Pay shopper's tote bag, that she used as her hand bag for school each day, onto the desk in front of me before proceeding to shut the classroom door behind her. She did most of her actions boldly, a constant need to be seen. We, at school, were all use to it. She wiggled her way onto the seat of wooden desk and it was apparent that school desk was not built for her adult body. After she finally stopped shifting her weight on the seat, I followed her and sat down as well.

We sat facing each other, but I kept lowering my gaze. I was nervous and didn't know what to do, so I reached for my bag once to take out my bread. As I picked out the four slices of chicken and mayonnaise sandwiches, I offered Ms Fredericks from the bread which she instantly accepted. We continued to sit in silence, nibbling at the corners of the sandwiches, until I finally looked up. My wet eyes met hers. I felt her gaze smoulder into mine.

“Muhammad, relax. You know that anything you say will stay safely with me, right?” uttered Ms Fredericks, as she tugged at the collars of her fluffy purple night gown, trying to wrap the gown around her neck. I wasn’t sure why school management allowed her to dress in pyjamas, but her whole outlook did make me feel comfortable.

“Well, Ms Fredericks, it’s hard to say –”

“Oh please, Muhammad. Call me Aaliyah. Don’t be so formal,” she interjected, raising her hands as if she were criminal trying to surrender.

“Okay, Aaliyah...” within my long pause, I mustered as much strength to blurt out the truth. “Uhhm... I think I might be attracted to boys... as well,” I said it so softly. She remained quiet so I repeated myself, although I knew that she heard me the first time.

After repeating, she squawked loudly, and threw her arms across at me, hugging me around my neck.

“This is so exciting! My first gay student! But...” her excitement died down. She composed herself and laid her body forward on the desk. “But isn’t it sore?” said Aaliyah whilst making an agonising face, with her arm reaching behind her and her right index finger pointing to her bum.

“Huh? What do you mean?” I didn’t know if that was her way of trying to be funny or whether she was actually serious. Aaliyah sat back in the seat before continuing.

“You know, man...” she started to speak again, placing her hands on the desks, leaning forward again like a pigeon about to peck at the stale bread from the ground, “Anal –”

“You can’t be serious right now!” I began to laugh hysterically. I couldn’t believe what was happening.

“All I said was that I think that a part of me is... you know... *gay*. Where does anal sex fall in?”

“You mean put it in?!” she said with a malevolent smirk.

“No, please listen. I know you’re trying to be funny, and that’s your shtick... being the cool and easy-going adult here at school, but I need you to listen to me,” as I said that, Aaliyah’s back shot up straight. She put on her spectacles. Out of her shopper bag, she grabbed a folded exam pad and a pen.

“Serious talk now right? No jokes?” I asked, just to feel re-assured.

She nodded vehemently whilst she sucked on the insides of her cheeks.

“Well I’ve been seeing this guy for a few weeks now. It’s nothing serious or anything. The other day he sent me a message stating that we were dating. There wasn’t even a discussion. I felt like unwanted sale item finally being snatched and taken home...” I paused, gasped for much needed air, and continued, “You see, I don’t even know if I like him, like him... well I always knew that I would kiss another guy... uhhm... eventually, but I had never thought that I would like it. I mean... it feels so wrong. I am a Muslim –”

“Weren’t you in love with Jamielah, now the other –”

“How do you know about Jamielah?” I frowned immediately.

What was Aaliyah on about?

“Muhammad,” it was as if Aaliyah sang my name each time she uttered it. “We’re friends on Facebook, *remember*. I’m the easy-going one here at school!” said Aaliyah, as if she was proud of her self-proclaimed title. “I saw all the photos of the you and Jamielah. I liked all the cute posts you wrote on each other’s walls. Plus, Jamielah also spoke to me about... Oops! Oh never mind. You know, that’s confidential things. But don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.” Aaliyah smiled at me, as she gestured to the bread, indicating that she wanted another slice. My nerves were completely gone. I expected Aaliyah to be reluctant to hear my story, or to be judgemental, but she seemed to be genuinely interested in talking. “Muhammad, listen. you have your whole life ahead of you. Don’t overthink things. Have some fun, enjoy yourself, but oh... use condoms. You can find them in the boy’s toilet,” remarked Aaliyah as she winked so hard that her fat right cheek and eyebrow squeezed against each other. “So, tell me. If you’re not with Jamielah anymore, and you are dating some guy, who’s the girl and who’s the boy in this relationship of yours?”

“Woah! There’s no girl in the scenario... and I guess that’s the point? Besides, I really don’t want to speak about sex with you.” Despite her antics, and her inappropriateness, I was surprisingly not uncomfortable speaking to Aaliyah.

“*Ai nee, man*. Don’t worry. If you don’t want to talk about it, I’m sure I’ve got a brochure about ‘how to have safe anal sex’ lying around somewhere in my office for–”

“I’m still going to get married and have children one day. This is just a phase. I’m sure I’ll get over it soon, because lately, I can’t stop thinking about Jamielah. If I was gay, why do I also feel this way about her?”

But what if I was going to develop strong feelings for Riyaz or one day have sex with him, that’s what I was truly thinking, but I didn’t tell her that, so I stopped my mind from pondering and I wrapped my arms around my chest. “I’m just lost, Aaliyah. Nobody

understands me and I have nobody to talk to about all of this.” Tears seeped out from my eyes. Aaliyah hopped up and she leaned in to hug me.

There was finally a huge weight off of my shoulders.

“*My broe*, are you seriously going to the matric ball all of a sudden? I thought you weren’t going?” quizzed Kaashief, as he was laying his heavy body on his unmade bed, with his left leg up against the wall cuddling with a big packet of NikNaks.

He was right. I wasn’t planning on going to my school’s matric ball. In fact I made it vehemently clear to Zaynab that I wasn’t going. Shame, she was super upset, because she never got to go, as she was pregnant with me at the time, so I felt the disappointment spark out her eyes.

“And why are you going with Jamielah, as your matric ball partner after what she did? Are you now good enough for her?” I could tell that Kaashief was going to fireball me with many questions, and again, he was right. I shouldn’t have changed my mind so impulsively about going to the matric ball or going with Jamielah, but she begged me to go with her.

With my disdain swallowed away, I accepted Jamielah’s invitation. She handed me pretty hand-written letter at school that she also happened to spray with her Lentheric Hoity Toity spray. In the letter, she explained that her boyfriend had dumped her and she had already paid for his ticket,

Was it a good idea to be going?

I hadn’t seen Jamielah in weeks – her letter came as shock to me.

Maybe there was chance that she and I could be together? I still carried the hurt of her not wanting to be with me. If I could be with her again, I could once and for all bury my feelings towards Riyaaz.

“Muhammad, *my broe*, why is she –”

“*Yoh*, Kaashief! Stop badgering me with your *kak* questions!” I snapped back, as I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Relax, *my broe*. I was only going to ask why is she having a matric ball *tafel*? It’s not even that much of a big deal. The whole *tafel* idea and having people over is for special occasions only. Is she then going to Makkah? Are you going to make a *du’ah* before she leaves the house?” Kaashief just continued with his interrogated, whilst I stood angrily in front of his askew mirror that was glued to his unattached cupboard door, checking that everything was in place.

I must admit Kaashief was correct, the whole idea of having a matric ball send-off pre-party was stupid. It was an excuse to be flashy and excessive. A way for the families of the matric student to brag.

“And where are you going with that shirt and *kruisbane*? You look like Urkel!” he continued with a joke, trying to defuse my obvious irritation toward him.

“*Ag man*, are you working for the Scorpions now? What’s with all these questions?” I bounced back at Kaashief, as I lifted the cupboard door and laid it back on the cupboard frame.

“Just say you’re going because you still *smaak* her!” interrupted Kaashief, as he stuffed another handful of NikNaks in his mouth. He then placed his hands on his stomach indicating that he shouldn’t have been laying down and eating.

“And why is she going to the matric ball, but she *bunks* the revision classes? Makes no sense,” he continued, as I folded my blazer over my arms, continuing to ignore him. In that moment I regretted telling him anything about Jamielah. Deep down I also wished I could’ve confided in him about Riyaz. Without dwelling on my thought, I reached out and clutched the red rose from Kaashief’s bed, and strolled out of his home.

As I took my first step into the passage of Jamielah’s home, things felt different. It was as if there was a heaviness clouding above me. Unlike previous times, for the first time I felt unwelcome in her home. Each step I took became weighted. My feet didn’t seem to want to leave the floor. I was cemented to the creaky wooden floor. Before the entrance of Jamielah and Haleem’s room, I also noticed a tall family portrait on the wall – a picture I hadn’t noticed before. The portrait was probably newly placed there. They looked like a “big ol’ happy family”. Each member was smiling and placed strategically in the frame, as if they were a four-pieced puzzle. In the picture they all looked straight ahead. Jamielah and Haleem sat on chairs, whilst their parents stood behind them, protecting them. Both parents’ hands were attached to Haleem’s right shoulder.

Was it possible for Muslim families to accept their gay sons? I quickly fanned those thoughts away, as I entered the room.

There were about six to seven people scattered around sitting on chairs and lounging on the opposing beds – the usual set-up, just as I had remembered. Most of the faces were new, so I decided to go around and introduce myself to everyone, politely extending a handshake. There were girls and boys in the room, and I shook the hands of the girls too.

“Is it Eid that you’re shaking everyone’s hands?” announced a voice from behind me, with a chorus of laughter joining in. I wasn’t expecting that dumb comment, so I lifted my hand up, awkwardly staring at it. My act of good nature was not well received.

“Ag, I’m just trying to be polite,” I responded, smiling awkwardly at my hand.

Apparently Jamielah was still busy putting on her make-up, so I made my way to sit on Jamielah’s bed, as I used to do. Suddenly, in walked a short guy with fair milk-like skin. His hair was long and dark, and he also had the prettiest brown eyes I had ever seen. He sauntered effortlessly, allowing me to soak in his pink lips, high cheek bones, and fierce short eyebrows. He stopped in front of Haleem, sat on his lap, whereas Haleem embraced him from behind.

I had never seen two guys do something like that so openly before, so instantly I lowered my gaze!

I was shy on their behalf. I looked around the room, awaiting a reaction from everyone, but nobody said anything. It was fascinating watching them, two guys being themselves with everyone else just accepting. Had Kaashief been with me, I wonder if he would’ve freaked out.

The beautiful guy drew me in. He occasionally glanced at me, smiling; I smiled back at him, but not for too long, trying not show any signs of how I truly felt about his beauty. I would divert my gaze every time, because I didn’t want to let myself melt away by his brightness. I also didn’t want everyone else to know that I was staring at him, or staring at his pretty smile. He had perfect teeth, too perfect... his smile was so handsome that my own teeth felt inadequate to reveal itself.

I tried my best to hide to that I was blushing, but he must have known that I was watching him, because he continued to pierce at me with his smile permanently plastered over his face. In return, I keep fixating on him and how perfectly intricate his big teeth were.

He finally hopped up and slid across towards me.

I hopped up too! Instantly, reaching out my hand to shake his, yet he interrupted my gesture by hugging me. He was much shorter than me, with is silky black hair swiftly brushing

up against my chin. I had never had an unknown guy come up to me and hug me, but I hugged him back. Of course I wasn't going to be rude or show that I was uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry for not greeting when I walked in. Salaam, my name is Irshaad, and you are?" he reckoned politely.

"I'm Muhammad, and *Eid Mubarak* to you too!" The whole room began laughing again. Irshaad turned red as he didn't catch the joke from earlier.

Irshaad walked back to sit on Haleem. I heard Haleem explain to Irshaad that I was in Jamielah's class and that I was her matric ball partner for the night. He was emotionless as he explained to Irshaad who I was. I guess he was still upset with me for kissing Jamielah. I didn't know what to think. It didn't matter. I was too fixated on Irshaad's beauty.

Then, Irshaad's gaze diverted toward the doorframe of the room – that's when I became completely flabbergasted!

What the fuck are you doing here?

As the figure stepped into the room, and lifted his head, I was completely shocked to see that it was Riyaaaz. My heart shot down to my intestines! What was even more odd about the situation was that Riyaaaz wasn't his usual flamboyant self. In fact he seemed to lack any sort of confidence, as he slouched through the room. It was as if he didn't want the others to notice him.

What is he doing here?

To make things worse, Riyaaaz came to sit next to me on Jamielah's bed!

"Awe, Muhammad," announced Riyaaaz. The room went silent.

Riyaaaz's voice was thicker and louder than I had remembered. I was starting to feel uncomfortable, as he wiggled to sit a little too close to me. For the first time I didn't appreciate him invading my personal space. I looked over to the each person in the room, my eyes shooting around like the ball from the 3D Pinball Space Cadet computer game. None of them were actually taking notice of us. In fact they were blatantly ignoring Riyaaaz. Haleem was the only one looking at us, and it felt like he plucked out his eyeballs and threw it onto us.

Irshaad, who was still on Haleem's lap at that time, was talking across the room to one of the girls. Haleem cupped his arms around Irshaad's tiny chest, and he leaned in to kiss him from behind. Only then it clicked in my head that Haleem was in his mid-twenties. Coldness shot down my back. Haleem was a grown man kissing Irshaad, who was clearly much younger than him!

I could also tell that Haleem was acting that way on purpose in front of me and weirdly in front of Riyaaaz to, his ex-boyfriend. It felt like I was in a deleted scene from the *John Tucker Must Die* film Zaynab and I had watched. I decided that I didn't want to be in that environment anymore; I needed to get some fresh air. Even though I admired them for being open and comfortable with themselves, seeing a sixteen-year-old boy on a much older Haleem's lap made me uneasy. I galloped out of the house, and Riyaaaz followed me.

"Muhammad, wait!" Riyaaaz grabbed my hand, but he was too weak, because I violently pulled away from him. What possessed him to that he would grab my hand so openly in public?

"Why are you running out like that?!" he yelled, but I ignored his question, and continued to speed down the road, unaware of my familiar surroundings.

I didn't want to be seen with him, or be around other gay guys kissing.

I felt dirty.

Then, as it was bound to happen, the *athaan* sounded through the neighbourhood. When the *mu'athien* cried out the first "*Allahu Akbar*", his voice pierced and shattered in my ears. Allah was punishing me. I could feel it. I wanted to get away from Riyaaaz but he kept brisk-walking behind me.

"Can you please stop fucking following me!" I screamed loudly, in the open road, whilst the important call to the *Asr Salaah* was sounding out loudly. "*Maaf*, Allah. I didn't mean to swear during the *athaan*!" I turned around and frowned so hard at Riyaaaz, I thought my eyebrows would pop off my face. Riyaaaz made me swear during the *athaan*!

"Can we talk, please." Riyaaaz's voice was gentle, like the light spring breeze that was passing us. "Why did you run out like that? Now they'll feel as if they won!" he yelled again, before stopping his gate.

"What are you talking about? Is this all just a game to you people?" my responses were all frustrated. I stopped, turned around, and leaned against the pole of the at the stop street. Riyaaaz stood against the corner house, finally giving me my much needed space. I watched an odd car pass the stop street, every now and then. The drivers would ignore the rules of the road, and without stopping, and they'd be gone again. Woodstock seemed fast-paced too. That Friday moved by speedily with everything in my life feeling like one big snowball.

“I didn’t know that you were going to be there. Nor that you are Jamielah’s new matric ball partner. This is all a shock for me too. I think Haleem was trying to make me jealous,” remarked Riyaaaz, who at that moment was sitting on the tarred pavement with his head buried in shame.

“Why would he do that?” I played dumb, I already knew the answer as Jamielah had told me.

“Because Haleem is my ex-boyfriend, and promise that you won’t get mad... I told him that you and I are dating,” confessed Riyaaaz. I lifted my shoulders from the pole. I couldn’t believe that Riyaaaz would betray my trust and brag about me to Haleem.

I was about to walk away from him when he dropped another bomb.

“And you saw the boy that was sitting on his lap? Irshaad?” I just nodded to his questioning. “Well... he and I also dated.”

“Maybe it’s best that you just go home. I still have to go back and face those people,” was all that I could say back to him. He stopped leaning against the wall and stood up with his feet facing opposite diagonal directions.

I watched Riyaaaz stroll up to the Main Road before I made my way back to Jamielah’s house. Kaashief was right, I shouldn’t have agreed to go with her.

The rest of the night was a blur due to my anxiety flaring up.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

My seventeenth birthday was coming up. Zaynab and I had this silly yet meaningful tradition where we would make a pot of chicken curry and naan bread, and stay up all night and watch old Bollywood films.

According to Zaynab, when she was younger, she and her mother would go to the Alabama Bioscope, every Saturday and that's where her love for Bollywood films had begun. She hardly spoke much about her parents. I knew that she hardly knew her father, as he worked away in Durban for all her life and came home every six months. The only thing I knew about her mother was that she was a chain smoker, loved cashew nuts and that she enjoyed going to the bioscope.

When I was younger, Zainab tried to get me to be intrigued with watching Bollywood films just as her mother once did with her. I could never, however, follow the fast paced changing of the subtitles, nor the weird way the actors' lips moved with the English dubbing. Nonetheless, and because it made her happy, I pretended to like watching those films.

Surprisingly, after many years of watching the same Bollywood film list, I had grown to like one movie – 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai'.

I loved 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai', because one of the main characters in the film, named Anjali Khanna, lived with her single parent, Rahul Khanna, played by the famous Shah Rukh Khan. I connected with the character of Anjali, but unlike her, my missing parent didn't leave me letters to read on my subsequent birthdays. I guess I wanted to be like Anjali and just as Zainab did with 'Can't Hardly Wait', I watched myself live through the character from that film. The difference between Zainab and I was that when I grew older, I realised that it was merely a film (a Bollywood film with an elaborate plotline) so I knew that I couldn't continue to fantasise about what my life could have been like, or hope and wish that my life was a film.

Then, as time passed, and my opinions about life changed, the relationship that Zainab and I developed changed too. The demands at the hospital became more time consuming for her. She started working twelve-hour shifts. I guess the main reason was because she needed more money to provide for us – it was never taken personally. And although she wanted to provide us both with a better life, by attaining more money, inadvertently, she and I grew apart. I felt as though I had lost a big part of her to her work.

We began to live past each other. We didn't even perform our evening *salaah* together! As I was getting older, I realised that the promises she made was as empty as the vase on our rhombus-shaped coffee table. I also had to learn how to cook because she was never around. When she was indeed around, she would spend her time mounted to her bed. Luckily, Aunty lived a few roads away so most nights I ended up eating at their home or sleeping there.

Whenever Spring was coming to an end, and summer was fast emerging, it also meant that the days to my birthday became closer too. The fear of knowing that Zaynab would disappoint me again also emerged with the change in season. Deep down I knew that each year our birthday tradition was dying out.

On the morning of my birthday, I had already taken out the frozen chicken breasts and left in the sink with hot water to defrost. I hated takings things out of our small box freezer. If we weren't playing tetris, moving and shuffling our meat within the small space, we would be struggling to close the square door due to the frost always overflowing onto the corners of the freezer.

When it was closer to the time that Zaynab would be home, I started my preparations. I can still remember how finely I diced the onion, threw it into the pot with the already hot oil and waited for the onions to braise into a brownish colour. With my next step, I added a grated tomato and sliced strips a half of a green pepper and one chili; my spices (curry powder, father in-law masala, *bori*, *koljana*, *jeera*) got thrown into the mix. The chicken got placed into the pot, thereafter the potatoes, and finally some chopped *dhanya*. Over the years I had made a mental note of how to make the curry, as I inspected Aunty as she made her food. The naan followed a similar step-by-step routine, and after about an hour the food was ready. I was excited to see Zaynab's reaction!

The table was decked, the food was dished in fancy crockery, I pulled out the winter blankets from my cupboard (as most of the extra blankets and towels in our home was stored in my room), inserted the 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai' dvd, and waited.

Another hour must have passed, when I heard Zaynab slamming the door.

She fetched her plate and sat next to me. She didn't bellow any greetings of peace to me, so I didn't greet her either.

I watched her lift the remote, sit at the edge of the settee, press play before digging into her meal – *our* meal.

She didn't speak about my birthday, in fact she didn't speak at all. We just sat there – watching and eating.

There were times that Zaynab's inconsistent personality scared me. There were days that she was either her regularly bubbly and compassionate self, or she would either be moody and tight-lipped – I never knew which version of her would enter the door, each night.

On the nights that she walked into our home, with downturned eyes and a heavy heart, her always bright face would instead be colourless and bleak. The long conversations that we once shared, and our minds that were intertwined with similar thoughts, were wiped away, just as she wiped away the trickles of the condensed milk she messed on our kitchen counter each time that she made tea. She even began developing a heavy hunch on her back. Even though she was young, she struggled to carry her daily Shoprite packets into our home. Her *salaah* became inconsistent as well. As a parent, she had the right to remind me to be submissive and remember Allah, but I didn't have the chutzpah to ask her why she didn't complete her prayers on time. I also pre-empted that she would slap me across the face with her dainty hands, if I ever questioned her – even though she had never laid a reprimanding finger on me and not that I gave her any reason to.

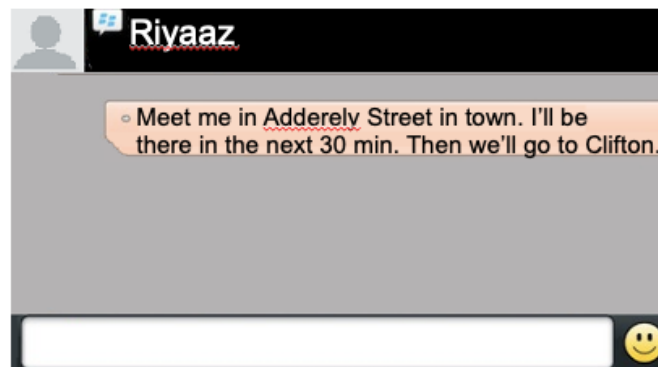
Later that night I went to bed with mixed emotions.

I expected her to be there for me, which she was in some weird way, but it wasn't like the other times. To some extent I had expected her to disappoint me by not wanting to complete the tradition, but I still had hope. Deep down I still felt the disappointment circle over my throat and water my eyes. I reached for my Blackberry and noticed a string of messages from Riyaaz.

I opened the messages and began to type, a part of me feeling happy again, because I was talking to somebody that I could count on.

The next day, Riyaaz and I decided to have a birthday 2.0. I never spent my birthday with someone I had liked romantically before, so I had high hopes. But before he could see me, Riyaaz had an interview for a job Green Point. Green Point has been known gay capital of Cape

Town. I should've used my brain and connected all the obvious rainbow-coloured dots to what he was actually doing that day – but more on that later.



After reading his BBM text, I quickly grabbed my new sweater that I received as a gift from Kaashief, took a quick shower, lifted my grandfather's guitar case and sped to the Main Road to get a taxi. Yet, when I got to Adderley Street, Riyaaz wasn't there.

I didn't know where to stand. The buildings on Adderley Street seemed taller than I remembered. The space of the street seemed more confined and crowded than before. Compared to Woodstock Main Road, Adderley Street on Saturday morning was always filled with way more people shuffling around to complete their weekly shopping. I allowed each minute to snail by, as I anticipated Riyaaz's arrival. To distract my mind I watched blurry figures speed by me. Everyone seemed faceless and in a hurry to get somewhere.

Between the two opposing lanes in the street, there was a semi large island and I rested my body against the horizontal poles. I stood facing KFC with the guitar case next to me, resting against the pole too. The distinct smell of the freshly deep-fried chicken wafted nostalgic memories into my brain.

I reminisced to the Saturdays that Zaynab decided to run errands in Town. She and I would catch a bus and after arriving at the bus terminus in Cape Town, CBD, we would trek to Adderley Street. KFC was always our first stop.

The excited little boy that I was would race to the counter and stare with insatiable eyes at the newest Chicky Meal toy that would be advertised above me. Zaynab would place our order, take out the notes and coins from her mini ostrich leather purse. After the cashier handed over the plastic tray with our food, we'd climb the steep stairs to go sit on the balcony. With a new toy (to add to my growing collection) in one hand, and an oily chicken leg in the other, I would watch Zaynab nibble at her coleslaw. In between her bite sizes from the red plastic

spoon, she would move around the carrot pieces from her coleslaw and pick at the cabbage only. My eyes would dart between watching her actions and looking up at the KFC flags flap in the breeze. There were Saturdays that I had hope for my father to show up in the picture, but he never did. So, there I stood, standing and waiting, once again, for a different man to show up.

An hour passed and he still hadn't pitched up; I didn't like where things were going. It was my birthday 2.0., I shouldn't have had to wait around.

Eventually, I spotted Riyaaaz walking towards me after he exited Woolworths. He smirked at me from afar, as he always did. In fact could also see his mismatched teeth from afar. In my stomach it felt as though there was a WWE Smackdown wrestling match happening. A few weeks previously, the thought of kissing another boy was merely a tremor in my mind, and then, all of a sudden, I had grown to like Riyaaaz a lot. The situation wasn't supposed to be serious, but he, along with the thoughts of how much I wanted his dark lips to meet mine, invaded my life. All I wanted was to have more low-toned secret conversations with him. The thoughts in my mind were always spinning. Round and round. Unhealthily. Suddenly, I was interrupted as he was standing in front of me, the person I continuously thought about all day was standing before me.

“Happy Fucking Birthday, Muhammad!” he yelled, as he handed me a little gift bag.

I was still leaning against the horizontal pole, and he stood a good distance from me.

“Open it,” he said as he hopped up to sit on the pole. I placed my hand inside the bag, I pulled out a stuffed dog. The dog was grey with long black ears.

“His name is Greyie, like you know... Grey-*ie* with an *ie* at the end,” pronounced Riyaaaz, emphasising on the last syllable. “One day when we get married we will have a real life dog just like him.”

Two guys getting married? Is that even possible? What Riyaaaz said didn't sit right in my core.

“Do you really mean that, Riyaaaz?” I responded cautiously, taking a few steps until I was standing next to him. The image of he and I living together or being married was hazy.

“Of course I do. Unless you don't want to marry me?” he hopped off the pole with a clank, leaning forward towards me to nudge my shoulder with his elbow. “Picture it... you and I getting married one day... We would be so happy. Just you and I... and let's not forget about Greyie with an *ie* at the end. Eventually, we would adopt a child, 'cause we would need

someone to inherit everything... No, we would adopt three boys, or maybe even get a surrogate. You, me, Greyie with an *ie* at the end and the boys; picture it! How happy we would both be..." he went on about what life would be like one day and I got lost in his words. Faceless bodies still roamed by us, and Riyaaaz's face was so clear in front of me, along with his hopes and dreams.

"I want to kiss you right now," I muttered with my eyes popping around to glance if anyone had been watching or listening to us.

"Follow me," he said before walking away from me.

"Where are we going?" but he didn't answer, "Where are we going? I wasn't serious... about the... you know," my words broke off out of my mouth. He was too far ahead to hear my anxious feelings towards actually kissing. His walking was swift and the stomping of his gate made me realise that he was indeed serious.

"You'll see birthday boy," he once again smirked, as the words left the corner of his mouth.

Riyaaaz headed straight to KFC. Reluctantly, I trusted him and I followed him, because all I wanted was to taste his lips on mine. He walked up the staircase, that seemed less steep than I had remembered and I followed him.

He and I were the only ones in the upstairs section.

He walked towards the toilet and I followed him.

The main door closed behind us. We both stepped into a corridor and I followed him.. In the corridor was a basin and a mirror, with the female toilet adjacent to the mirror and the male's toilet at the end of the corridor.

"Walk in first and I'll walk in you after. Don't lock the door... okay?"

"Okay," I replied and walked obediently.

The next moment Riyaaaz and I were in the toilet facing each other. He looked at me with flames in his eyes and grabbed me closer. His arms were wrapped around me like a beach towel. I did the same to him.

"Happy Fucking Birthday, Muhammad! I know this isn't this isn't the ideal place, but one day you and I will be able to kiss freely."

After the stint at KFC, we trekked toward Strand Street catch the taxi.

The taxi ride to the beach was unusual, because he said that we were not allowed to speak to each other. I obeyed. We also didn't sit next to each other. I guess to keep our distance and not to raise any suspicion. Riyaaaz was more experienced, so I didn't think anything of it.

In the taxi, the guitar case kept falling over. The taxi *gaatjie* wasn't happy with me, but I didn't take any notice of him as I was excited to impress Riyaaaz with my new skills. I knew a few chords and there was only one song that Kaashief taught me how to play on the guitar – *California King Bed*, by Rihanna. I learnt a little bit of the chorus to this Gypsy King song too, but that wasn't the full song, nor enough to impress Riyaaaz.

As we first stepped down the long flight of stairs that took us from Victoria Road all the way down to Clifton, Riyaaaz explained that Clifton 3rd Beach had an unwritten rule of being a gay beach. I didn't know what to make of his comment, as we climbed down past a string of fancy beach homes. Riyaaaz stopped at certain homes and stared up in awe. He further relayed his hopes of one day escaping his regular Muslim home in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town to wanting to live a cosmopolitan life. I smiled widely at his future hopes, hiding how much I resented walking down all those stairs.

Finally, we got to the sand!

The air was clear and the beach wasn't too full. Surrounding us were only men, some baking in the sun, and others lounging on long white plastic beach chairs. It took me a while to get that many of them were in deed gay. I too was with my "boyfriend". For the first time, I think I felt the essence of being accepted and free.

"I'm not going to lie, initially, I thought that I wasn't going to feel comfortable here, but... sitting here is peaceful," I said to Riyaaaz, as I grabbed handfuls of sand, letting the sand pour for my grip. The waves were swelling more in that moment and the high tide was starting to present itself.

"That's good, Muhammad! Don't worry, nobody here will know us, nor will they think anything of us sitting here. I mean, think of it this way, why would anyone we know see us here, at the *gay beach*?" his response was quick, just like the quick action of him rubbing sunblock on his ears. We sat under a red flimsy Coca Cola umbrella that produced a small blob of shade. Riyaaaz proceeded to take off his shirt and pants. He displayed himself in his underwear as if it was nothing. Although self-conscious, I took off my sweater only, and sat on the towel in my swimming shorts.

Riyaaz continued to share stories of his past experiences with other boys. He also had a quick answer for every question that I asked. He was a self-proclaimed Mr Know-it-all, but I later learned that was just a playful way to cover his narcissism. I allowed him to speak most of the time, as, to me, there was a lot of comfort in hearing him speak. There was something soothing in his voice. I felt content around him, like a child feeling comfort after hearing, “Everything is going to be okay,” from a parent.

“Tell me more about the guitar. Are you going to sing me a love song?” he asked with a silly grin, after he picked away at his fried chicken. Seagulls gathered around us like predators waiting to attack the chicken. I slipped my hands in and out of my KFC container feeding them chips, before I answered Riyaaz.

“Firstly, the guitar was my grandfather’s,” I picked my words carefully just as I picked up each chip. “I don’t have any memories of him, but apparently he was a charmer —” “Just like his grandson?” interjected Riyaaz, there was always a cute side remark from him.

“I guess so, but I’ve learnt how to play from my cousin, Kaashief... oh, you met him the other day. Anyway, I can’t play any chords from memory, I just play by ear. Kaashief basically tells me where to place my fingers and I memorise it. It’s hard to explain, but just know that he’s a bad teacher, cause we should have actually started with learning the different chords.”

“Well, are you going to play for me —”

“Only if you’ll sing with me. I learnt this song just for you.”

“Deal!”

I strummed the interlude and watched the ocean reflect in Riyaaz’s dark eyes. Out of nowhere I started singing and he followed. In that moment I realised that I should’ve learnt *Someone Like You* instead because it seems easier to sing in a lower register. To try and sing *California King Bed* lower or in Rihanna’s tone was shitty either way, but I didn’t care and neither did Riyaaz.

“So how come when I reach out my fingers, it seems like more than distance between us,” both our voices started screeching, as we hit the high notes, trying to replicate Rihanna’s unique tone. Then he and I hit the chorus, “In this California King Bed...” but much lower. It’s a thing I’ve observed most people do. After singing a high note and embarrassingly not singing it correctly, immediately there’s shift to a lower tone of singing. Riyaaz and I did it together, with chuckles of laughter in between.

We continued the rest of the song, loudly, to the dismay of the gays around us, but again we didn't care.

California King Bed became *our* song, and I secretly called Riyaz "My California king" as Rihanna belts in the song, which we shorted CFK.

Sadly, to this day I can't get myself to listen to that song, which actually holds a lot of good memories.

It was months later that I learned why Riyaz had taken so long. He never went on an interview. Let's just say for now that he wasn't the person I thought he was.

After we left the beach, and I got out at my stop back in Woodstock, I watched the almost empty taxi snail down the rest of the Main Road. The driver would hit dead breaks for different passers-by, hoping to fill his taxi, but at that time on a Saturday evening, there was hardly anyone travelling out of Woodstock. From the back window of the taxi, I could see Riyaz waving to me. I stood for a few minutes watching him disappear, as the taxi edged farther away.

As I strolled down to Kaashief's home, there was a vibration in my jean pocket and I knew it was a BBM message from Riyaz. Whilst taking the corner around Debonairs, a pizzeria, my eyes smouldered into my screen and my heart wagged up and down in excitement. Riyaz was already sending me a string of message, so I wasn't really focused on my surroundings. I also tried best to balance my body weight whilst shuffling unsteadily due to my arms being tired from carrying the guitar case. I was about to lift my left leg and take another step forward when another body crashed into me.

There was a pain that knocked on my chest, on the very place the unknown figure's head hit me. The tar of the concrete pavement comforted me, whilst my grandfather's guitar case lied next to me. Above me, the sky was still a bright blue and there were no clouds to be seen. I listened to various sounds of the Main Road waft and hover around me. Especially, the wheels of cars screeching down the road that clanged in my ears, the faint sound of the beeping at the red robot that signalled for the blind to walk, and the taxi *gaatjies*' shrill voices that

boomed in the air as they were all looking for passengers. Suddenly, a dainty hand flashed in my face. I smacked the hand away from me and lifted my body up from the hard floor. I was about to yell out. The person who knocked into me should've watch where they were going! But as I was about to open my mouth, my eyes just popped instead when I saw who it was.

“Please give me *maaf*,” he said.

It was all a weird blur. He handed me my phone that must have slipped out of my hand when he knocked into me.

How could it be that a guy his size could knock me over like that?

I stood there like an idiot incapable of saying anything. At first, I didn't recognise him, as his black Nike cap sunk deep over his forehead. After he took off his cap, his hair bounced out and his face opened up. I just stared at him, taking in his beautiful features as I had done a few days prior. His fair milk-like skin shimmered in the harsh Cape Town sun. I scanned over his face tracing the edges of his big doll-like brown eyes that were protected by his short eyebrows, his pointy nose, and thick pink lips – he just, once again, seemed like perfection.

“Do you remember me?” he flashed his toothpaste tv advert smile at me, whereas I remained silent, eventually bending over to pick up the guitar case. “I'm Irshaad, we met at Jamielah's house,” he continued with his intrusive re-introduction. There was her name again... the three syllables I hated most, following me around like an annoying unwanted fly. “Oh, and Happy Birthday!” he said ecstatically.

“Thank you...” I lifted my shoulders. “but you're a day late and how do you know that it was my birthday?”

“Oh I feel embarrassed now,” he responded, as the Main Road was beginning to quiet down.

“Don't be!” I replied with my hand instantaneously falling onto his shoulder. It was a weird reflex, so I pulled back my hand and moved my head around to see if anyone saw what I had done. “I don't think I want to celebrate my birthday anymore,” I continued to speak, with my words starting to vomit out from my oesophagus. “You see, on our birthdays we tend to set ourselves up for disappointment as we expect too much? Grand gestures, big presents, flowery words and speeches... but in reality, people will just often forget about you, even though we hope that they don't. Or worse, we throw big parties and many don't attend. Those who do attend forget to buy anything and come empty handed – not that we should expect any gifts;

but, the expectation is always there, so, *ja...* I just don't want any disappointment, you know?" I took a deep breathe, whilst Irshaad squinted at me in confusion. His eyes shrunk from looking like full round pebbles to minute stones. Where that long speech about birthdays came from, I still don't know.

"Wow I never thought of it like that. You seem so clever," replied Irshaad with another smile. I didn't understand how anyone's teeth could be that straight and white.

"Thanks, I guess... Listen, it was nice seeing you again, but I need to go to go my cousin's home. My aunt doesn't like us walking in after *Maghrieb*," I relayed in finality before walking away in embarrassment.

It was around 7pm and because of the longer summer days, children were still playing outside in the street. Whenever I walked in the streets, I would get random flashbacks of my childhood – that evening was no different.

Outside, a group of about six year olds were huddled in a circle *kapping tol*. A nostalgic feeling crept over me, as I remembered how Kaashief and I use to do the same when we played the game called "*stokens*". The game consisted of a group first spinning their *tols*, and the loser, whose *tol* stopped spinning first, would have to place theirs in the road whilst everyone else *kapped* their *tols* on it. At first I was very bad at the game, because it takes a specific dexterity to master. I needed to learn how to first tie the thin piece of rope like string around the plastic *tol* – this needed to be done not too loosely, and neither too tightly. There also needed to be a knot on each side of the string which is used as a guide to tie around the metal nail, found at the end of the *tol*. Once the tying was perfected, I needed to *kap* correctly, which I suppose is similar to bowling a cricket ball. Instead of throwing the *tol* forward like a cricket ball, one needs to throw the *tol* down on the street, and quickly lift the string up. The children were gleeful, and in that moment I wondered if I could still play that game and enjoy myself as I once did.

I wonder what Aunty Deema would say to these children if she were still alive, I pondered before I began to giggle.

Her shrill voice echoes in my head every time I brisk walk past her home. She was that one evil old aunty who scolds for every petty little reason. I'm sure every neighbourhood has an Aunty like that. Sometimes I wondered if Kaashief purposely hit those tennis balls into her yard with my cricket bat just to incite a string of vulgarities from her. Even though she had long passed away, her presence still loomed in Woodstock.

I continued walking, and turned the street corner, passing Aunty Miena's home. Aunty Miena was the owner of the our neighbourhood corner shop. Well, the she actually operated her shop from her kitchen. As I passed her home, I could smell the strong scent of incense, burning at her doorway, and I remembered how that smell wafted down the passageway and through her home. Aunty Miena had small watermelon seed like eyes, sallow skin, jet black hair that was dyed bi-weekly with *Glory* henna, and wrinkly hands and face. She chained smoked *Rothmans Mild* cigarettes. I could still remember the quick drags she would inhale of her cigarette, thereafter exhaling large clouds of smoke out of her nose and not her mouth. Kaashief and I loved walking in and out of her home. We also used to marvel at how Aunty Miena mind controlled us with her products. To us it was as if Aunty Miena decided what games would be played in the streets of Woodstock, which we called the different seasons. Most popular was the *tol* season, in which for a few weeks we'd be playing "*stokens*" on the tar streets. We then moved over to the *gattie* season (the one season that irritated our neighbours the most because we would dig holes in whosever lawn we found appropriate) and we would then shoot our marbles into those holes. There was the pallet gun season and at the beginning of every November was Guy Fawkes Day. The days pending up to 5 November, we would *bas klappetjies* in the road or throw Pop Pop Snappers around – I can still picture that yellow box with the red print and the girl on the box. Kaashief and I had good memories, but traumatic ones too...

As I walked down the road, getting closer to Kaashief's home, I could smell what every neighbour was cooking. There were strong smells of the different *bredies* made by the different aunties, and my stomach started to howl. The McDonalds Riyaz and I ate didn't make me full, in fact McDonalds' burgers never made me full, so I brisked quicker down the road.

"*Asalaamualaykum!*" I bellowed as I entered their home. The front door of Kaashief's home was never locked, in fact many of the homes in the neighbourhood wasn't locked. I proceeded to stroll down the passageway. In the kitchen Aunty was busy knocking her large ladle on the side of the pot. She must be the only person I've ever seen cook food with a ladle, as she said that the utensil is easier to stir and scoop the food with.

"Muhammad, *my kind*. How are you? Are you hungry?" asked Aunty, as had a habit of asking two questions immediately after each other. I watched her place the lid on the pot. She then glided over to the cabinet beneath the sink where she slightly leaned back to rest. Aunty

slid her hands into the pocket of her *Radio 786* apron and she looked up at me. I always felt her watery eyes linger on me, as if she was forever apologising.

“I’m well, *shukran*, Aunty. How are you?” I responded as I dragged out the tall kitchen stool.

Because my father abandoned Zaynab, after I was born, along with both her parents passing away, Aunty always felt that she needed to protect us. Again I could see that Aunty wanted to tell me how much I reminded her of my father – that thought always glared in her eyes.

“I’m *alhamdulillah*,” she said and I still don’t get why Muslim people in Cape Town respond with this. *Alhamdulillah* translated to English means “praise to God”, so it never made sense to me why older people’s response to how they are would be “I’m praise to God.” I’ve always wanted to interrupt and tell people to reply with “I’m well, *alhamdulillah*, or I’m good, *alhamdulillah*,” as we were taught in *Madrassa*, but, simultaneously, in Islam we are taught to respect our elders and never show them that we think we know better than them.

“Boeta Rashied went to the shop quickly and Kaashief is in the shower.” After she said that there was a slight pause between us. She all of a sudden went back to her gas stove, awkwardly manoeuvring the knob to adjust the heat lower.

“Any news yet on a girlfriend?” my heart shot down to my stomach.

Did she know? Surely she couldn’t know? Why do family members always ask this question? Is it obvious that I liked boys?

“Don’t ask, Mummy! He’s still heartbroken over, Ja... Mieeeelah...” echoed Kaashief as he opened the toilet door. Kaashief was always my saviour. He always knew what to say in the correct moment.

My mind raced over to Riyaaz and I wondered if he was at home yet. A pain occurred on my chest. as I rubbed it, Irshaad popped into my head. I could see him standing before me. Guilt shot up from my stomach, scrapping the back of my throat like unwanted bile. I didn’t want to be thinking about guys in the presence of Aunty and Kaashief. What if they were to sniff out the guilt on me – the stench of being different that always poisoned me. But I tried to convince myself that was all in my head. Surely, Aunty’s “girlfriend” question didn’t mean that she knew about Riyaaz, nor what I truly thought about Irshaad. Or did she sense that I was gay, or bisexual, or just fucking confused about life?

The very next day, I woke up (still in bliss over the date I had had with Riyaaaz) to a new notification on *Facebook*.

It wasn't Riyaaaz. It wasn't Jamielah. It was Irshaad – the pretty boy from Jamielah's pre-matric ball party who had knocked into me.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Who even uses the poke option on Facebook?

Irshaad was clearly trying to get my attention without being too overt. I understood why and I admired his bravado. In the year 2012, there was no way to unsend and Facebook inbox. If he had to openly flirt with me, and I were to reject him, Irshaad would've felt like a fool.

It was obvious what Irshaad was trying. He wanted to know if I was gay. I didn't mind, because since he had bumped into me, earlier that day, I couldn't erase him. My fingertips ran over the scab on my left elbow, as if I were running my fingertips over his body. He also had a familiar stench on him that didn't leave my nostrils. I tried as best I could to remember his face, but all that I saw when I closed my eyes was a figure of his body and a bright white light shining where his head was. Tighter, I squeezed my eyelids, trying to rummage the image I had of his face, but he was gone. He was just a feeling.

One tap away, I went into his profile. I needed to have a clear image of him before me, but I couldn't view his profile due his account having a strict privacy option.

Why join Facebook and not allow other people to view your profile properly?

So I sent him a friend request to properly invade and peruse on his life.

He accepted instantly!

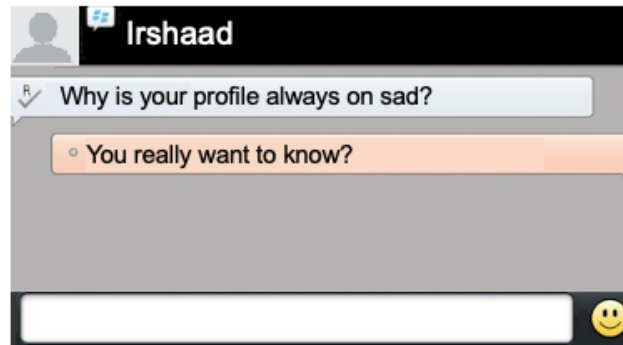
I scanned through the pictures on his profile.

Could it be that this beautiful boy is interested in me? I double tapped on each photo of him. When I got to group photos that he was in, I especially zoomed into his face, blocking everyone else out and to focus on him. Whilst lying on my bed, I could still feel his body knocking into me. I placed my phone on my chest, and with a clearer image of him, I wrapped my arms around myself and embraced the memory that had become more vivid.

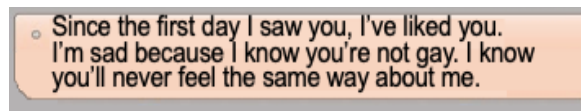
I made the first move and sent him an inbox.

A week then passed since my birthday and it had also been a few days since Irshaad and I had begun chatting. Irshaad was the total opposite of Riyaz, and I still couldn't get over how handsome he was. Another trait of Irshaad, that I noticed from the time that we had begun

chatting, was that he constantly added sad memes or short melancholic poetry to his BBM updates. It was a desperate cry for attention.



His reply on BBM was ominous. I had a weird feeling that it had something to do with me. Then, as I had suspected, the following message from Irshaad popped up:



I took in continuous slow sips of air after reading his message. Once the air filled my lungs, I let out a long whistling exhale, calculating what my next reply would be.

Did I have it in me to lie?

From the foetal position that I was lying in, I turned over and lied on my stomach, burying my face in my pillow.

Riyaaz? Irshaad? Irshaad? Riyaaz?

Did I have it in me to lie?

I couldn't tell Irshaad the truth, and I knew that if I were to take the next step with Irshaad, I would have to let go of Riyaaz. So, I did indeed lie...

I replied to Irshaad saying that I had never been with another guy before. Also, I said that I was open to the idea of meeting up with him and getting to know him better. My eyes scanned over my reply to him and I imprinted the lie in my head, until I started believing it.

It took a while for him to reply. He must have been deleting and retying his reply. Unlike Riyaaz, I figured that Irshaad must have been shy about his feelings for me. Riyaaz enforced his feelings onto me, but Irshaad was modest and sincere.

The next day, he was at my home to visit me.

There were two dainty knocks on my front door. Unlike when Riyaaaz had first visited me, I walked to the door without slouching. With my chest boastful and my neck elongated, I was ready to see Irshaad. There wasn't a semblance of nervousness in my body. I unlatched the lock and swung the door open.

Irshaad stood before me. He was nothing like the boy I had met a week prior. At first, he was looking down to his feet with his arms crossed behind his back. He lifted his head up and cocked it to the side before grinning at me. The doorknob was still in my hand and I looked at him over my shoulder. There was a silence in his brown eyes. As I felt him staring up at me, I could tell that he had a lot that he wanted to say. He had an in-your-face type of beauty which I took in and savoured in small doses.

Irshaad hopped inside of my house. After I closed the door behind him, I leaned over to embrace him. Instantly, my nostrils were invaded with the soft stench his spicy body spray. The scent of Axe was easy to identify because many of the boys in my class wore the same spray, but it smelled even better on Irshaad.

I watched Irshaad tip-toe down the short passageway of my home. He peered around, but when I reminded him that we were alone, he relaxed his shoulders and let out an audible sigh. He then moved around my home with ease, as we made our way to my yard. I didn't want to be seen smoking with Irshaad on my stoep, in case Kaashief or one of his friends walked by; I didn't want to raise further suspicion with another unknown guy visiting.

It was windy that day. When I turned the key to unlock the top section of the dutch-door in our kitchen, the wind swung it against the wall of the yard. Instantly, I pulled back the mini padbolt, and gestured for Irshaad to walk past me. Zaynab and I hardly used the yard. In fact there wasn't much of a yard in our semi-detached house, it was just a thin strip of empty space. There was a red plastic Coca Cola crate in the yard and I let Irshaad sit on it. He thanked me coyly, and I decided to stand against the wall.

Whilst we were talking, I noticed that Irshaad had a soft, laid-back demeanour. At Jamielah's matric ball pre-party, I had watched him be all over the place. His flamboyance seemed like an outcry for attention, especially in the loudness of his nasally-toned screeches. Back then, I would've never expected myself to see him ever again, let alone be in his company by choice, yet there he was, in the confided space of my yard, making small-talk. That new version of Irshaad had a welcoming shyness in his voice. I often caught him glancing at me, smiling, but I diverted my gaze, as I smoked my cigarette.

I learned a lot about Irshaad, as we reminisced about our short time on Earth. He said that he was from a rough section of the area Manenberg. I wanted to know more about the area he lived, but he scurried over to another topic. Never before had I met someone that lived in the Cape Flats, so I had to retune any potential prejudices towards him. I lived a secluded life in Woodstock. My only contact with the rest of Cape Town was through media. In most cases, the Cape Flats had always been portrayed as a slum by the media, but surely I was smart enough to know that not every guy living on the Cape Flats was or would end up being a gangster. I was definitely not going to judge Irshaad or his upbringing.

To make him feel more comfortable, I shared a short summary of my family life. Not having a father and being raised by a single parent was a big part of me. We went back and forth. Irshaad then revealed that he and his younger sister lived with his *ouma*, because his Mummy had an on-and-off relationship with *tik* and his father was in Pollsmoor Prison. “Ouma Gigi” was the only person that understood Irshaad. Throughout his whole life he had been classified as too effeminate. As a little boy, when he and his sister did live with their parents, his father would continuously verbally abuse him. Daily, his father would add chants of how much he resented his son “acting like a *moffie*” and Irshaad’s mother, who was constantly on a hustle to get more *tik*, was never home to protect her son. He then explained in that after his father landed in jail, Irshaad and his young sister moved in with their *ouma* in Manenberg.

With the wind becoming stronger, we huddled closer together in the limited space of the back yard. I was finishing the last few drags of my second cigarette when Irshaad whipped out a small plastic bank bag. He lifted the bag up to the sun and asked me if it was okay to smoke. I had never smoked *dagga* before, as I was never interested in being high. From a young age, Zaynab had told me that *dagga* was a drug and drugs are *haram*. That was enough to keep me away, because who was I to question what Allah had forbidden. But, I wanted Irshaad to like me, so I agreed to smoke with him. At that point, he was still sitting on red plastic Coca Cola crate with his left hand holding a folded A4 sheet of paper and his right hand cutting the *dagga*. Intricately, he removed seeds from the finely cut shreds and he began to roll the blunt. As he rolled, he pinched his one eye closed, and licked his lips from time to time. His lips were evenly balanced between being not too thin and not too thick – in the back of my mind I wondered what it tasted like.

Irshaad hopped up and lit the blunt. There was no space between us, as we stood face-to-face. He took another puff from the blunt when the strong stench fumed inside my nostrils. I held back remnants of a cough that was dangling at the back of my throat.

He gestured for me to take the blunt. I placed my lips on wet edge where his mouth had been. I inhaled a long puff which resulted in my lungs immediately wanting to collapse. Through my vehement coughing and shyness, Irshaad just gave off a light giggle. He lifted my hand and placed the blunt in the opening of his mouth. I felt his soft lips on the edges of my fingertips. Before he exhaled, he placed his hand on the back of my neck and pulled me forward. Our lips touched for the first time and instantly the smoke glided out of his mouth into mine. The smoke left my lungs effortlessly thereafter. We continued that pattern until the blunt burnt away.

Despite his tiny frame, Irshaad was physically strong. He pushed me against the wall of my yard and I leaned forward to give him a proper kiss. He slithered his tongue into my mouth and, after finishing that joint, I didn't mind the taste of the *dagga* any longer.

Minutes after, we floated back into my house. Through the kitchen, I grabbed a can of coke and a few snacks from Zaynab's luxury drawer, because Irshaad reminded me that we would both soon have "the munchies". I was high on Irshaad, who was snailing behind me, with his hand locked into mine until we reached my bed and plomped our bodies on my uneven mattress. Next to each other, we watching the sun rays creep through openings of my wooden shutter.

"Are you and Riyaaaz dating?" Irshaad quizzed whilst opening the dark green packet of Lays.

Did he have to ruin the moment by mention Riyaaaz's name.

Hearing him sound out Riyaaaz's name felt like an unwanted goats-head horn to a bare foot.

"Are you dating Haleem?" I snapped back, thinking back to the day of the matric ball. With the Coke can in my hand, I didn't know what my next move would be. I watched an icy cold trickle flow down the coke can, hoping that Irshaad would divert the conversation, but, he didn't.

"Answer my question first," he looked irritated. Had he travelled all that way, by taxi, just to interrogate me about Riyaaaz?

"Just because I was speaking to him, doesn't mean anything," it was so easy for me to lie. I had always prided myself in being honest, yet those untruthful words flowed that easily off my tongue. "But to answer your question, he and I are just friends," that was another one of the many lies I would tell Irshaad. "Apparently you guys were being very nasty to him –"

“Well you don’t know him like I do,” Irshaad’s tone was ominous. It was clear that he despised Riyaaaz as his anger created lines on his pretty face.

Why would he say something about Riyaaaz like that? Was he trying to give me a warning?

Maybe I should’ve told him that Riyaaaz and I hung out, kissed, and that he said that I was his boyfriend.

“Okay then. If you say he isn’t your boyfriend, then I believe you,” his face began to relax. “But like I said, you don’t know him like I do. I wish Riyaaaz stayed at Jamielah’s house that day. Haleem was trying to make him jealous. It must have worked seeing that he ran away like that,” Irshaad began to laugh.

“That’s rude, why are you laughing?” when those words exited my mouth, I noticed the smugness on Irshaad’s face disappear. I took a final swig of Coke, slurping the final bits of liquid and stood up to chuck the empty can in the bin beside my door.

“You know Haleem told me that he likes you too. I think he also secretly wanted to see your reaction,” responded Irshaad. In that moment, as I sat down on the bed again, I turned toward him. “But it’s his loss now, because I have you,” he continued before leaning over and kissing me. His top lip felt bumpy and dry. At first our lips didn’t lock into each other as it did when we were kissing in the yard. When he opened his mouth into mine, he knocked his top teeth against my lip. There was a quick lash of pain I felt on my top lip, which resulted in Irshaad kissing me all over my face to apologise – it was like he was tickling me with his mouth. I wanted to enjoy it all, but I began to feel guilty. The saliva soon washed the guilt away, because the more his tongue slid around with mine, the more I forgot about Riyaaaz. He moved from being next to me, to sitting on top of me. We were still kissing when he wrapped his arms over my shoulders. His presence was comforting, but then he ruined the mood by asking, “Muhammad, can I give me a blow job?”

CHAPTER NINE:

Maybe I should have let Irshaad give me a blowjob. Because after the moment had passed, and he left my house, I wanted to know what it felt like. Although I wanted to experience the sensation, it just didn't feel like the right time. Him being at my house was the first time we got to be alone together. Call me naïve, but I invited him to over to get to know him better. I really didn't expect him to ask me something like that.

Up to that point, I didn't think that sex would be a reality. From a young age, I was taught that any form of sex before marriage was *haram*. As always, the elders would add in the mandatory, "You don't want to burn in the fire of *jahanam*, now do you?"

Everything I knew about sex I learnt from those white and purplish-pink Life Orientation softcover textbooks we received in primary school, or randomly searching porn on the internet when Zaynab wasn't home or when she was sleeping. The older I grew, the more I started noticing and fantasising about the men in those porn videos. Eventually, after realising that I was fixating more on the naked men in those videos, I started Googling gay porn – but even that task became a back and forth struggle. There was a lot of shame in viewing gay porn on my computer. I'd either quickly clear my browser history and exit the website immediately after watching the first few seconds. When I did end up attempting to masturbate, there was an overflow of guilt and shame that followed the ejaculation. Off I run to the toilet, turn the shower to full blast to complete the *ghusl janabat*, whilst begging Allah to forgive me.

But like I said, when Irshaad asked to give me a blowjob, I froze. I didn't know how to react. He moved from kissing me to trickling his mouth down my body, eventually groping my penis through my thick jeans. Because I was awkward, I pulled him back up and hugged him.

Why?

Why did I do that?

He said he wanted to please me. Why didn't I allow him to? It could have been a right-of-passage type of moment, yet I spoiled it with being too caught up in my head.

So again, that night, I was just lying in bed, tripping on Irshaad. Overthinking and replaying the could haves and the what ifs. I didn't want to have a mind that was continuously plagued by unwanted thoughts. I wanted to be free and live without having any inhibitions,

however, it wasn't that easy as it was made out to be on the films that Zaynab and I watched. At the back of my mind, I regretted declining Irshaad like that. And, as it always happened, thing ping sound from my phone interrupted my thoughts.

That early November, Riyaaaz and I stopped hanging out and chatting, because we, along with all of the other Grade 12s in the country, were too busy focusing on their final Grade 12 examinations. Because Riyaaaz and I weren't in contact, I revelled in chatting to Irshaad all day. The whole gay thing was still new to me, and I also liked the thrill of hiding the two of them from each other. I felt in control, even though I knew it was wrong. The situation was tricky, because the more I got to know Irshaad, I realised that I liked him and Riyaaaz simultaneously.

One day, Irshaad suggested that he and I go on a real date. Summer was soon approaching and because Cape Town was beginning to heat up, Irshaad suggested that I bunk school and join him and his friend to the beach.

A meet up at my house? Check! Have a beach date? Check! It all seemed too familiar to the experiences with Riyaaaz.

I liked that Irshaad consulted with me before making decisions. He asked me in and out and asked my for my suggestions. Riyaaaz on the other didn't do that. I shouldn't have compared them with each other, but I couldn't help it. There was a lot of space in my mind for the two of them. I liked the thought of wondering if they thought about me too. I liked that I got to spend time with two different guys. So, when Irshaad suggested that I bunk school to go with him to the beach, I knew that I needed to get myself to agree. The only problem was that I never bunked a day in my life. I always thought that if I ever tried, my lies would somehow be revealed to Zaynab and she would definitely give me hiding. I was seventeen years old, still afraid of my mother's alleged hidings, but with a lot of begging and convincing from Irshaad, I agreed to go. I was finally going to bunk school.

I didn't understand why I was so scared of going against what Zaynab expected from me when she was hardly ever at home. She left early each morning and came home way before *Maghrieb* each night, so I actually could do as I pleased without her knowing. It was also a Thursday and she wouldn't return home after work. Instead she'd go straight to Aunty's home for our weekly *thikr*. So, that Thursday morning, I crept out of my home with my *floppie*, aviator sunglasses and my body smeared in sunblock. I sped up to the Main Road, with the

hope of not being stopped and questioned by one of my neighbours for not being at school. I then gestured for the first taxi that I saw to stop for me. Not to long after that, I arrived at the taxi terminus in Town CBD, which I had always hated. Before Zaynab got her car, she and I would travel by bus, and although the bus terminus wasn't that much better, at least it didn't stink from the stench of fresh piss and overused frying oil like the taxi terminus did.

There were tingles in my gut, as I approached Irshaad and his friend – the one he wanted me to meet who would tag along on “the date”. When I got closer to them, I noticed that he was standing with one of the girls I shook hands with at Jamielah's house on the day of her pre-matric ball party.

Jamielah!

The sweet and beautiful Jamielah!

I hated how she was still, somehow, connected to my life.

As I approached Irshaad and his friend, they both stopped talking. Irshaad was grinning so widely I swore his mouth could've fallen off his face – he always grinned at me like that, it made me feel weak. His friend introduced herself as Maliekah. She reminded me a lot of Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*: she had thick voluminous red hair, matching freckles that were carefully placed over her wide face, and her blue eyes pierced in the sun.

She threw herself to me to embrace me and when our arms departed from each other, I could feel her eyes gazing into mine.

“*Yoh!* You've got pretty eyes just like me,” she yelled before turning around over to Irshaad to wink at him, as if to express her approval. “We bought boerewors rolls. I hope you don't mind, but I guess you shouldn't because I know you like *wors*,” she said with a chuckle and handed me the boerewors roll. I just laughed and shook my head, telling myself to give the her weird persona a chance.

“Maliekah makes inappropriate jokes like that all the time. Don't mind her,” Irshaad interjected. He reached his arm up to my head, and pulled the cap off, placing it on his. My hair was a mess, so he ran his fingers through it, making me look somewhat presentable again. It all happened so fast, I wasn't even sure if anyone at the taxi terminus noticed.

“You know, that was the first time I took a taxi alone to town!” I attempted to make small talk with Irshaad and Maliekah. They couldn't believe it and I explained to them that there was no need for me to travel around Cape Town, as I spent much of my life confined in

Woodstock. “I was so nervous hey. I kept rehearsing in my head what I would say to the *gaatjie* and driver –”

“*Yoh!* You’re so funny,” replied Maliekah. It wasn’t even a joke and already I was beginning to dread her spare-wheel like energy. I tried my best to let her antics slide because I liked that she reminded me of Arial, but Maliekah’s excitement, about everything, was getting way too much for me. The thing about being a good spare wheel is to never make it obvious that you are the spare wheel, on that particular date. Maybe Maliekah didn’t know that rule, or watched many romantic comedies like I did, as throughout the day, she constantly chimed into mine and Irshaad’s conversation – she was the human form of a buzz kill.

“So, be lucky I came all this way for your, mister,” I continued that whilst playfully pushing Irshaad.

“Aww, you guys are so cute!” yelled Maliekah. I didn’t remember Arial being that annoying in the movie. “Do you know Allie? He also lives in Woodstock?” that was one of the many names of those who also lived in Woodstock that Maliekah brought up throughout the day.

“No, I don’t know Allie,” I lied to her.

What would happen if I said yes and next time she saw Allie she’d slip up about Irshaad and I.

It seemed like Maliekah had a big mouth.

“Oh, he was my ex-boyfriend, but anyway, let’s walk towards the Camps Bay taxi line,” Maliekah added, and we all wiggled our way through the crowd.

As the taxi drove from the terminus, up Town CBD, through calm Green Point, and then down the busy Sea Point, I felt Irshaad’s eyes on me. He held our secret in his eyes. I tried my best to ignore him by looking through the taxi window. I didn’t want to give our game away to the other commuters, so I focused on the wind gushing through the window.

The Main Road of Sea Point was relatively empty. It was after 10am and the early morning peak hour was long over. The taxi was obliged to speed and through the window, I ignored Irshaad and focus on the blurry images of the world that passed by. The next moment I felt Irshaad’s hand between the togetherness of my thighs. My first instinct was to flinch, but I didn’t want to draw attention to us. Luckily, we sat in the back corner of the taxi. There was a burning sensation that rushed through me, and I knew that I couldn’t allow my body to react there in the taxi, especially since I had already been wearing a tight jeans, but I couldn’t help myself. The taxi came to a quick halt at the red robot near Milton Road. In a quick instant I felt

the back of Irshaad's hand knock against my penis. He quickly moved his hand away from me. He wasn't as daring as Riyaaaz. Throughout the rest of the ride I didn't feel Irshaad's glance on me, and my mind shifted to Riyaaaz.

We arrived at Camps Bay and the beach was also relatively empty. There were a few dogs running freely with their owners watching them from afar. We walked from the large pavement onto the crisp white sand. I kicked off my flip flops and allowed the sand to wiggle between my toes. I didn't like the beach, but I did like the feeling of the warm sand and sound of the ocean breathing. Maliekah pleaded that we had to sit closest to the water and when we got to the designated spot, we threw out our towels. Irshaad proceeded to shove the umbrella stick into the sand. I noticed his strong hands, as he twisted the umbrella stick to make it stand up firmly, whilst his toned arm muscles were flexing in the mix.

He still didn't take his eyes off of me. In return, I watched his every move. After we were done setting up, one or two people strolled by us with their dogs, and despite her annoyance, I was grateful that Maliekah was around. It would've looked suspicious if Irshaad and I laid alone on the beach towels together. Suddenly, Irshaad removed his shoes and then his floral shirt, and raced toward the open sea. His outgrown mullet bounced around and his oiled shoulder muscles glistened in the sun. Maliekah, who was gesturing to get the attention of one of the men that sold ice suckers from his cooler bag, stayed behind with me, so we both watched Irshaad from afar. He kept running in and out of the waves, and, as always, he looked back to grin at me.

He was free and I was not.

"He likes you a lot you know. He speaks about you all day in class... well in secret of course," said Maliekah as she took a bite of her *Jelly Jolly* sucker. "These suckers are R2 at home, but here on Camps Bay they wanna rob us by charging R10! Can you believe it!" Maliekah wailed.

"I like him too..." I said, as I decided to ignore chunks of what Maliekah said. "I've never thought I'd ever have feelings for another guy, but I do. He makes me feel so good inside," perhaps it was the *Jelly Jolly* that tasted so good on that hot day, but my insides felt sugary and sweet. "Don't tell him I said that though," but I honestly wanted her to tell him and I knew that she would.

I don't know what possessed me to speak so openly about my feelings for another guy to Maliekah – a stranger! Aside from speaking to Aaliyah at school, I didn't have anyone to talk to about my feelings.

Do people actually accept others for being gay?

I looked over to Maliekah and told myself not to be too hard on her. It was a nice feeling to share with someone a part of me that I found so shameful. I hated myself most days and I still found my sexuality confusing, yet there Maliekah was, giving me confirmation that I could be accepted.

Irshaad called me over to the water, so I rolled up my jeans and walked towards him. I kept my vest on to hide my flat chest and lack of muscles.

“I want to rinse the salt off my body at the shower over there, do you mind walking with me?” asked Irshaad with the icy water trickling down his body.

He is so perfect, what does he see in me?

When we reached the shower, that was out in the open, outside of the toilet section, Irshaad cupped his hands over his body.

“Are you on Bay Watch now, huh?” I joked with him, and he let out a quick laugh and shook his head, sadly not getting the reference.

On our way back, he blurted out, “Would you like to be my boyfriend? I know it's very soon, but I just like you a lot. I've never met anyone like you. You're very handsome, and you're so funny... I've always wanted a boyfriend like you...” The insecurities I had earlier left my mind after he said that, yet the image of Riyaaaz entered. No words wanted to leave my mouth. I couldn't say yes because I knew that I was in the wrong.

What about Riyaaaz?

Did he still care about me?

And Irshaad? I can't do that to him.

My feet were mounted to the sand, and Irshaad waited in silence for my answer – I was still busy calculating what my answer would be. All I wanted was to say yes, but there was one person standing in the way. Until I realised that technically, Riyaaaz and I weren't really dating. He just said we're dating and I didn't technically say yes. So, technically, I could say yes to Irshaad and that's what I did.

Irshaad was so happy, but a week later, he decided to break up with me, and I didn't see or hear from him for many months.

CHAPTER TEN:

The next day was Friday, the day of *Yaumaul Jumu'ah*. On Fridays it is incumbent for all Muslim men to go to mosque, at around after 12pm, midday, when the sun reaches its zenith, to perform the congregational prayer. Before the prayer takes place, the *Sheikh* or *Imam* would deliver an English sermon, usually to provide the attendees with an inspirational message on how to live a better life in accordance to the will of Allah, thereafter an Arabic *khutbah* is delivered, and finally, the congregational prayer. Each Friday the Muslim boys at my school were able to leave earlier to attend *Jumu'ah* prayers. After school I would walk to Kaashief's home to meet up with him and Boeta Rashied, thereafter we would proceed to the mosque.

I had previously stopped performing my five daily prayers, but a part of me could not abandon going to mosque for *Jumu'ah*, because I was indoctrinated, from a young age, to believe that Allah would brand my heart if I missed three consecutive congregational prayers and that I would go straight to *Jahanam*. Ultimately, I did not want to take the chance to miss the important weekly event, neither the chance to leave school early.

That day, and like every other Friday, Boeta Rashied was speeding ahead of us and Kaashief and I lagged behind. Every Friday, when we walked to mosque, Kaashief had something new and funny to tell me about his school, and his classmates and their antics. Instead of being pious and respectful on Fridays, like Boeta Rashied often reminded us to be, Kaashief and schoolmates were always up to mischief. We didn't attend the same school, so Kaashief, the master at delivering a story in a more interesting way than it occurred, filled me in on what always happened.

When we arrived at mosque, I shook off the giggles of Kaashief's story and with Boeta Rashied and Kaashief already through the opening of the mosque, I found myself unable to enter. The edge of my school shoe was pointed down on the first step that lead to the mosque. My right foot treaded up and down until it began to shake. Still I couldn't get myself to enter. From behind me, large hands whisked me up the stairs.

"Come, my brother, you can't stand here and practice your clutch control. It's always good to be in the mosque early. We get a greater reward from Allah if we are early at mosque, so let's go in," an unknown voice murmured, and in an instant, I was lifted inside.

Allah Hum Maf Tah Lee Ab'waaba Rahmatik, I muttered to myself, as I read the transliteration of the Arabic *du'ah* for entering the mosque from behind the large wooden door.

Kaashief, making his way out of the *wudhu* area, signalled to me which wooden block he had placed his shoes in. With my right school shoe unloosened and taken off first, as it was a *sunnah* to begin with the right side, I thereafter placed my shoes in the block under the one Kaashief chose.

I proceeded to the *wudhu* area. As always, the area was damp and smelled like fresh Lifebuoy soap. We do not perform the *wudhu* with soap, but it is important to first cleanse the hands and feet from any dirt or markings, before performing the actual *wudhu*. I hung my school blazer at the row of hooks on the tiled wall, rolled up the sleeves of my school shirt, and tucked my tie into one of the openings between the buttons of my shirt.

Over the interlocking rubber floor squared tiles, I pranced to get to the closest tap, opened it slowly, bent over, and cupped my hands. Each tap in the *wudhu* section in the mosque had a corresponding mounted stool close to it, however, I always chose not to sit on the stool, as I found it awkward to wash certain parts of my body whilst sitting.

There I stood, bent over, and I started to recite the *du'ah* and *niyyah* one makes before the *wudhu*: *Nawaytu fardal wudhu'i lil laahi ta aalaa*, I whispered, and I let the thin stream of water wash over cupped my hands.

Bismillahi rahmaan niraheem.

Hands again.

Bismillahi rahmaan niraheem.

I did that for the third time, and again acknowledging Allah the most beneficent and merciful throughout the process.

Mouth. Nose. Face. Arms. Forehead. Ears. Feet.

Never forgetting to say *Bismillahi rahmaan niraheem*.

Never forgetting to do each body part thrice!

The *wudhu* is an important and intricate cleaning ritual.

Finally I completed my *wudhu*, and the post *wudhu du'ah*. Whenever I performed my *wudhu*, I would shut my eyes and block my ears, because I didn't want to see the blobs of spit trickle down to the drain, nor hear the coarse sound of the men around me clearing their throats. I left the *wudhu* area and walked towards a singular bench to pick-up a washing cloth, dabbed my body dry, and I threw the damp washing cloth in the adjacent basket.

Everything I did in Mosque that Friday happened slowly, but finally I proceeded to the *salaah* area and completed my *sunnah salaah*. Thereafter, I sat kneeling waiting for the Sheikh

Khaleed to enter the *salaah* area and address us. At that stage, we had arrived early and with every minute that ticked by, one or two men would enter the mosque.

Not too long after that, the Sheikh Khaleed glided across the carpet, greeting certain men in between. Sheikh Khaleed had also been my *Mualim* at *Madrassa* so I had known him my entire life. That day he wore a flowy black *salaah thobe*, and a matching black fez. His sprouting hoary beard contrasted his attire. At the front section of the *salaah* area, Sheikh Khaleed greeted us all that were in attendance, and the warm and inviting religious leader turned into a dragon spewing fire at what felt to be directed straight towards me.

“Brothers, homosexuality is a sin! Those who commit the vile act of lying with another man will burn in the fire of *Jahanam*,” scorned Sheikh Khaleed, as he towered over us on the wooden *minba*.

I swear Sheikh was looking directly at me, and I felt the resentment flare from his eyes. A fire rushed through my stomach and up my throat. A knot formed at the top of my oesophagus. Invisible fingers were clenching around my throat and I could feel sharp nails scratching me.

How could Sheikh Khaleed, a man I had admired and grew up in front of, spew so much hate towards me.

Previously, Sheikh would praise me for my fluent Arabic reciting and for my inquisitive interest in Islamic history, but he was no longer the man I looked up to. From my stomach, I could taste remnants of bile at the back of my small tongue. All I wanted was to get out of the Mosque! But if I had to get up and leave, I knew that the crowd of men would think that I was guilty; it already felt as though Sheikh knew that I was.

I changed the position of the way I was sitting, and I lifted my knees to my chest, placed my head forward to my knees and covered my face with my arms. I continued to listen to Sheikh Khaleed rant about why I deserved to burn in *Jahanam* for the rest of eternity.

I needed to get out of the mosque!

I needed to get out of the mosque!

It was all a sign from Allah. I knew it. I could sense it deep within my core. I could feel it in my stomach, by my throat, around my small tongue... in my heart.

Allah was punishing me by flaring up my anxiety, forcing me to listen to that specific sermon. It was then best for me to block out everything that Sheikh was saying, and I tried to clear my mind, however... in that moment, it was not that easy.

I keep thinking about my time at the beach with Irshaad. Images of the water dripping down his body, flashed before me, in mosque! Flashcards of the different movements Riyaz and I made when we first kissed flipped in my brain. Then, Irshaad popped into my mind again. I thought about how he was sitting on Haleem's lap that day. My mind then moved over to the day I knocked into him. The next image was of him smoking *dagga* at my house and us kissing thereafter. The blowjob that never happened!

You are a moffie!

You are going to Jahanam!

You will burn for eternity.

There was a rush of shame that followed, so I ensured that nobody could see my face. I embraced my knees tighter and buried my head further away. In that position I wailed in silence. I felt like a disappointment to my creator. I sat there chanting to myself that it was time to never return to mosque.

“What did you think about today's *khutbah*, my *boytjies*?” quizzed Boeta Rashied, as we sat tightly around the kitchen table at Kaashief's home. The air in the home was filled with melted margarine. Aunty's thinly rolled-out *rootis* hissed on her hot pan; her gas stove was on full blast. For as long as I could remember, Aunty cooked us lunch when we returned from mosque – our routine each Friday; and each week Aunty would be late with the meal. So, just like any other Friday, we were sitting waiting patiently to eat, discussing the sermon we had just heard from Sheikh.

“You see *them* everywhere lately. *Astaghfirullah!* They are disgusting! Oh Allah! Yaumul *Qiyama* is near us. The signs of Yaumul *Qiyama* are every –”

“Boeta...” Kaashief always addressed Boeta Rashied this way, and even after all the years, he didn't acknowledge his stepfather as his father. He tapped his fingers on the oval dinner plate that I'm pretty sure it was actually a serving platter. “Let me just say,” and these were the four words that started every religious debate at the lunch table. “You say that the

world is going to end every time you refer to *haram* things that are being done by Muslims. In fact you've been uttering those exact words since we were children, and look, the world still hasn't ended."

"But you heard what Sheikh said today!" shouted Boeta Rashied, as he lifted his two hands.

"*Maaf*, Boeta, and don't take this the wrong way... no man can technically predict the end of times, only Allah can." I felt Kaashief's words bow at itself in victory. He always made realistic remarks to prove his argument.

"Yes, I understand, and it's fine to be scared, my –"

"I'm not scared," responded Kaashief coldly, as he poured his second glass of Coke.

"How can you not be? The signs are a reminder of how we need to turn to Allah. You heard what Sheikh said today!" Boeta Rashied raised his two hands once again, as if he was asking Kaashief if he had not listened to the sermon. "More and more men are living homosexual lives out in the open. You see it in Cape Town a lot lately. Sies! They are disgusting! I can't imagine any child of mine being a *moffie*," Boeta Rashied's words smacked me across the face.

He had been the only fatherly figure in my life, and I began wondering about what his reaction would be to me if he ever found out I was indeed a *moffie*.

Would he too think I'm disgusting?

I shifted my gaze to Kaashief. With my eyes, I pleaded to him not to take the conversation on the route that I knew it was going to take, and, to my disappointment, he did.

"What about your son, Waseem? Did you forget what he did to –" but before Kaashief could rehash dormant memories, Boeta Rashied forced his fist down on the table, his hand ricocheting back to him.

The next moment Boeta Rashied calmly walked to his bedroom, and homosexuality was never spoken about again in Aunty's house.

Because of my anxiety attack at the mosque, and the argument at Aunty's home between Kaashief and Boeta Rashied, I decided to read up on Islamic history from one of Zaynab's books to try to understand what Islam exactly states about homosexuality. As children, at *Madrassa*, we were told the stories of Allah's twenty-five prophets and how they were sent to earth to spread and teach the true meaning of Islam, as well as to guide mankind. Many of the prophets mentioned in the Quran, are known by Christians and Jews; there are

many similarities between the history of Islam and other religions. In fact, it is incumbent for a Muslim to believe in and read the Bible (known to Muslims as the *Injeel*), as well as the *Taurah*, however, we as Muslims view Jesus, known to Muslims as *Nabi Isa, Alay Hissalaam*, as our prophet and not the son of God. We further believe in one God, and not the Holy Trinity, and whilst paging through Zaynab's book I stopped on the section about Nabi Lut.

Nabi Lut, *Alay Hissalaam*, migrated to the cities Sodom and Gomorrah, and as with other prophets, Nabi Lut was sent to a specific place to guide its people on how to live lawfully in accordance to Islam and Allah. The people within Sodom and Gomorrah committed *haram* acts such as: stealing, rape, and homosexuality. Because those people did not listen to Nabi Lut's teachings on how to live life in accordance to Allah's will, Allah destroyed those cities. But, revisiting this history, I came across an article on how modern scholars interpreted the Quran's mentioning of Lut, as well as the Prophet Muhammad's *hadieth* on homosexuality, Some scholars believe that the people of Lut were destroyed by Allah due to the men raping other men, and not necessarily being homosexual.

The more I researched, the more I realised that I did not want to get into this debate with conservative Muslims. I wasn't sure what to believe. Ultimately, I came to the realisation that if I was going to be punished by Allah, and sent to the fire of *Jahanam* for eternity for being gay, then I couldn't align myself nor practice Islam any longer.

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

Mid November 2012 edged closer toward me. Up to that point, my final examinations had gone fairly well and I had three subjects that I still needed to complete before I was officially done with my secondary school career. But, without Allah in my corner guiding and protecting me, and me not performing my five daily prayers, I could feel that there was something missing in my life. The pain of Irshaad dumping me without a valid reason after that day at the day at beach still felt fresh. I didn't even get the chance to get to know him better! There was the empty feeling inside of me, and what made things worse, Irshaad blocked me off all social media. So, naturally, I decided to divert all my attention to Riyaaaz. Again!

Randomly, on a Monday night during that mid November there were three melodious knocks and two taps at my door. The sounds were familiar, but it couldn't be who I thought it was. Zaynab wasn't home from work yet. When I opened the door, there he was. Riyaaaz! On my stoep just before *Maghrieb!*

I didn't care to interrogate him on why he was so late at my house during the examination period, on that week night. Instead, I pulled him from my stoep, shut the door and embraced him, wholeheartedly. He said that he had spent the day at CPU's Town campus, trying to finalise his application for one of their Commerce courses. It didn't make sense that he was in Town to do that, because all universities were waiting for our Grade 12 final results to update our applications statuses. Nonetheless, why he was there didn't matter to me. I was just happy to see him and have a distraction from the studying.

"Would you like to come sleep over at my house?" asked Riyaaaz as we stood in the short passage at the entrance of my home. His request came as a shock to me. Riyaaaz's parents were strict. Especially Riyaaaz's father, who was part of the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

I gestured for Riyaaaz to follow me into my home and he further explained that he was alone at home for that week. According to him, his mother and two older brothers had left for *Goudini Spa* for a few days, and Riyaaaz had to stay at home and focus on his studies. I was confused, because surely if Riyaaaz's father followed the strict customs of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, then why was his wife and children on a holiday alone at *Goudini Spa*? To my understanding the *Tablighi Jamaat* were extremely pious Muslims that did not associate themselves with worldly pleasures, but, simultaneously, I was not going to cross-question Riyaaaz about his

family life. I was, and would never be, in any position to judge another Muslim. Only Allah was the one that could ever judge, and I truly wished others understood that concept.

I started to think about how difficult Riyaaaz's life must have been and that's when Riyaaaz interrupted my daze. He wanted an answer from me about the sleepover and study session. I would have said yes, instantly, but there was one hurdle Riyaaaz and I had to overcome...

"What will we tell Zaynab? She's also going to be home any minute now!" by sounding those words out loudly to Riyaaaz, I reminded myself that she of course wouldn't allow me to sleep out during my final examinations. Then again, aside from sleeping at Kaashief's house, I never had any friends to have sleep overs with so I didn't know what her answer would be.

"We are both writing Business Studies on Wednesday... let's just say that you are going to study by me?" remarked Riyaaaz after he took a seat on the settee and criss-crossed his legs, placing his feet on the rhombus coffee table. He seemed to have the plan all worked out.

The front door began to screech and then it was flung open. Zaynab was home! With each step of her dainty heels creaking on the wooden floor, the nerves inside of me pierced at my heart. I wasn't the excited little boy racing to help her with the grocery bags, instead I wanted to bury myself in the settee. The smell of *Amala* hair oil and Dove deodorant became more prominent in my nostrils.

Say something, Muhammad! Soon Zaynab will be standing in front of you and Riyaaaz!

"Muhammad?! Are you home?!" bellowed Zaynab, her voice sounded louder than ever, and soon she was indeed standing before Riyaaaz and I in the lounge. At the sight of Zaynab, Riyaaaz jumped up. Zaynab was startled. She quickly dropped the brown paper KFC bag, and rummaged through her handbag to find her *hijab*.

Shit!

I should have shouted for her not to take off her *hijab*, as she always did when she entered the home. Riyaaaz was not an immediate male relative to her, so she had to cover herself. Quickly, she tucked away her long thick flowing black curls.

“*Asalaamualaykum*, Aunty Zaynab! My name is Riyaaaz,” his tone was respectful and the sound of his voice was low, whilst he reached out his hand. Zaynab didn’t extend her hand to him.

Did she still have her wudhu that she didn’t want to shake Riyaaaz’s hand?

She proceeded to scan Riyaaaz from his head to his feet, before letting out an unenthusiastic, “*Wa Alaykum Musalaam.*” I was scared that Riyaaaz might have been thinking that she was rude, however, I knew that her aloofness was due to her being embarrassed for not having her head covered in front of him. The three of us stood in silence around the coffee table, nobody knew what to say. I walked up to Zaynab to kiss her and picked up the brown paper KFC bag.

Get plates out of the cupboard! Lay the table!

Off I walked to the kitchen and called Zaynab and Riyaaaz over to sit.

Whilst eating, the two of them hit it off, because they spoke about Bollywood films for most of the time. They gushed over their favourite on screen actors, Riyaaaz emphasising how he had always been in love with Aishwarya Rai – which was obviously a lie. Zaynab finished her chicken and moved over to begin nibbling at her coleslaw, her favourite snack from KFC. Like she always did, she moved around the carrot pieces from her coleslaw and ate the cabbage only.

I watched her every move, waiting to see any odd reaction from her. I was fearful of what she was possibly thinking about Riyaaaz, who was busy removing the skin from his chicken. The audacity. The skin was the best part of KFC chicken! From his plate, he peered at me a little too much. I caught him every time! He was going to give our game away!

As Riyaaaz and Zaynab continued to gush over each other, I interrupted them by explaining to her that I had met Riyaaaz at Kaashief’s house, at his birthday *braai*. With the sound of Kaashief’s name, she approved more of Riyaaaz. Kaashief could do no wrong in her eyes.

The sound of the *athaan* called us. At that point, I couldn’t tell Zaynab that I stopped performing my five daily prayers and she signalled to Riyaaaz and I that we needed to go to the toilet to complete our *wudhu*. Riyaaaz happily obliged because he too came from a home where *salaah* was non-negotiable. Riyaaaz explained his home situation to Zaynab and she praised him

even more for being a son of a *Tablighi*, whilst I felt secretly sorry for him. Not only did she like his taste in film, but she appreciated that he appeared to be a steadfast young Muslim boy.

After the *salaah*, Zaynab hugged me and whispered in my ear a *du'ah* for Allah to grant me an easily and smooth final examination period. To my surprise, she leaned over to do the same for Riyaaz. With her back facing me, and his head rested on her shoulder, Riyaaz winked at me as if to indicate that he gained her approval. We were moving the furniture back to its designated spots, when Riyaaz stated, “Aunty Zaynab, I was thinking... because I’m alone at home, and because Muhammad is struggling to study Business Studies, would Aunty mind if he slept over at my house tonight?”

I didn’t think that he would be so brazen to ask on my behalf. I walked away from them to pack away the prayer mats, biting my lips in anticipation of her no.

“Muhammad, I’m only saying yes because I know you’ve been struggling, and if Riyaaz is saying that he’s going to help you, then you can go. I’ll call a Rikki cab. Go pack your clothes and don’t forget your toiletries, *kanallah*,” stated Zaynab. I was surprised yet elated that she had agreed. I kept my composure, followed her instructions, and soon thereafter, Riyaaz and I were in a Rikki on our way to his home.

After Riyaaz closed the door behind him, he let out a loud, “*Asalaamualaykum!*” that echoed into the empty home. He pulled me closer and kissed me on my forehead, exclaiming how excited he was to sleep next to me. For the first time, in a long time, I felt as though breathing was easy. My breathing had mostly been short puffs of inhaling and exhaling, but, that day in his home, I could feel the air filling into my lung’s capacity.

I rested my head on his shoulder and he and I stood at the doorway. There wasn’t a need to talk. We were holding each other closely and I listened to the sound our bodies telling each other how much they had missed each other. His presence was so potent that he took away all the longing that I had for the non-existent Irshaad. The sweetness of his *Nivea for Men* aloe vera body lotion calmed me, and having him close to me again removed me from all the uncertainty I had been experiencing.

Over those few weeks, I felt like I was falling from space into the Earth's sky, and instead of landing onto Earth, my body would be shot back into the atmosphere to repeat the process.

Falling. Falling. Falling.

There was no saving me. The world didn't understand, yet somehow it was like Riyaaaz did. He was the one that was stopping me from falling into the sky again, but something was also telling me that the then current moment wouldn't last.

Riyaaaz placed his fingers in the openings of my hands, and whisked me around the house. When we entered the lounge area, he showed me a family portrait of the time he and his family were in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, to complete their *Hajj*. Previously, on BBM, Riyaaaz sent me individual pictures of the members of his family, so seeing them all together had a different effect. He also never told me that he had been on *Hajj* and that he completed the final incumbent pillar in Islam. Although I admired his family, seeing a more religious glimpse of Riyaaaz made me feel more connected to him.

Riyaaaz was holding the portrait and he revealed a lot about each family member. In the portrait, the entire family stood before a backdrop of The Holy *Kaaba*. His father stood next to his mother, with a stern look in his brow, whilst he loomed over Riyaaaz and his two older brothers. I knew that I struggled to understand my place in the world as being both gay and Muslim, but I obviously couldn't compare my turmoil to Riyaaaz's. Again, I couldn't imagine being the son of a highly pious *Tablighi*, and again, I started feeling sorry for him and his life. I wanted to save Riyaaaz.

A spit-ball of different questions rolled off my tongue and Riyaaaz just accepted me being inquisitive.

"Muhammad, I can still remember how when I was younger I would try to impress my mother and older brothers with my dancing, singing or sometime even twirling. When they did notice me, they would just belittle me and call me a *moffie*! Can you believe it?! My own family. I realised that I had to hide my effeminate tendencies, so I pushed aside wanting to perform in front of them," Riyaaaz clenched tighter onto the portrait as her continued telling me about his family.

“My daddy was always away with the *Tablighi Jamaat* group that he belonged to and I still wanted to impress my mother and brothers, so I began reading a lot. They called me a know-it-all after I shared every new fact that I had learned from The Guinness World Records or one of the thick brown Encyclopaedia books. My new found hunger for knowledge was not enough to get their affection. I still tried my best to hide flamboyant nature, but he failed most times. I was only a child!” revealed Riyaaz who was still was clenching the family portrait.

I tried my best to read his face, but his head was downturned as he continued to share his story.

“On the rare occasions that my daddy was home and not travelling, I would receive severe beatings. My brothers would tell my daddy that I was playing with the girls at school, or my mother, instead of protecting me from my daddy’s torturous wrath, would fuel the situation. It wasn’t easy growing up.”

Riyaaz hid his tears from me, as he placed the family portrait back on its designated space on the wooden cabinet. He then proceeded to show me all his awards and certificates. The lounge of the Salloway home had a shrine dedicated just for him. Exuberantly, Riyaaz’s mood changed when he revealed to me each certificate, medal, and trophy that he had received since Grade R, and I looked on and smiled politely. He then showed me his report cards, highlighting and emphasising each distinction with his left index finger. For the first time, I noticed a side of him that I hadn’t before. Riyaaz, like myself, was a lost soul, trying to fit in.

After the family revelations, Riyaaz lead me to his room, and asked me to get comfortable on his bed as he was going to shower. Before he left, he handed me a Spiderman printed gift bag. I was instructed to only open the gift once he left the room. Firstly, he already won with the giftbag, so it didn’t matter what was inside, but I couldn’t get myself to check what was in the bag. Inside I felt guilty. I couldn’t stop thinking about the little boy in the picture and his family had treated him. Riyaaz had shared a part of his life with me, and I betrayed him by going behind his back with Irshaad. I was lying there, on the hard single mattress, crunched up with the giftbag between my arms.

“What’s wrong?” Riyaaz questioned me as he came into the room, still wet with a towel around his hips.

“It’s nothing, Riyaaaz,” I tried lying, as I slowly watched the drops of water stroll down from the outline of his collar bones and over his mini chest muscles. “I’m just happy to be here with you, and lucky to have you,” that was the second lie. Again I felt confused.

Riyaaaz loosened his towel, dried himself, threw baby powder all over his body, rolled roll-on over his armpits, and crept on the bed next to me. He was naked and he wiggled around until his body fit in next to mine.

“I love you,” he whispered. He then unbuttoned my skinny jeans, and I felt his cold hands slid down my underpants.

“I’m not comfortable with this,” and truly I wasn’t ready for whatever his intentions were.

Instead, we ended up lying next to each other for the rest of the night; him on his Blackberry chatting and I was staring at the ceiling, in awkward silence.

The following morning, I woke up to the sound clanging pots and pans. I could feel that that Riyaaaz wasn’t lying beside me any longer. Although I wanted to stay in bed, the burning smell of egg forced me to stand up. I reached for my Blackberry under the pillow to check for any notifications, but my phone was flat.

My eyes scanned over his floor, and when I found a charger, I plugged in my Blackberry. I jumped up to get clean clothes from my backpack. The night before I didn’t even change my clothes, I fell asleep just like that. In my jeans! Just thinking about the previous night made me cringe.

My mouth was also in a desperate need of brushing. If there was another important thing I did pick up from the romantic films that Zaynab and I watched was that the whole kissing with morning breath was not a real thing! The only problem was that my backpack with all my things in it was not in Riyaaaz’s room. I didn’t want to be in his presence without brushing my teeth, because I knew he’d come up to me and want to kiss me.

From the kitchen, I heard Riyaaaz talking to a stranger. He was making us breakfast, which I thought was an adorable gesture, and I wanted to be fresh, but who was with him? Nonetheless, I was obliged to seek Riyaaaz, and to my surprise, after walking to the kitchen and dining area, a stranger was sitting at the table, whilst Riyaaaz was bending at the stove top.

“Keenan, this is my friend Muhammad. Muhammad, meet Keenan,” announced Riyaaaz as I stepped towards him in the kitchen.

What is going on here?

When did I become his friend?

And who is this random guy in your house?

I should’ve expressed my rage. How could he make me feel that rejected like that? Not too long before then, Riyaaaz had begged me to be his boyfriend, yet, there he stood, with a spatula dribbling with wet egg on its end, announcing that he and I were just friends.

Keenan, the stranger, was quiet, and after he lifted his head from the empty plate, I noticed that his face was filled with boil-like puss-filled pimples. He just nodded his oily head to whatever Riyaaaz was saying in that moment. From the corner of my eye, I noticed that my bag was placed on one of the chairs at the table... as if the bag had been sitting there all morning, waiting for me. I, on the other hand, went blank and was not hearing anything.

Could it be true?

Deep down I knew what was happening. Keenan looked at Riyaaaz the way Riyaaaz used to look at me when we first started to get to know each other.

Could it be true?

The thought wouldn’t leave my mind, and, in my heart, I knew that something was happening between Riyaaaz and Keenan. It was definitely payback. A taste of my own medicine for what I had been doing with Irshaad.

Did Riyaaaz know about Irshaad and I?

Riyaaaz and Irshaad had dated before, but I knew that they weren’t in contact. Maybe I should have allowed Riyaaaz to touch me. Maybe he wanted to have sex the night before. If I wasn’t ready for touching, I was certainly not ready for sex.

“Muhammad, Keenan needs help with Business Studies, so I invited him over. You are welcome to stay for breakfast if you like, but I think it’s best that you go back home,” those words shot from Riyaaaz’s mouth at me. I was being punished for what had happened the previous night. The table was all laid out for a feast. I couldn’t tell if his words hurt or the sight of the breakfast spread that I received a half invitation to.

What did Keenan have that I didn’t?

He is grotesque looking!

Riyaaaz could at least leave me for someone better looking.

I looked back at Keenan and let my eyes scan over the table once more.

Okay! That was rude Muhammad! Don't judge people for their outer appearance!

Between Riyaaaz and Keenan, my feet were mounted to the tiles of his kitchen floor and my mouth was sewn shut. I couldn't look at neither of them, so my eyes fixated on the breakfast spread.

Did Riyaaaz prepare this all for me, but now I can't enjoy it because of what didn't happen?

I knew that I wasn't the better person either, because of what I had done with Irshaad, but at least I hid it all away! Riyaaaz was still waiting for me to respond when I walked toward the table, pulled my back from the chair and stampeded out of his house.

I didn't know where I was, but all I needed was to get away from him and his house. After a few minutes, and many talks with random passers-by, I reached what looked like a Main Road and spotted a taxi.

Keenan needs help with Business Studies, did he think I was an idiot? That very excuse he used on Zaynab the night before. A code for having a boy sleep over. A taxi halted in front of me with screeching tyres. I explained to the driver that I needed to get to Woodstock.

"Bru, don't be dom. You are in Grassy Park! There are no Woodstock taxis here," exclaimed the driver through the opening of his half rolled-down window. *"You need to take a taxi to Wynberg and then from there take a taxi to Town!"*

Take a taxi to Wynberg... take a taxi to Town?

It didn't make sense. Aside from taking the taxi to Town the day to go with Irshaad and Maliekah to the beach, and travelling with Zaynab in buses, I didn't have much experience with public transport.

Irshaad! He would have never treated me that cruelly!

Zaynab wasn't there to help either. She always guided me when we travelled by bus.

My privileged and bubbled life in Woodstock was catching up to me and before I stepped in to the taxi, I realised that I was indeed dumb. I had forgotten that my phone was still charging in Riyaaaz's room.

"Shukran, driver. I'll catch the next taxi, it's fine. I need to go back to my... friend's house."

Okay, Muhammad. Don't stress! All you need to do is walk back into that house and get your phone. Don't work yourself up. Retrace your steps. You'll be fine. Then... take a taxi to Wynberg... take a taxi to Town! Just as the driver said.

That was my chant as I trailed around trying to find Riyaaaz's house.

Take a taxi to Wynberg... take a taxi to Town!

And after almost knocking at a few wrong houses, I finally reached back to his home.

The door of Riyaaaz was still open which I found weird. They probably ignored my dramatic exit and enjoyed their precious romantic breakfast. I re-entered the home yet Riyaaaz and Keenan were not at the kitchen table. The spread looked untouched.

Just get the phone, leave immediately and... take a taxi to Wynberg... take a taxi to Town!

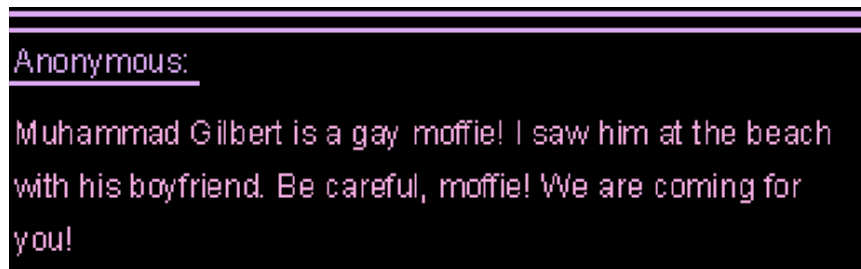
I needed to return home and complete my final Business Studies revision. How could I have gotten myself into that mess and not actually focus on my final Business Studies examination! There were way more important things to worry about than Riyaaaz. When I shoved his room open, Riyaaaz's head was buried into Keenan's groin.

“What is it with you gays and blowjobs!” I didn't understand why I had belted those words. Riyaaaz shot up and I raised my hands to cover them from my sight. “You fucking idiot! You left the front door open! What if one of your...” it wasn't even worth it to continue my words. I unplugged my phone and stopped at his doorway before I walked out.

“Is this how you treat someone you love?” I didn't even need an answer from him and I walked out of his home.

CHAPTER TWELVE:

“Muhammad, have you seen the new post on *Ou Toilet?*” asked one of my classmates as we walked out of the school building at the end of the of the Business Studies examination. *Ou Toilet* was a gossip website and online chatroom – think of the website as low budget and wannabe Cape Town version of *Gossip Girl*. There were two main sections of the online gossip chatroom: areas around Cape Town and high schools around Cape Town. According to my classmate, I had become infamously a part of the website. She handed me her Blackberry and I read what was said about me:



Anonymous:
Muhammad Gilbert is a gay moffie! I saw him at the beach with his boyfriend. Be careful, moffie! We are coming for you!

I sped through the message. Re-reading each syllable. Over and over. Until it made me sick. There were only two guys that I went to the beach with: Irshaad and Riyaaaz. It could have been either of them. Well, then there was Maliekah... and if Riyaaaz had told Keenan, there were four people who could have potentially posted that message.

What if someone I knew spotted me at the beach?

I didn't do "gay moffie" stuff with either one of them, so how did the person posting that anonymous post about me know. It was definitely an inside job. Nobody I knew personally would have been at Clifton 3rd Beach on that day I went with Riyaaaz and the day that I was at Camps Bay with Irshaad and Maliekah, the beach was almost empty.

"I need the toilet. *Shukran* for showing me this," I relayed to my classmate. After handing her Blackberry back to her, I raced off to the toilet, trying not to let the bile exit my mouth.

"Don't take note of it, Muhammad ... the school year is already over!" shouted my classmate, but her words flew by unimportantly.

In no time I was in a toilet cubicle, ralphing until my throat started to pain. I slid down on the floor, resting my head on the lid of the toilet seat – never feeling more grateful for the school’s maintenance staff for keeping the toilet so clean.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

I heard monstrous sounds on the toilet door. I didn’t think anything of it, so I stood up from the floor and turned the dial of the lock.

Big mistake!

The door blasted open. I fell backwards, knocking the back of my head against the edge of the toilet seat.

In followed two boys. One of them grabed the back of my hair and the other took my hand and placed it on his pants, by his penis area.

“*Ja, moffie*, do you like that?” screeched the one, whilst the other laughed.

With my head still in his grip, he bashed me forehead against the toilet pot. Between the two of them, they continued to plunge my face in and out of the toilet bowl that contained my own vomit. I didn’t even try to fight back. I was outmatched. My body felt lame.

“*Ouens!* The *paalie* is walking down the corridor!” another voice echoed through the toilet, signalling that they could potentially be caught.

They ran off.

Shakingly, I hopped up from the floor and stood in front of the mirror in the toilet. The blotches of the breakfast I had eaten that morning, in vomit form, covered my hair. A trickle of blood was tracing down my forehead, all the way down into my neck and I just stared ahead. I wasn’t even looking at myself, I was looking through myself, as if life and my body didn’t matter.

I tried to clean myself as best I could with shards of hard toilet roll from the metal dispenser.

The rest of the day was a blur because sadly for me, after returning home, I was crippled with anxiety.

After years of keeping everything under control, I knew I had to go back.

“Zaynab something is not right. My heart is beating very fast and I’ve never felt like this before,” I said to her over the home telephone, after calling her at work that Wednesday afternoon. My heart felt as though it would burst out of my ribcage. As I sat on the settee, it was as if the walls of the lounge were closing in on me.

“What is the problem?” she replied, abruptly. The twelve-hour shift must have been making her cranky.

“I can’t really say right now... I’m just not feeling like myself,” it was hard to explain the unfamiliarity of the panic attack.

“I’m sending you a *Rikki* cab right now!” and instantly I heard the beeping of the telephone. She put the phone down on me!

Before I knew it, I was at the hospital.

Why am I even in the emergency unit? She’s really making a big deal of nothing.

I tried to relax as I laid on the foamy hospital bed, but still, everything around me was moving fast. The nurse hooked me up to a machine and left me alone.

I began to hear the galloping sound of my heart.

“What’s the problem with you now?” snapped Zaynab, as she stomped her way through the separating curtains. An entrance always had to be made with her. She always had to be dramatic.

“Why am I here in the emergency ward? Don’t you think you’re over-reacting –” I asked her, but my words were no match for her quickness.

“Over-reacting?! What happened to your face?” she questioned, yet I didn’t answer.

There was a long pause between.

“Sister Maggie is going to come back now now to give you an injection,” her tone became sympathetic.

I laid, looking up at the ceiling, feeling angry.

“Well... Do you know why you’re in this room with such a high bp?” I knew the answer, but what was I to say?

Salaam, Zaynab! I'm gay, or bisexual... I don't really know the label yet. And do you remember my friend, Riyaaz? From the other night? Well, Riyaaz is actually my boyfriend, and whenever he ignored me, I took the opportunity to talk to Irshaad...

Maaf, say again?

Oh... You want to know who Irshaad is? He was Riyaaz's ex-boyfriend, but the funny part is that Irshaad was also my boyfriend... It's all really fucked up –

Maaf!

Yes, you're right... I shouldn't be swearing. Muslims don't speak like that! But forget that... I want to know if you still love me? Your gay, or bisexual, fucked up son?

But I couldn't say what I was really thinking, so instead I replied by saying, "Well I don't feel like I can share it with you."

"Is Riyaaz causing you all this grief?"

Wait... why would she say it like that? I couldn't believe what I had heard and I knew what she was implying.

"Out of all of my friends, why are you mentioning him?"

"Well... You don't have any friends, and no, before you mention Kaashief, he is your cousin so he doesn't count. Besides, I saw how he kept looking at you the other night. He seems to be animated with you."

"You're delusional –"

"No, my son, I think you're the one that's delusional. You clearly have deep internal and psychological problems, and if you don't want to talk to me about it, you'll have to talk to a professional," she pranced away and in walked the nurse with the needle.

Hours later I woke up in the Psychiatric Ward, held against my own will.

The hospital room was bright. I opened my eyes to the a yellow painted room. There was an instant warm feeling around me – the walls must have painted that particular shade of yellow for that reason. My mouth was dry. I sat up and reached over to the portable wooden and metal counter, that was above my feet, to pour myself water out of the beige plastic jug.

In the room were four beds: one next to me on my left and two opposite me. The bed directly opposite me had many different items around it, but calculating my surroundings wasn't important at that time – I needed to get to a toilet desperately.

As I got up from the bed, my gaze still hazy, I stood in the mirror looking at myself...

I know I'm at Zaynab's work... a hospital... but where the fuck am I exactly?

Then it clicked!

I touched my bum cheek and remembered the numbing feeling of being injected. Everything was still blurry. I realised that I was in the Psychiatric Ward, but I wasn't ready to face it. So, I just stood there, staring at myself in a large mirror, with hollow eyes staring back at me. I noticed my name tag, but I could only make out the capital "M" and capital "G". As I read the rest of the letters on the tag, the more unintelligible my name and surname became.

My heart wasn't beating fast any longer. I didn't feel happy. I didn't feel sad. There was a feeling of nothingness inside me.

After using the toilet, I decided to get back into bed. The hospital bed was surprisingly comfortable, so I tried to think about what had triggered my panic attack.

What has become of my life?

I hated myself so much in that moment. I thought about the situation I had gotten myself into with Riyaaaz and Irshaad.

Did I deserve what was happening to me? Maybe I should've have lied to Riyaaaz and gone with Irshaad behind his back. Irshaad, my sweet brown-eyed boy!

I stopped.

The thoughts were causing me to work myself up again.

Riyaaaz! Irshaad! Irshaad! Riyaaaz! A perfect triangle.

Did I still have feelings Riyaaaz? Was Riyaaaz still in love with me like he said he was? Why did he humiliate me like that with Keenan? Did Irshaad still care about me like he had told Maliekah?

The arrows went round and round, perfectly connecting the three of us.

A perfect triangle! Not some perpendicular shit you would find in 'Twilight' or 'Vampire Diaries'.

As I thought about each of them, the thoughts ran through my mind like lamb cuts sliced through the noisy machine at a butcher. My mind was zinging with pain.

I cannot live like this anymore! I cannot play the victim. I cheated too and I need to tell Riyaaaz the truth.

And as that specific thought zinged through my mind, it then felt as if my mind was being sliced in half. The sharp metal sounds of the butcher ran through me. Over and over. Over and over. Over and over.

I traced my fingers over the cut on my forehead and I remembered:

Muhammad Gilbert is a gay *moffie*! I saw him at the beach with his boyfriend. Be careful, *moffie*! We are coming for you!

The comment on *Ou Toilet* popped up into my head along with the memory of what had happened in the toilet earlier that day. It was all getting too much for me, so I hopped out of bed to clear my mind.

There was a long corridor just outside my room. I often enjoyed walking around the hospital as a child, but the area of the Psychiatric Ward was unknown to me. The corridor wasn't painted white like the rest of the hospital, instead the walls were covered with a soft beige colour carpet. I trudged around stopped at the end of the corridor. Before me were two large doors, which I assumed was the entrance or exit to the Psychiatric Ward – the doors were covered in carpet as well. There was carpet everywhere! I supposed that the carpet brought a homely feel to the place – a camouflage to the fact that I was locked up.

I placed my hand on the door. The carpet was tickling the insides of my hands. There were no handles on the door except for a square grid with glow-in-the-dark numbers on. I turned around and proceed to stroll back to my room. In between the some patients' rooms were small offices. As I continued strolling, tv sets were blaring from the rooms. The occupants were all sitting up in their beds – I didn't remember seeing them when I walked up the first time, moments back.

These people seem normal, I whispered.

Why does everyone seem normal?

I had always pictured the Psychiatric Ward to be filled with the insane people, screaming and hurting the staff, throwing shit around – I guess films got it all wrong?

Where are the patients who run around with their arms strapped?

I continued to stroll down. There were no nurses chasing patients with a needles. Everything seemed normal.

I am normal?

I really don't want to be here, but I guess it was some sort of holiday.

I still had about a week of examinations – two examinations to be exact. The one thing that started to make me nervous was the thought of what would happen when I would leave.

Only time would tell.

My room seemed bigger when I returned. There were windows everywhere. I didn't like sleeping in light, but I guess I needed all the light I could take. Each of the four beds in the room had a tv hovering above them, and lucky for us, we had DSTV. There were small wooden cupboards beside each bed, and curtains around each bed if privacy was needed. In that moment, a nurse entered the room. She seemed emotionless, and she didn't say anything other than why she was in my room.

Was Zaynab just as cold as she is when she's on duty?

All of a sudden, I felt a coldness in the air, as the nurse was busy fiddling with the air conditioner. I was only wearing my underwear underneath the hospital overall, so the chills hit hard.

"I honestly don't belong here," I tried making small-talk but she didn't say anything.

"The last time I checked, your blood pressure was very high. Get into the bed," and her sharp words ushered me beneath the thin blanket. I was beginning to get scared.

"Take this, it will help you sleep," she commanded.

I didn't remember being knocked out by that pill, and a few hours later I woke up in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was, again. It was as if I was going to repeat the entire cycle again.

As I looked over, there was another body in the bed opposite me. Although the room was dark at night, I began to do my inspection of my surroundings: windows, four beds, a cupboard beside me, tv hovering above me – a spark struck inside me and I realised where I was.

Why am I here?

Why did she send me here?

Everything started to rush back and race through my mind. There I lied, alone with my piercing thoughts. So, I decided to get out of bed, and walked out of the room. I took a different route until I ended up at a balcony at the end of the ward. The balcony was well lit, but there wasn't much of a view because the wall was pretty high. I only got to see a small part of the skyline, but I didn't mind because I smelled the freshness of the trees.

A woman sat at one of the plastic tables. Her short blonde hair shone in the light, and her body was infested with tattoos. The tattoo on her left arm triggered me most – it was a black heart. I stared at it for quite some time until her gaze reached mine.

"How old are you?" she exhaled smoke and dabbed her cigarette in the seashell ashtray.

“Seventeen, how old are you?” I kept my speech short, as I didn’t have her figured out yet and I didn’t want to make random conversations with strangers in the Psychiatric Ward.

“Don’t worry about me. I’d like to know what a young *boetie* such as yourself is doing in a place like this? Are you perhaps lost. The paediatrics’ ward... I mean the kiddies area is down –”

“I know what paediatric means lady,” I frowned at the nerve of that woman.

“Relax, *boetie*! I’m only kidding. Here, sit –” she outstretched her one leg, pushed out a plastic chair from under the plastic table with her foot. I proceeded to sit down. “Can’t sleep, huh? You’ll get used to it once they find the correct dosage, they probably don’t want to give you too much... seeing that you’re only...” she counted and wiggled her short stubby fingers in front of me. I knew that she was trying to joke with me.

“Seventeen?” I asked, sarcastically.

“*Ah!* I remember when I was seventeen and innocent like you, no care in the world –”

“Oh, I wish I could say the same,” and I really did. My life wasn’t carefree as she had claimed. What did she know about being a teenager? She must’ve been cool when she was younger.

“You’ve got a lot on your mind?” she questioned me and I just nodded. In that moment tears started to stroll from my eyes, “Listen, *boetie*! It’s not good to be alone with your thoughts in this place, so take it easy. You can only take on so much, you know?” she paused, and lifted another cigarette to her thin lips. “Do you want one?” she handed her soft packet of Stuyvesant Red to me. I didn’t know how she could tell that I smoked, but I nonetheless took the cigarette willingly. “Smoke if you want to smoke. The nurses never come out to the balcony, well it’s not much of a balcony –”

“That’s exactly what I thought. There’s literally no view!” and we both laughed as I lit the cigarette, “This is my first for the day... the day sped by so fast!”

“That happens, *ja!* My life also speeds by. You know, you need to get this under control... I’m not going to lie to you, you’ll probably struggle with this for your whole life, but it gets easier as time goes by... you’ll learn how to deal with everything,” she continued with a smile and lit herself a cigarette as well. “This is my second time here, for the year.”

“Do you have a membership card? Shit... why did I say that... sorry,” I tried to retrace my words.

What if she is insane, and I upset her? I mean look at all the dark imagery on her tattoos, but I played things cool.

“You’re a funny *boetie*,” she laughed and shook her head, “Funny people usually hide pain, but let me teach you something, *boetie*. Adults take on too much and they cannot handle it. Stress. Depression. Anxiety. It’s everywhere. Most people cannot identify what it is, so that’s when addiction occurs – another factor that people cannot immediately identify. Instead of dealing with their problems they look for consolation elsewhere,” she looked down at her cigarette, making marks on the table with the burning edge.

“I didn’t think of it that way, are you perhaps a life coach?” I replied. At that point I was truly invested in the conversation.

“If I knew everything about life, why would I be in a *kak* place like this?” she and I laughed again. I liked her calming presence. “If you must know,” she began to speak again, “when I feel that things are not going my way, I stop and listen to the signs. People often push away their problems and never deal with it. I could feel my demons re-approaching so I checked myself in,” we both stubbed our cigarettes in the seashell ashtray. “What was the first thing you noticed about me,” she looked up at me for the first time and I saw the sadness in her crystal eyes.

“I’m not sure, there were various things about you that I noticed... I cannot pinpoint one thing, my mind is all over the place remember.”

“*Ag*, come on, funny boy... there must be something,” she replied with a chuckle.

“Well, I did notice your tattoos, especially the one on your left arm... it’s, uhm... unique,” I looked ahead as she traced over each tattoo.

“I bet you were so intrigued by the tattoos on my left arm that you didn’t know that my right arm is completely tattoo free.” She released her arm onto the table and I observed.

“You need a tan hey,” I responded and she giggled. The woman flipped her arm over and revealed the insides of her arm. To my surprise, I noticed razor sharp horizontal lines. Some were fresh, and some were becoming scabs – I was completely flabbergasted.

Why would anyone do that to themselves? If you want to commit suicide, then why not just do it, but I kept my words locked. I couldn’t imagine how sad somebody must have been in order to want to harm themselves like that.

“You can say what you’re thinking,” from her words I could tell that she felt offended by the long pause that I had taken. “I got the tattoos to distract everyone from the scars. Most importantly, I got the tattoos to distract myself,” she said so softly it almost sounded like a whisper. “You see, the world is such a cruel place. People only see the obvious; people only see what they want to see. You were so intrigued by my tattoos that you didn’t pay attention to what was really there – my scars. Look, *boetie*, we are a special breed – you and I. It takes a

lot of courage to be in this place, so one thing you need to realise is that you need to take care of yourself.” The woman with the tattoos picked up her box of cigarettes, lit me a cigarette, stood up and left the balcony.

“Hang in there, *boetie*,” her words stung me.

As I inhaled long puff of smoke, I decided to sit back and watch the thin strip of skyline.

Am I living in a weird dream?

The following day, I had to attend the group breakfast in the communal dinning space – later I learned that group discussions were held in the same venue. A new nurse woke me and told me to seek the door closest to the balcony. When I entered the hall-like area, there was a large buffet of breakfast items spread on about four tables lined next to each other. The spread reminded me of the romantic breakfast that I could’ve had with Riyaaaz and thinking about the image of him on Keenan just removed my appetite. I picked up a tray that had an empty plastic plate in it and towered over the various food items.

I was about to dish a ladle of scrambled egg and a piece of sausage that I ensured that it was *halal*, when I heard someone’s screams directed to me.

“*Boetie*, over here!” it was the woman with the tattoos, waving over and calling me. She sat with two other women: an older woman, with frizzy reddish hair, and the other woman was dark skinned and bald. I walked towards them with my tray, and sat down.

“Tammy, who is this?” asked the older woman. I noticed that her hair was actually died red, after looking at her mismatched grey roots.

“My name is Muhammad, and who’s asking?”

“Hey! Hey! I like him already! My name is Ella, I guess you know Tammy with the tattoos, and that lady over there is Busi,” she turned her head acknowledging everyone, “What are you in for, *boetie*?” she took a bite from her soggy tuna sandwich.

“Uhm... Anxiety, I guess –” I was about to try to explain my case but she cut me off.

“Anxiety?! Oh that’s nothing. I’m bipolar! My husband brought me in because I needed to get a few stitches –”

“A few stitches?! Oh that’s nothing.” I responded quickly. I knew it wasn’t the truth, but she laughed, revealing her teeth that was full of wet bread.

“Okay. Okay. Actually, I was eight weeks pregnant –”

“*O lieve Jesus! Vader help ons!* Not this story again,” wailed Tammy, as she threw her hands up.

“The *boetie* has to know!” shouted Ella.

“But you’re almost sixty! Were you going to give birth dust?” replied Tammy with the tattoos, but I tried my best to keep my laugh in. The Psychiatric Ward seemed like a lot of fun and less depressive as it had the night before.

“See! See! I can’t move my legs, because of all the water weight from my pregnancy!” Ella relaxed to the back of her chair and grabbed her stomach. I noticed that Ella started most of her sentences excitedly repeating the same word twice, just as Aunty did.

“Well! Get on with the story, Ella,” commanded Tammy as she played around with the yolk of the egg on her plate.

“Alright! Alright! It was about past five the evening, I was busy chopping onions. Then, my hubby came home. Initially, I didn’t hear him come into the kitchen, because I blasting *Heart 104.9* radio,” she raised her arms making awkward dance moves, “I love me some good old school Sunday music. Then, he switched off the radio to get my attention – during *Earth Wind and Fire! Fokkit*, he switched the radio off at the best part!” Ella jumped up from her seat and started singing and dancing, “My hubby then went on and on about how he knew I wasn’t taking my medication... I mean... What a prude. He can never have fun! It was only two days that I missed,” Ella sat down, she seemed tired of dancing.

“*Then*, what happened?” I asked, intrigued by the weird old woman and annoyed by her overuse of the word *then*.

“He walked up to me, pointing on the ‘Saturday’ and ‘Sunday’ demarcations on those stupid pill divider box things. I told him that I couldn’t take the pills, especially after finding out that I was pregnant. Then, he went on about how a woman of my age couldn’t ever be pregnant, but I tell you what *boetie*, I can feel the baby growing inside me! He’s looking for an excuse not to be a father, so the next moment, I *might* have nabbed my stomach with the kitchen knife, but I swear it wasn’t on purpose and it was only a scratch. I was trying to make him scared. I wasn’t going to kill my unborn baby. My arm slipped by accident,” she laughed awkwardly with herself.

“And now you’re here?” I asked.

“And now I am here, *boetie*,” she just smiled as she began to scoop her yoghurt from the mini plastic cup. She turned over to Tammy, “And you? What brings you here?”

“I told you already,” Tammy replied.

“Yeah! Yeah! But the *boetie* doesn’t know what really happened. I mean... Common, look how young and *oulik* he is. He has got to know about all us whack jobs!” she knocked her head with her fist, and stuck her tongue out of her mouth.

“Well...” Tammy took a long pause, as if she was gathering up the strength to the story. “It’s okay... It’s okay, Tammy... He has to know,” Ella rubbed Tammy’s back, and then Tammy began to nod.

“Throughout my entire life, I’ve always felt like an outcast. I never fit in anywhere, nor with anyone. Just look at me. Tall. Big-built woman. Short blonde hair. My body doesn’t really scream “be my friend” or “come date me”, you know. From a young age, I started to cut myself. And yes I know, it’s a cliché, cutting oneself to feel the physical pain instead of feeling the emotional pain, but I did it because I thought it would help. I just got used to the feeling... so used to it that I still do it... in my late thirties! I have my good days, and then I have the *worst* days. Cutting myself keeps me stay sane...” Tammy’s words seemed more broken than the previous night.

Is this what my life was going to be like? Am I going to turn into them?

I looked around the room, staring at everyone, thinking to myself.

Tammy did mention to me on the balcony that I’d probably struggle with my anxiety for my whole life and that I was a special breed. I guess it made sense why Ella was so adamant on having them all tell me their personal stories. My scrambled egg was cold, so I broke off pieces of the sausage and lifted the small pieces to my mouth to chew. The chatter within the hall spun around me. It was hard to focus. The deep sense of loneliness revealed itself again to me. I was sitting at a table of women that understood me, yet I never felt more alone in my life. I still couldn’t get over the fact that Zaynab forced me to be there, my heart was still sore over the whole Riyaz and Keegan situation and my mind was working overtime trying to block out what had happened in the cubicle of the boy’s toilet at school.

“The other night...” Tammy started talking again, and I snapped out of my thoughts, “Pass me a few brown sugar sachets, *boetie*.” I handed her the sugar, and she stared at the coffee cup and saucer, “I *just* couldn’t take it anymore. The bath was filled to the brim with warm water. I climbed in. The water overflowed onto the floor. I didn’t care about the mess as I usually did. Down into the water. Up for air again. I did that about five times until I was

ready. The blade met my skin. I cut deeper and deeper. I've never cut myself so deep, but then I couldn't handle how much pain the overwhelmed me. Although I wanted to die, I couldn't go through with it. I wrapped a cloth around my wrist, raced to get my phone and dialled the ambulance."

"And now you're here?" I asked.

"And now I am here," Tammy stopped talking, staring at the empty sugar sachets that were on her saucer.

"We all have stories, *boetie*. We're all meant to be here," said Ella, who looked at me with intensity. She turned over to Busi, who had been relatively quiet since I joined their table.

"I'd rather not, I don't want to scare him," said Busi. In fact I had forgotten that she sat at the table with us that's how quiet she was. I was disappointed, I wanted to know more about her.

"Are you sure, Busi –"

"Yes, Ella. You don't have to try to be everyone's fucking therapist, that's what the daily one-on-one sessions with our psychiatrists are for!" Busi raised her voice so loudly that the entire hall went quiet.

"*Ag... Ag... don't mind her, boetie*. She secretly likes the attention," Ella laughed. "So, anxiety, huh? I'll give you a fifty-rand if you can tell a better story than we did of why you're here, *boetie*."

"Only fifty-rand, so you're crazy and cheap?" I responded and Ella started to laugh again.

"See, I told you, you'd like him," said Tammy giggling. "Tell us!"

"Well, I'm gay...or bisexual, it's hard to explain," other than telling Aaliyah, that was the first time I said that out loudly to anyone. I wasn't even nervous when I said it.

"Really? All the boys must be over you. You're such a looker with your stunning green eyes," gushed Ella. "But don't worry, my uncle was gay, so you don't have to feel uncomfortable."

"Yeah, me too. Well, no... My uncle wasn't gay, but who cares, right? It's 2012!" Tammy snapped her fingers a few times, and made her fingers into gun signs, pointing towards me, winking.

"Honestly, I don't know why I shared that with you all, so I guess I do feel comfortable. Being gay and being Muslim isn't really accepted, so I'm still in the closet about everything... I guess –"

“Yeah! Yeah! Who still gives a shit about all that, tell us why you’re here!” Ella was starting to get excited.

“Well, there’s this guy –”

“Surprise! Surprise! There always is,” replied Ella. “Did he break your heart?”

“His name is Riyaaaz and the other day I found out he has been cheating on me... I actually caught him in the act, so we’re kind of broken up now... Well I think we are because I haven’t spoken to Riyaaaz in days. And before you feel sorry for me that he cheated, I’ve kind of been cheating on him too... with his ex-boyfriend name Irshaad. You see, technically Riyaaaz and I weren’t really dating. Well, that’s what I told myself to make myself feel better about the situation with Irshaad,” the three women just stared at me, intrigued by my life. “I know it sounds complicated and confusing; I’m still confused about the whole situation. In fact, I make myself sick! It’s like I’m this big fucking hypocrite! On Wednesday morning, the day after I caught Riyaaaz with this Keegan *bra*, I woke up and my heart was beating so fast because of my anxiety; I’ve never ever felt that way before. I was a bit stressed for my final Business Studies examination. Then... then... then I was attacked in one of the cubicles in the boy’s toilet. Right now, life is just too much. So... I phoned my mother and told her about my rattling heart. And... and... now I’m here,” and there it started, the tears were beginning to swirl around in my eyelids. I tried my best to hold them back, but I couldn’t. My heart felt sore again. I let all the tears waterfall from my eyelids.

“*Ag, nee... Ag, nee...* You must take it easy,” Ella jumped up and walked over to hug me. “Everything will be okay. You’re one of us, so trust me when I say, everything will be okay.”

Later that day, the nurse re-entered my room and ushered me down the hallway to one of the small offices. On our way walking, she said that I was going to meet up with my psychiatrist for the first time. What she didn’t tell me that was that Zaynab was sitting in the room.

“The psychiatrist will be here any moment. You should sit,” demanded Zaynab after she turned around from her chair gestured to the chair beside her. “How are you feeling?” she asked with a shift in tone.

“How am I feeling? When you said that I needed to talk to somebody professional, I didn’t think you were going to force me into the Psychiatric Ward against my own will! So, no! I don’t want to sit! And don’t ask me how I am feeling!” I had never raised my voice at Zaynab, but I couldn’t help it. She was a traitor!

“You’re not here against your own will, Muhammad. You can leave at any time,” she replied by turning her back towards me. I watched her foot continuously tap against the leg of the chair which meant that she was nervous. My anger started to subside. I actually liked the place but I just didn’t appreciate how she went about sending me there. “I think you’ll like Dr Khan, so try not to be... rude. Apparently he’s good with teenage problems,” she continued to talk, still without looking at me.

“Is that what you think I have? Problems?” I couldn’t believe her.

“No, I think whatever you’re going through is serious, that’s why I sent you here,” said Zaynab and before there was any awkward silence in the room, she ended the conversation by saying, “Maybe, you should finally speak about what happened with you and Kaashief when you were children.” After she relayed those words, and her forcing me to into that place, I was definitely not going to speak to her ever again. Zaynab was officially dead to me.

The door of the office finally opened, and in walked the psychiatrist. Zaynab stood up from the chair, exchanged pleasantries with Dr Khan and then she left the room. All those actions were done without looking at me. I was still standing against the wall, I couldn’t get myself to sit down.

Dr Khan was lanky. He shuffled past me to sat down behind at his office table. I didn’t like that I was going to have to speak to a man about my so called “problems”. It was easier to talk to the ladies at the breakfast table. They understood what I was going through. But I pushed down all my fears and told myself that it would technically be easier to speak to him because he didn’t even know me, and neither did I know him.

Finally, he greeted me with a simple expressionless hello and further relayed how he had heard a lot about me from Zaynab.

I was then instructed to sit down and not lean against the wall.

He wanted me to talk about my problems, emphasising that it was a casual talk – perhaps like the casual light denim *Levi* jean, the white golfer, and the white pair of *Jack Purcell’s* he wore. Dr Khan didn’t look that much older than me, with the stubble on his face and his shaggy mushroom cut hair. From his jacket pocket, he took out a roll of *Mentos* sweets. It was strawberry flavoured, and he offered me one. As I reached for his roll of *Mentos* sweets,

I diverted my gaze to look at the view of roof of the hospital outside his window. I began tapping my hands on the arm rests of the chair I sat on, contemplating what I was going to say. The gayness had to be addressed and *how does it make me feel?* I didn't accept it and I was fearful that others wouldn't accept me... Nobody truly understood me and I felt so alone. Dr Khan's was scribbling on his notepad. I know he was pretending to write something, as he waited for me to speak.

"So, Mr Gilbert, your mother said something happened to you and your cousin when you were a young boy. Would you like to tell me?" cross-examined Dr Khan, as he reclined on his chair, lifting his baby face from the notepad. With a sudden rush, I could feel all the blood in my body drop to my feet.

I contemplated.

Should I? Or shouldn't I?

Before me, Dr Khan looked expressionless. He was waiting on me. So I took my time, thinking, waiting. I too was waiting for myself to say it, and for the first time in my life, I told my side of what happened all those years ago...

As a young child, my life was relatively normal. I didn't have any friends, so I had to think of ways to keep myself busy, but still, I always felt comfort in being alone. Zaynab was a single parent who worked twelve-hour shifts as a nurse. I spent most of my time at the houses of my neighbours. None of the neighbours had sons, nor children my age, so that weirdly meant that all the children, to play with, were older girls. Most of the older girls in the road treated me like their living doll. I guess it was because I was small for my age and they adored large chartreuse eyes, giving them the opportunity to dress me up and paint me in make-up. I don't remember much about this time of my life, I've succeeded in block it out as best as I can... but nonetheless, after the girls would dress me up, they would play the music of the *Spice Girls* or *Britney Spears*, and I'd have to fall in line and follow their dance moves. My father had always been non-existent, and I had no brothers, my grandfather died after I was born, so the older I grew, I became more inclined to do things that the girls did... I didn't know better. Zaynab didn't say much and allowed me to be me. She must have been too busy to care or notice.

At the age of five, I was sent to school. It was the first time that I was mixing with children my age and automatically I was inclined to play with the girls in my class – it’s all I had ever known. The teacher didn’t like that I had effeminate tendencies.

“Muhammad, it’s unnatural for boys to be playing with girls! Stop acting like a *moffie*,” said the teacher to me one day during play-time. At the time, I didn’t know what the word “unnatural” meant, but I knew that *moffie* was not a good word due to the way her tongue lashed when she said it. It was only later when I learned that word was South African slang for guy who acts, dresses or embodies a girl or woman – a guy with effeminate tendencies. Because I obviously didn’t listen to the teacher, each time I was caught playing with the girls, the teacher spat out the word at me with so much hatred.

“Muhammad, it’s unnatural for boys to be playing with girls! Stop acting like a *moffie*,” she’d repeat before placing me in the corner. Once my time-out session ended, the teacher would move me play with the boys, and for not too long after that, I would just end up back with the girls.

That first year of school, in Grade R, was torture. I was never physically bullied, but the name calling hit me hard. Maybe if my bullies hit me, I would’ve felt the physicality of the hatred, but the name calling broke my spirit. Every single day of my life in Grade R, I was called a “*moffie*” – how I wish that were a hyperbolic statement, but that’s unfortunately true. It happened every single day! Somehow the boys learned of the word “*moffie*” and, again, although I didn’t know its true meaning, I knew they also they directed to me with so much hatred.

One day, after building up much needed courage, I asked the teacher what it meant; she was in fact the first person that said it to me, therefore she would know.

“Muhammad, I warned you! You are a boy so you should act like a boy. When boys act like girls or do the things girls like, they are *moffies*. You don’t want to be a now *moffie* do you?” explained the teacher. She was a plump woman that always wore a tight scarf, making her head appear rounder than it actually was. My first teacher was soft-spoken and gentle, but when she said that word, she seemed evil. I knew that I was a boy, I just couldn’t comprehend why it was wrong of me to play with the girls. The rest of the boys didn’t stop with the name calling and eventually I felt dirty about myself. They treated me as if there was something wrong with me. Because I was very small and thin too, I couldn’t retaliate with my fists; I was never taught to stand up for myself, both physically and verbally. The more I heard *that* word, the more I accepted it. I took the verbal punches.

As time progressed, the older children in the school started calling me “gay bunny” – “bunny” is another derogatory term like “*moffie*”, but then the word “gay” was added.

“Gay means happy. We are calling you a *happy* boy!” that’s what the older children would say to me, but by then I knew exactly what it meant.

How could I be gay?

I was a little boy, I couldn’t ever imagine liking another boy.

Luckily, a year later, Kaashief moved into a house a few roads down from mine. We were both going to Grade 1. At the time Aunty had just married Boeta Rashied. He lived a few roads away from us and after he and Aunty married, she returned to Woodstock after many years. Aunty and Boeta Rashied were somewhat a good match, because Aunty’s husband died a few years prior, and Boeta Rashied and his first wife were divorced – they both needed companionship. Both newlyweds coincidentally had one son from their previous marriages.

With family close-by, I started spending a lot of time with Kaashief at his house. He taught me new things, especially how to play cricket. Rugby and soccer were not my strong suits, so for the first time in my life, I started enjoying sport. We didn’t play the professional game of cricket, as we were only two players: one would have to be the batsman, and the other would have to bowl. We also used a tennis ball, because it was easier to hit, and a black street bin with a round lid as our wickets. The aim was to get the tennis ball to hit the bin, which was easy because the bin was much wider than regular cricket wickets. My dexterity was displayed when I bowled, and Kaashief was a master batsman, although I bowled him out of the game most days.

I had never seen Zaynab more happier, and because Aunty lived so close, she didn’t have to worry about my safety – even though most days I took care of myself and Woodstock was safe in the early 2000s. Zaynab was also happy that I finally played sport, instead doing *girly things*, so she always made sure that we had tennis balls to play with. Kaashief often hit the balls into Aunty Deema’s yard or on her roof. She was a bitter old lady, so we would never get our balls back, but as I said, Zaynab was happy, and after each ball lost in the oblivion of Aunty Deema’s yard, Zaynab would gladly replaced it. Whenever Kaashief hit the tennis ball into Aunty Deema’s yard, the game was automatically over – this often upset me, but after a while I would forgive him, and then the next day we would start again, with a brand new ball.

I loved playing with Kaashief each day. When our summer holidays were over, and it was time to begin Grade 1, Kaashief was sent to my primary school. He protected me from all my bullies. Kaashief, from a young age, had always been burly built, so when we he came to our school, and in my class, he stood out easily because he was much taller and fatter than the

rest of us. He also knew how to swear very well which made all the other children scared of him. I'm not sure where he learned it from, because Aunty never uttered any vulgarities. Naturally, Kaashief became my bodyguard, and the bullying stopped. I also stopped playing with girls, and doing *girly things*, and slowly but surely the effeminate tendencies died down. But, as I look back now, a part of me was just suppressing who I truly was.

Because Zaynab was always working, I often slept at Kaashief's new house on the corner of Devon and Regent Street. Aunty and Boeta Rashied were at work during the day, so after school Kaashief and I basically did whatever we wanted to. This did, however, make us an easy target for Kaashief's older stepbrother, named Waseem.

Each day, when our classmates left school, Kaashief and I stayed behind at aftercare until Waseem would fetch us. Aunty was finicky about us being alone, and after she made many judgemental comments to Zaynab, for letting me once roam around the streets of Woodstock as I pleased, Waseem was forced to look after us until the adults returned. Ironically, what Aunty didn't know was that there was something *strange* about Waseem.

I liked Waseem a lot because every day he would buy Kaashief and I NikNaks and frozen apple *bompies*. In the afternoons whilst we were on the playground during aftercare, we always knew when Waseem was close by the school due to his obsession with whistling. When we heard his whistling, Kaashief and I would run to fetch our school bags and out of the school gate we'd scurry. The running continued all the way over to the corner shop of Aunty Miena's. We'd race down her shaky wooden passageway, with the wafts of incense following behind us. Because Kaashief and I always tried to imitate Waseem's whistling, we would receive a scolding from Aunty Miena as she believed we were calling the *Shaytaan* to her home.

With a packet of NikNaks in the one hand and a frozen apple *bompie* in the other, Kaashief and I would follow Waseem home whilst he would be telling us a new joke or a funny made-up story. I was happy to be around them both because, aside from having Kaashief to play with, I finally had brothers. I admired Waseem even more because when we arrived home, he would make us all something to eat. I always enjoyed his knack for making gourmet two-minute noodles or fancy cheese and spiced beef snackwich. All the treats after school and the snacks he made was his way of manipulating us, because after a while Waseem became...

strange. Aunty trusted him to look after us, but in the end he would be the sole person in this world to damage Kaashief and I the most.

Boeta Rashied hid his porn vhs cassettes at the back of his wooden cupboard in an faded *Shoprite* plastic bag. The cupboard nearly touched the roof of the room, and it had two monstrous doors with symmetrical mirrors on its doors. In his favour, if anyone was going to enter the room, Waseem would be able to see in the mirror. Luckily for him, or unluckily for Kaashief and I, Boeta Rashied and Aunty never returned home earlier than 5 o' clock, except on Fridays when they both worked until 12pm to be home for *Jumu'ah*. It then became the norm for Waseem to fetch the faded Shoprite plastic bag and play a vhs cassette on the tv in his and Kaashief's room. After a while Waseem started letting us watch those porn films with him. He wasn't even sly about what he did, as he timed Boeta Rashied and Aunty. Because they lived on the corner, we could all hear the screeching of Boeta Rashied's Nissan Champ bakkie rolling down the street.

One day, Kaashief was sick, lying in bed all day, so he never came to school. When Waseem fetched me, and because Kaashief was at home, Waseem said that I could have whatever I wanted from Aunty Miena's shop. I chose the dark green packet of *Lays*, my favourite, and a longtom can of *Coke*. When we got to my Aunty's house, I noticed that Kaashief was in bed fast asleep.

"What's wrong with Kaashief?" I asked out of concern for my dear cousin, but Waseem didn't respond. Instead, he asked me if I needed to pee, and I agreed, because I greedily drank up the entire longtom Coke, not wanting to share with Kaashief. Waseem followed me inside the toilet and locked the door behind us. As I was about to sit on the toilet, Waseem instructed me to stand instead because boys stand and pee. That was not true. At school we were taught otherwise by our teacher. She always reminded us that as Muslims we must not behave like animals, and only animals stand and pee, so irrespective of gender, boys should sit and pee.

Waseem scolded me. In a forceful manner, he instructed me to stand and pee. I had never heard Waseem raise his voice nor had I ever seen him become angry. I didn't understand and I didn't want to upset him, so I followed Waseem's instruction. When I was done peeing and performing the *istinja*, I lifted my school shorts, however, Waseem stopped me and pulled my pants back down. Again, I didn't understand.

Why didn't Waseem allow me to put on my pants? In fact why was he with me in the toilet?

He then instructed me to bend over and reach my hands forward towards the cistern. It was an exercise that he wanted to show me and he said that it would make me a better bowler in cricket. Everything that he said did not feel good inside my tummy, but because all I wanted to do was please Waseem, the only older brother figure I admired, I did as I was told.

As I bent over, I focused my gaze on the fluffy baby blue toilet seat cover that also matched the mats around the toilet pot and close to the shower entrance. I started looking around the toilet, noticing the different intricacies I hadn't before. I now can still remember the doilies on the black cistern... the cream coloured curtains over the window that was never opened... the ceiling above me had dark mouldy dots...

I remember when I wanted to turn around and leave the toilet, Waseem shouted at me, saying that I should look in front of me.

I was scared.

His voice felt violent.

Intrusive.

Until the memory just goes blank...

And after exiting the toilet, I went to lie next to Kaashief. The rest is all a blur. I wish I remembered what happened to me that day, but I don't.

Every day after that experience, when I would see Waseem, I began to feel sick. Whenever I heard him whistling I wanted to vomit. I started becoming more and more scared of Waseem. The older brother that I once loved, was now a scary monster. Overnight Waseem had become the ugliest human in my life. More and more his moroseness became evident.

I hated him.

I hated his face that was filled with oozy pus-filled pimples.

I hated the slowness of his gate whenever he followed us home after fetching us from school.

Most importantly, I hated his whistling.

Each day he would smile at me, a sly smile as if he knew something about me that I didn't know, and I guess he did because I have no memory of what happened. I didn't know what to do, it was as if I was on mute. Then, as he had always been, Kaashief became my saviour.

Waseem made a big mistake... he tried to do the same to Kaashief as he had tried with me.

Waseem should've known that Kaashief would fight back and speak up. The next thing I remembered was Aunty and Boeta Rashied standing in the kitchen of my home having a *serious talk* with Zaynab. I knew exactly what they were discussing, even though Kaashief and I were told to play outside. Years later, when I addressed the topic with Zaynab, she told me that Kaashief said that Waseem forced us both to touch his penis too. I had no memory of that. She further said that Boeta Rashied nearly beat Waseem into hospital bed, so that was the reason why he was sent to live with his mother.

And so, life after that went back to normal, and everything was forgotten. Kaashief and I have never spoken about that memory. It is a dark secret I cannot get myself to face. What makes the memory everything even more dark is that I have no memory of what exactly happened in the toilet that day.

I left doctor Khan's office, refusing to return. I also sent a message to Zaynab's Ward, telling her that I wanted to return home and that I she couldn't force me to stay any longer. When I returned to my room, there was a bunch of sunflowers with a note from Riyaaz saying that he would soon visit me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

The sliding doors at the hospital's main entrance opened and I snailed out of the building. It was a tough mission to put one foot in front of the other. Dr Khan had said that I would feel weird and he was right. I wasn't used to the medication yet. My heart felt hollow and my mind was empty. I knew that I was supposed to feel happy about leaving, but my insides were just blank. In fact for all those days at the hospital, I had felt nothingness. My heartbeat was in control. The anxious feelings were gone, but for some reason I didn't like that I was feeling nothing inside, although I knew that I didn't ever want to feel an anxiety attack either.

Three days had passed since I had seen the outside world. The sun's rays were harsh and it warmed my cold body. I embraced the heat, as if it were the first time feeling any sort of warmth. Whilst looking to the sky, my eyes paining due to all the oversleeping, I promised to never take the sunlight for granted again. Although my mind was clear from any plaguing thoughts, there was a haze in my eyes that I couldn't shake off. I kept my breathing slow, calculating the surroundings outside of the hospital when the sliding door opened again, and as I turned, it was Zaynab. I was instantly disappointed. When I looked at her, I made no eye contact. I wanted a large rush of fury to overwhelm me, but I couldn't get myself to feel angry. My body was too numb. She merely stayed a floating figure in my gaze. I wanted to summon up any feelings of anger towards her, but again I felt nothing. I so badly wanted to hate her, but I just couldn't feel it. The one person in the world that was supposed to have my back, betrayed me.

Whilst standing outside, apart from each other, waiting for the *Rikki* cab to arrive, she tried speaking to me a few times. Her words were useless – in fact it was just unidentifiable mumbles. Whenever she tried to reach out to get my attention or walk towards me, I would turn around and walk away from her, proceeding to stand somewhere else. She was like Pacmac zigzagging all around me, trying to corner me. On her last attempt at trying to talk to me, the yellow *Rikkis* cab had rolled into the driveway and I could finally go home.

Zaynab went to sit in the front passenger's seat of the cab, exchanging pleasantries with the driver, whilst I crawled in the cab to lie on the backseat. My heavy eyes stared out the window above the boot, giving me an upside-down view of the hospital, and, as we drove away, I watched Oranjezicht stay behind. I enjoyed seeing the scenery change from green, leafy and

posh to the dullness of Woodstock. I wanted to just lie on that backseat forever, with the *Rikkis* cab driver transporting all over Cape Town, but I that fantasy would obviously never become true.

The cab came to a stop.

Zaynab was still chatting to the driver. Her voice was excruciating. All I needed was to get into my room, and block her out for good. With great force, I shoved my feet out of the cab and waited at the door for her to unlock.

The delirium comforted me, as I strolled into my home. The pills were not kicking out of my system. My house still looked exactly the same from those few days prior, which meant that Zaynab didn't do any cleaning. Suddenly, I was transported to the day my heart had been rattling out of control, but even that was an unfamiliar feeling. In that moment my heart was at ease. So, there I stood, in my lounge, staring at Zaynab who was standing in the kitchen. I was also preparing myself to co-exist with the enemy. The outlines of her lips were puckered and round, as if she was ready to speak, yet it took a while for the words to leave her mouth. Our stare down continued for a little too long.

"I do not agree with... but if you are... *like that*, and Riyaaaz is... more than just a *friend*, then I... I accept you for who you are," Zaynab spoke with many pauses, clearly thinking hard about what she wanted to say. Her words sounded like severe calamities that she was unsuccessfully trying to overcome. She always knew what to say, so her lack of confidence in her speech surprised me. The silence between us grew thicker. She was expecting an answer, but I didn't say anything. I was taught by her that it's disrespectful not to answer when adults address me, but my respect for the woman I once called mother was gone.

"Are you not going to answer?" she finally blurted out and I then began to stare through her.

"Look at me when I speak to you!" she raised her voice at me, and I hopped a little to the foreignness of her aggressively cutting tone. For the first time in days I looked at her in her face. There was no *nur* emanating from her. Zaynab was always glowing. Her skin would often glisten like melted margarine, yet her face was unrecognisable! I was surprised to see dark bags under her eyelids. Her hair was messy, tied in a *bolla* and evidently oily. There were cracks on her always perfect lips.

Who is this woman?

I was shocked to see her in that state. I couldn't understand why she looked that way, my mother was always meticulous and close to perfect. The woman that was standing before me looked unhinged and had so many apologies in her eyes.

“Muhammad, you would have done the exact same thing; you cannot behave this way. I am your mother,” her tone whipped to being more pointed and aggressive. Still, I did not answer. Zaynab pulled the door of the fridge wildly, bent over in a frantic search of something and turned back to me to drop down a packet of chicken breasts on the counter. She seemed un-lady like. Her motions were filled with aggression and she lacked the decorum that I had always admired.

“You want chicken curry? I'll make you your favourite!” she yelled at me. I didn't ever think that her demure voice could reach such a high pitch. She shuffled around the small kitchen, opening and throwing the cupboard doors in search of the various ingredients to make the curry. When she found what she needed, she tossed the onions and potatoes onto the counter with one onion falling off and rolling to my feet. I didn't even pick it up. Instead I watched the spectacle. From the draw, she grabbed her large knife and began dicing the onions. She moved over to the stove and I watched her struggle with our gas.

Click. Click. Click.

Perhaps she forgot to refill the tank whilst I was away.

Aah! I didn't even feel sorry for her, because the thought of her forcing in the Psychiatric Ward popped into my head again.

The onions hissed, at it landed into the pot. She finally got the stove to work. I watched her grate a tomato, slice strips of green pepper and dice up a chili – those were the beginning steps that made the perfect pot of chicken curry. For my whole childhood, I memorised her recipe; my eyes stealing every intricate step that she followed, but in that moment, there was no connection between her and I. I didn't want her food nor anything from her.

“Well it's fine if you want to be this way. Every day, I will make a *du'ah* for you. I will ask Allah to forgive you and make your life easier,” she reckoned to me. I didn't need her prayers, nor did I need her to speak to Allah on my behalf! My legs were getting tired and I

didn't want to look at her any longer. The problem I then faced was that I had to walk past her, through the kitchen to get to my room.

"I love you, my son!" she wailed out, as I tried to squeeze past her. She dropped to the floor, clutching too tightly to my legs. She seemed erratic. All over the place. Unhinged! I tried to wiggle my legs from her, but her grip was too strong. All I wanted was to get to my room and put my head down on my bed. My body was too weak. I couldn't break free from her.

"Just fucking leave me alone! I hate you!" I couldn't believe that those words left my mouth and shot towards her.

She finally let go of me and I ran towards my room, shutting my door and shutting her out.

The following day, I met up with Riyaaaz for lunch at a popular food chain restaurant in Town, CBD. I didn't want to see him, but after what occurred between Zaynab and I the night prior, I needed to get out of the house. There was no way I was going to revise properly for the last of my final exams whilst having that whole scene with Zaynab play through my head.

When I arrived in Town, and after receiving a few directions from strangers roaming around, I finally ended up in Strand Street. Even though the restaurant was well-known in Cape Town, especially for their Monday two-for-one burger specials, I had only been to the one in Observatory and not to the franchise in Town. It was also the first time I was going to see Riyaaaz after catching him in action with Keenan. Previously, I would feel jittery before seeing him, as if my insides were shaking and tossing around like my clothes being spun in Zaynab's old LG washing machine. Yet those butterfly-like tingles weren't there. I didn't have the feelings of hurt either and the whole Riyaaaz and Keenan incident was an afterthought. I wanted to still be enraged at him, but the hateful passion I possessed towards Riyaaaz disappeared after I had been locked up. My body still felt hollow. I was scared of the newfound feeling of nothingness towards life, and I started to not recognise myself. The haziness in my head was there permanently due to the medication. It was still difficult to walk yet I kept forcing my heavy feet to move around town. Finally, I reached the destination and I strolled up the long flight of stairs that lead to the restaurant. When I reached the top, I was greeted by an usher holding an oversized black leathered menu. He called me closer with a wave of his hand and an inviting grin.

“Are you here for the two-for-one burger special?” asked the usher. I couldn’t tell if he was sarcastic or if it was a formality for him to ask, so I just walked past him without answering in search of Riyaaaz. My eyes peered through the busy restaurant. There was loud chattering everywhere. The many waitrons were bolting up and down, taking orders and carrying bulky platters of food and drinks. I figured that Riyaaaz must have been sitting outside on the balcony, because I hadn’t seen him inside which prompted me to take a deep breath before walking towards the outside section. All I wanted was for our meeting to be over and done with. I was grateful towards him for sending me the flowers, but I knew that it was best to get closure from him and move on with my life. I wasn’t going to be with someone that cheated and cared nothing for me. Despite not having any feelings inside, I still had my self-respect.

As I placed my head against the glass door, with my hands cupped over my eyes to help me peer around more easily, Riyaaaz called my name after he spotted me. He jumped up and ran to the sliding door. I didn’t need him to help me open any doors, but I accepted the gesture. We were standing face-to-face with another bouquet of sunflowers creating a small distance between us. He just had to draw more attention to the two of us. I bit on my teeth and flashed a forced smile before he gave me a one-sided hug. There was familiarity in the way his body fit around me. I imbibed the sweet scents that bounced off his body. All of a sudden, my body let me know that I missed him. He then bent down to pick up a card and a gift bag. I was bombed with his love. I could see he was making an effort, so I reluctantly accepted his gestures.

“How are you feeling? I missed you,” he spoke calmly, as we both motioned to sit down. I didn’t respond. We then sat at the table diverting our gazes from each other, taking slurps from our glasses of complementary lemon and ice water. Between us, the silence grew louder. I studied his face again, as I always did and I found nothing special about him. In his puffy eyes I could sense his sorrow. A part of me knew that he must have been sorry for what he did, but I also couldn’t just forgive him. I was humiliated after the whole Keenan incident. A few gifts and soppy words wasn’t going to make me forget.

“I broke up things with Keenan... But he wasn’t the only guy I was also involved with,” Riyaaaz finally blurted out. Riyaaaz’s words hit me into a breathless state. I couldn’t believe that he was involved with other guys beside Keenan.

“They were mostly flings, and no, I didn’t have sex with any of them,” he continued and Hearing that confession oddly made me feel a lot better.

In that moment, the waitress walked to our table, as if she was timing us like a seagull about to charge at fish and chips parcel. I wanted to hear more of what he was going to say yet she wouldn't leave us. She kept showing us her teeth, pretending to grin, and acting as if she hadn't heard what Riyaaaz had said. The regular me would've been embarrassed, but I didn't care if she had heard. I was too fixated on what Riyaaaz was going to say next, but he didn't continue. Instead, his eyes shifted away from me toward her, and my gaze followed. She nervously asked if we wanted anything and he ordered two beef burgers. He didn't even ask me what I wanted – that disappointed me further. The waitress then mentioned that they had another special on their ribs, and he ordered that too.

As the waitress strutted away, Riyaaaz continued to speak, and once again I listened carefully, trying to puzzle together why he did what he did to me. He began listing the names of all the guys he was also involved with. I couldn't believe it. For the longest time I had been beating myself up for the whole situation between Irshaad and I, yet he was involved with so many other guys – over fifty to be exact! There I sat, emotionless. Speechless. Bewildered that anyone could do so many repeated bad acts to a person they claimed that they loved. I wanted to express anger and frustration, but again I was still too numb on the inside.

I knew what I needed to do. It was time to confess and tell Riyaaaz the truth. Maybe I was just as bad as him because I had also been untruthful. It was time to tell Riyaaaz the truth about Irshaad, even though I didn't have the courage to. There I was sitting, a coward hiding in open daylight. I had the chance to hurt him. All I needed was to say the right words: *Riyaaaz, you know Irshaad – the guy you were once dated and were in love with? Well, he and I hung out a few times... in fact... we dated in December... whilst I was dating you. Or were we? Technically you and I weren't dating. I mean you didn't really give me a choice after all. You just announced that I was your boyfriend.... but, ja, that's beside the point... a few days ago Irshaad was in my bed... we did things... and I feel really bad for lying to you.*

But the words were choking me.

My mind was not in a healthy state. Surely, he would have understood if I told him. After all he'd been involved with so many other guys – over fifty to be exact! The silence between us regrew. I listened to the sounds of the busy Strand Street, hoping that the hooting cars and loud beeping of the robots would drown out my thoughts.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Between my calculated breathing and more gulps of lemon and ice water, I built up the courage to tell Riyaaaz the truth. And, just as I was about to reveal the truth, yet again the

waitress interrupted us. She was looming over our table, juggling bulky platters of food on her two open palms and strong arms. She placed the burgers and ribs on the table, and walked away, not overstaying her welcome that time.

I lifted the one plate of burger and chips off the platter, whereas Riyaaz started nibbling from the ribs. Each time I took a bite at the burger, I chewed away at my words too, swallowing the truth. The burger was in fact hard to swallow. All I had to do was tell him what happened. It was the perfect opportunity and then we could both part ways, yet my insides felt nothing for him. I had no remorse. Instead all that my lips could do was take more bites at the odd tasting food. I tried to speak, I really did, but my words kept mixing with the bites of food that I took. The burger meat tasted weird. I didn't get why everyone fussed over that particular restaurant and their burger specials. I dropped the burger to my plate, with the last bite of the burger forming into a ball of mush in my mouth. Riyaaz then suggested that I eat the ribs instead, which also had a funny taste. I continued to sit there hushed. Unable to express any emotion or words.

“Muhammad, say something, *kanallah*,” pleaded Riyaaz, but I continued to chow at the ribs. “I know you are hurt, but I promise those guys all meant nothing.”

I finished the ribs and relaxed my hands on the wooden table. Riyaaz wasn't eating either. He was busy looking through the tall glass doors. In my head, I kept practicing telling him the truth. Riyaaz turned his head and looked me straight in the eye. I couldn't decipher his look from his unreadable facial expression.

"How could you lie to me like that! You said that you loved me!" I yelled, realising that my deep voice could reverberate so loudly. The glass doors must have been thin, because everyone else at the restaurant went silent. There must have been a hundred eyeballs rolling over me. As soon as those people saw me looking back at them, they quickly looked away. I also don't know why I yelled like that, where those words had formed from or why I placed so much blame on him when I too had done the same. Yet, there was nothing that I could do. Those words were already spat out from my mouth, just as I had spat out the burger, previously. Riyaaz just sat there, embarrassed, looking downturned and away from me.

“How's the food? The pork ribs special is popular today!” reckoned the super annoying waitress who popped up at our table – again!

“Pork ribs?” I was confused.

Why would Riyaaz bring me to a restaurant where the food was not halaal.

My eyes pinballed around the restaurant in search of any *Tietie* with a scarf or any *Boeta* with a fez, but my people were not around us. The rattling inside of me made me feel as though my heart was going to detonate.

“Pork ribs?” I asked again, but as I turned to look up, the waitress had disappeared.

“*Maaf*, Muhammad. I thought you knew this place wasn’t *halaal*?” reckoned Riyaaaz. It then all made sense, I had never been to that particular franchise, because obviously Zaynab knew that their food was not *halaal* and that they served alcoholic beverages too.

“Why would you invite me...” but I couldn’t finish my words, because I thereafter sprung up and jolted to the toilet. My insides were not going to merely accept the non-*halaal* meat of a pig. Since childhood, I had been taught that pigs are dirty animals! There’s a reason why Allah deemed it *haram*. My stomach was bubbling. The vomit was preparing itself to exit my body. I needed to get to a toilet!

All the cubicles in the male’s toilet were occupied, so I ran out and sped towards the toilets reserved for those with disabilities. In a mechanical way, my body folded over the toilet pot and all the pork flushed out my mouth. The water in the toilet pot turned from being pristine and transparent to thick brown lumps of disgust. Seeing the undigested pork meat floating in the toilet pot forced me to vomit again.

There I sat, on the floor of the spacious toilet, with my stomach and throat paining. The smells of potent bleach invading my nostrils and the cold tiles comforting my body. I closed my eyes and tried to stop my tears leaving my lower eyelids. How could I have been so stupid? How could I let Riyaaaz continuously bamboozle me. I felt like a fool. My heart was disappointed.

At the sliding wooden door, I heard three slow knocks and I waited for two quick taps to follow. Because I didn’t lock the door and Riyaaaz walked in. He locked the door behind him and he came to sit next to me on the floor.

“I will never forget the night I first met you. You know, I wasn’t going to attend the party, but my cousin Laylah insisted that I had to go with her. I knew I was going to feel out of place, and, I was right. I didn’t feel welcome. That’s why I went to go sit in the corner of the yard. Then, you came. You were like this literal ball of light in the darkness...” Riyaaaz stopped speaking and his breathing became louder. I slid my hand over the cold tiles until my fingertips touched his. “Out of the blue you came to sit next to me, and there was something about your presence... I knew I wanted you in my life. So, *maaf* for everything I’ve done to you, Muhammad. Can you please give me *maaf*?”

I wish I could explain how it happened after that, or maybe I'm too embarrassed to remember, but the next moment Riyaaaz and I ended up having sex in that toilet. I went from one *haram* act to another. Not only is sex before marriage *haram*, I was also having sex with another young man – a double sin. To top that all off, my first time having sex was in a random toilet at a restaurant. I had always imagined it to be more memorable, I guess... another lie sold to me from the romantic films I watched with Zaynab. So, I buried that memory in a faraway place in my mind, along with so many other memories.

I ended up forgiving Riyaaaz too.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

The reality of the end of high school was finally sinking in. My school career was officially over! I couldn't believe it. There was no reason to be fearful of life. Most importantly, I was able to navigate being free from of any sort of pretending I had been accustomed to.

At school each day, I use to feel like I was an outsider that was gazing into the school from the dirty opaque windows, where no one heard me calling for help. Because I didn't fit in with the boys nor with the girls, nobody noticed me and it was for me easier for me to avoid everyone. At times I liked that feeling – being unknown. Watching. A voyeur observing everyone and not being a part of the school community, yet that was all over.

I was free from the anxious feelings. Free from the gossip, the whispers, and looks that made me feel unclean. Free from fantasising about the boys that would never want to be with me. The end of high school meant that I was free to figure out who I was without external pressures. Soon I was going to be attending the University of Cape Town. University seemed like a place where I could potentially be accepted. Life seemed as though it was finally going start. But that was only in two months ahead and until then, I had to find a way to spend my time.

So much had happened over those past two weeks, and after finally completing my final two examinations without any more disruptions from my complicated life, I was hoping that things would quiet down. That weekend, Riyaz managed to get an older man to organise and pay for a hotel room for him and two friends. The older man was a closeted, over fifty-year-old Muslim that worked for some rich law firm. How Riyaz met him, I still to this day don't know. Thinking back to that time, I was also so naïve to let Riyaz convince me that the older man was just his friend. Of course some sort of exchange had to happen between them. Why would anyone just randomly book a hotel room for three young men? But, as I said, I was naïve, and I only found out some of the truth later in life.

So, that Friday I had to meet Riyaz at the hotel on Greenmarket Square. Although I expected Riyaz to invite me to stay for the whole weekend, the plan was for me to sleep over for only that one night. I wish I never went, as I shouldn't have invited him back into my life. Despite him explaining the whole Keenan situation at that restaurant a few days prior, I knew that I couldn't trust him. Instead, I reluctantly forgave him. It was like I was bound and nailed deep into this ever moving seesaw with him. I couldn't escape him. I didn't ever think that I would be a cliché, bound to him just because I shared my body with him in a way that I had

never done with anyone else before, but I was. After he and I had sex, I felt automatically more intertwined with him. If I'm being truly honest as well, a part me agreed to meet up with him, because I wanted a do-over for my "first time", and what better way than to have proper sex than in a hotel room.

It was past 4 o' clock that Friday, as I trekked up the cobbled Shortmarket Street in search of Riyaaaz. Many tired souls edged their way past me, after a long week of working. Whilst I kept trekking higher up the road, I tried to spot Riyaaaz through the crowd of shuffling bodies.

Finally, I spotted him!

The closer I walked towards him, the clearer I could see the goofy smile that he always had on his face. Instantly, my heart opened up. On the corner ahead of me, Riyaaaz was busy talking to what I presumed was one of the friends he would share the hotel room with for that weekend. Timeously, he looked over his shoulder to try and spot me amongst the rushing bodies.

When he eventually did notice me walking up, he jumped up and down and waved at me, like an excited little child jumping up and down in *Sweets from Heaven*. From that moment after seeing me, Riyaaaz ignored his friend, who was still talking to him. He was fixating his eyes on me. When I got to them, Riyaaaz hugged me tightly, lifted me up and kissed me on the lips – all in public! It was so quick and before I could ask him to put me down, worried that people might be watching, my feet touched the floor.

"Aww, you guys are so cute!" Riyaaaz's friend shouted us. I looked down to the floor, hoping not to draw any more attention to myself and the situation, yet the people that were edging past us weren't even looking in our direction.

"My name is Eldorado-Emilio. It's nice to meet you!" the friend continued to shout. "I've heard a lot about you, Muhammad!" I look at him weirdly, as it wasn't necessary for him to shout like that.

I reached out my hand to greet, but he instead he also invaded my personal space to give me a hug that lasted a little too long. He also weirdly patted me twice on my back. Something in my core told me to be careful around him.

The two of them spoke loudly about how they couldn't believe that Riyaaaz had gotten the older man to pay for the hotel room. I proceeded to scan Eldorado-Emilio, trying to figure him out. His skin was dark like Cadbury chocolate, and clean too, which made his large pearl-like teeth stand out even more – a wicked yet charming smile that reminded me of the Green Goblin. The hair on his head was short and made mini waves on his scalp. He wore a faux diamond earring that hung on one of his sharp Mr Spock-like ears. The outfit he wore was misplaced: I didn't get why he wore formal pointy shoes, a checked suit-like tailored pants and a white shirt. What made him stand out more was that Riyaaaz and I were super casual as we were both wearing jeans and tank tops. Where he came from, or where he was going, I didn't know. It was so hard to figure him out. I could sense he had a sinister vibe to him but I was trying to take Dr Khan's advice by not to assuming the worst from people any longer. Finally, they stopped chatting and we walked towards the entrance of the hotel.

We entered at the sliding door of Greenmarket Place Hotel and already Riyaaaz was well-accustomed with the security at the front desk. He spoke and laughed loudly with the man, which irritated me. I didn't get why Riyaaaz was so overly friendly with everyone. He was always greedy to suck out the air out of the spaces that he occupied. Previously, I had liked his over-confidence, because it was what I thought I wanted for myself. Often times I would admire people that just said what they wanted, people who were able to connect to anyone, but I realised that that was never going to be me. The more I saw Riyaaaz act that way, I realised it wasn't what I actually aspired to be.

On the other hand, I noticed that Eldorado-Emilio was standing close to the lift. I walked up towards him, not wanting to listen to Riyaaaz's conversation. Eldorado-Emilio couldn't take his eyes off of me, and he scanned me with his nose in the air.

“You are much more handsome in person,” revealed Eldorado-Emilio to me.

“Is that a compliment or a diss?” I questioned him, but he laughed without giving me a response. I presumed that Riyaaaz had shown Eldorado-Emilio a picture of me or maybe he had stalked my profile on Facebook? I couldn't tell if he only meant well, or maybe it was a weird power move from his end? I flashed an awkward smile back to him, not understanding why anyone would make that kind of comment after meeting someone for the first time.

We were still standing in the lobby waiting for Riyaaaz, when we both diverted our gazes to the large orange and reddish painting of Nelson Mandela. We were both still unsure about

what to say. I thought about how it was the perfect opportunity to try one of Kaashief's conversational starters, but Eldorado-Emilio wasn't even worth it. I found it was best to just keep my cool and say nothing – I was too afraid that I was going to say the wrong thing. Finally, after what felt like a year of silence, Riyaaaz returned to us, and we got into the lift.

In the lift, Riyaaaz placed his arm around me and kissed me repeatedly on my cheeks and neck. He also kept bragging to Eldorado-Emilio how lucky he was to have me – the way he said was like he took ownership of me. Maybe I had been overthinking again in that moment. Was I not supposed to have reciprocated the feelings? Eldorado-Emilio did on my behalf, as he mentioned that Riyaaaz and I made a nice couple. In the large mirrors of the lift, I was watching Riyaaaz hold me and kiss me instead of being present in the moment and enjoying myself. My heart was still in a fragile state. I was about to spend time with someone that was supposed to be my significant other, in a hotel room, where we could be free to be ourselves. Free to have all the sex that we wanted. A space where we didn't have to worry about being caught, yet I just couldn't get myself to relax. So, as we exited the lift and walked towards to the hotel room, I tried my best to just enjoy life.

“Honey, I'm home!” screamed Riyaaaz throughout the small two-bedroomed hotel room. Dean, the other friend that was sharing the hotel room, popped his head out of the first room and he joined in on the chorus of laughter. I didn't get what was so funny. Dean was lanky, with a strong structured face, a goatee (which indicated that he was far more older than all of us), and long jet black hair that was busy straightening with a flat iron.

“Would you like me to do your hair next, Muhammad?” asked Dean. I looked at him bewildered, thinking about the weird way he introduced himself.

“Oh please, he doesn't need that,” interjected Riyaaaz, as he brushed his hands through my hair, with them laughing in the background. I was highly irked, and I knew that I didn't like his friends.

With his arm still around me, Riyaaaz motioned us both to sit down on one of the couches. He lifted his feet to the coffee-table, whilst Eldorado-Emilio was in the kitchenette, opening all the cupboard doors and banging it close again.

“How long have you two been dating?” quizzed Eldorado-Emilio, as he balanced three fragile champagne glasses over toward us.

“It’s been a few months,” declared Riyaaaz. Again he answered for me. Ventriloquism at its finest.

“That’s nice,” responded Eldorado-Emilio causally, as he was holding a champagne glass under the tap of the Namaqua box wine. He tried to hand me the glass and I shook my head profusely, with Riyaaaz telling him that I didn’t drink. Eldorado-Emilio was confused and his face changed to a look of disgust. To him I was some kind of alien.

“Why not? *Yoh*, I can’t believe Riyaaaz would date somebody so boring,” said Eldorado-Emilio, as if I wasn’t in the room and I didn’t have feelings. I knew that I didn’t like him and he finally gave me a solid reason. He was drinking cheap box wine whilst lounging in formal attire and pointy formal shoes, so why he was the last person to pass any sort of judgment to anyone. For the rest of the time they both ignored me, talking loudly and laughing as they spoke about other young gay boys. Their speech was making me crawl out of my skin. I didn’t get why I was there or why I was even still with Riyaaaz.

Just go home, I kept repeating to myself. Riyaaaz must have sensed my uneasiness, as he then suggested that he and I go for a walk. Eldorado-Emilio jumped up and invited himself to tag along. The invite was then also extended to Dean, but he declined and didn’t want to come of the room.

As Eldorado-Emilio was invading our walk, he made a suggestion that the three of us stroll down Long Street and go check out some bars and clubs. The busyness of the street heightened my anxiety. I kept thinking of ways on how to talk Riyaaaz out of the idea. I had never been in a bar nor a club before, and, if I was being honest with myself, I actually didn’t want to be seen in Long Street with Riyaaaz and Eldorado-Emilio. They were tipsy from the Namaqua box wine. They didn’t have any decorum, as they kept shouting loudly and laughing at silly nonsensical things. Yet, ironically, they seemed free.

I slowed my gate by a few steps. As they were walking ahead of me, there I was, back to my worrisome self. I realised it wasn’t a good idea to stop taking my medication. The jitters were kicking through my body. All I needed to do, as Dr Khan had said, was remove myself from any situation that made me uneasy. But, I couldn’t. I didn’t want to disappoint Riyaaaz.

Their nasally laughter sounded louder. I swear I heard one passer-by utter the word “*moffies*” at them, whilst shaking his head. I didn’t want to be associated with them. Certainly, I didn’t want strangers to label me as one of the loud “*moffies*” walking down the street. At last, they stopped outside a club called *Outer Space*, both intrigued at the noise of the music

and the hollering of the crowd. I myself was not impressed. The thought of drinking alcohol and becoming drunk made my insides churn.

The two of them walked past the burly bouncer, and when I followed, he all of a sudden wanted to see my I.D. book. He bellowed out loudly that I looked underage – which I was. He refused to let me in. I had only turned seventeen a month prior. It didn't occur to me that I looked that young. Riyaaaz and Eldorado-Emilio were on the inside of the alleyway that lead up to the club, whereas the bouncer loomed over me, blocking my entrance as he held the heavy gate in his humungous hand. Riyaaaz didn't even notice that I wasn't with him. Embarrassingly I had to call out to Riyaaaz. He walked back towards me confused. After many failed attempts at begging the bouncer to let me in, Riyaaaz called Eldorado-Emilio and the three of us walked back to the hotel. I could feel their disappointment hovering over me.

When we returned to the hotel room, the space was filled with an array of buzzing personalities.

“Who these are all these people?” I whispered over to Riyaaaz. Instead of answering, he gripped my hand tightly, and dragged me over to the master bedroom. Before we entered the room, he shouted across at the room, “Everyone, this is my boyfriend, Muhammad! Isn't he gorgeous?!” and the crowd of people cheered at us, except for Eldorado-Emilio. He wasn't impressed.

“Give him a kiss!” screamed someone from the kitchenette.

“*Ja*, kiss him!” another joined in.

Riyaaaz lifted up his one leg, gripped me tightly and leaned to the back. I traced my hands down his back, hugging him around his waist. Then, we kissed. The crowd cheered in elation.

“That was quite a show!” breathed the older man from the queen-sized bed, as he exhaled large clouds of smoke from his *okah*.

“*Asalaamualaykum*, Muhammad. I've heard so much about you from Riyaaaz, and, I must say, he's correct, you are very handsome, *Mashallah!*”

Instantly I felt uncomfortable. An older gay man was complimenting me whilst mentioning Allah.

“*Wa Alaykum Musalaam!* I thought you were only coming over tomorrow,” expressed Riyaaaz, as he flung to give the older man a kiss on his forehead. He was fair of complexion, with oily skin, a sharp pointed nose, thin brown hair, and black gums. I squirmed at the sight

of Riyaaaz's lips touching his oily skin. His shiny grey suit hug tightly on his fat arms and thick legs. Riyaaaz walked back to me and lead me to the cross-legged figure. The older man forcefully hugged me and placing a wet kiss on lips too. My hand did this weird reflex whereby I whipped the wetness of his kiss away.

“*Maaf*, uncle. Please excuse me, I need the toilet.”

I walked to the adjacent bathroom, and Riyaaaz followed me. In the small space, we both placed our hands on our mouths and giggled in silence.

“I can't believe you just said that,” he whispered in my ear.

“What. The. Fuck.” I mouth back at him, as we faced each other in the minute space. I wanted to vomit.

“I know things seem crazy, but just live a little,” he muttered and leaned in to kiss me. “I just want you to be happy and live your life.”

He pulled me closer again, bit my lip, and grabbed me. We continued to laugh. I wasn't sure when last time I was ever that happy or when was the last time I laughed, but I also felt tired. Deep down, I didn't want to be with Riyaaaz anymore... once again, I just didn't know how to say it.

By the end of the night, the hotel room was empty again. Dean and Eldorado-Emilio were sound asleep in the smaller bedroom, whereas, Riyaaaz and I lied vacuum packed into each other. He hugged me for a long time, laid his head on my shoulder, and continuously announced that he loved me. With our heads balancing on each other's shoulders, a deep part of me felt both guilty and confused. I knew that it was finally time for Riyaaaz and I to call it quits, but I also felt most loved by him in that moment.

Suddenly, there was a damp feeling on the bone of my shoulder. At first I thought it was sweet that Riyaaaz had started crying, but then I realised that tears were not that thick – his nose was bleeding.

He wiped himself, and the next moment we were kissing, profusely, until he stopped to reach over to the drawer bedside the bed. Out of nowhere he squirted lubricant on his hand and then.. we had sex.

After we left the room, we stood outside on the rectangle metal balcony. The guilt was insurmountable. I thought I would finally tip and fall off the balcony. It was time. I blurted it

all out. Finally, I said what I thought I could never expressed to Riyaaaz. My mouth couldn't hold the weight any longer, and my heart had to release.

“I cheated too... it was Irshaad,” I said it.

I regretted it.

He knew the worst part of me.

Uncontrollable tears then followed, whilst I watched him look at me differently.

I was hoping that things would change after us having sex for the first time, hoping that things would change after telling him the truth.

“I won't lie and say that I'm not hurt by you being involved with Irshaad, but I can't also be a hypocrite,” Riyaaaz responded, as we looked over the darkness of Green Market Square. “What I did to you doesn't compare. If there is one bit of advice I'd like to tell you is that there is a whole world out there, Muhammad. I know you get nervous and all in your head sometimes, but you need to try to live your life...” he took a long pause. “Muhammad, let's be honest with each other and rather break up. I will always love you but I'm not the guy for you.” And, just like that, he beat me to it. The guilt had left me and it was all over.

He stepped back into the hotel room to give me space to air out my thoughts. As I stood on the balcony, staring down at the darkness of Green Market Square, I realised that he was right. It was indeed time for Riyaaaz and I to go on our own ways.

The sliding door creaked again, with Riyaaaz returning to rectangle metal balcony. He interrupted me. I wanted to mourn him in peace. He stepped closer to me, awkwardly balancing to round glasses of water. My initial thought that he was kind, despite him breaking up with me. I drank the water instantly, stupidly thanking him for relieving me of my thirst.

A few hours later, I woke up to a security guard of the hotel tugging at my foot. I didn't wake up at first. The delirious feeling made me think that I was imagining myself. The security guard barked at me. As I lifted my heavy body, the security and a cleaning lady were talking to each other in hushed voices. I tried to decipher what they were saying, but I didn't even understand the disgust on their faces. The security began scolding again, yelling that it was

way past the check-out time. Still, I didn't understand. He made one last comment, before leaving the room.

The last thing I could remember was standing with Riyaaaz on the rectangle metal balcony, yet there I was lying, with my naked exposed.

Again, I was alone. My heart shattered in violation. Nobody in the hotel room to help me.

I never saw Riyaaaz again after that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

With Riyaaaz out of my life, the reality of the end of high school finally sunk. My school career was officially over! I couldn't believe it. There was no reason to be fearful of life. Most importantly, I was able to navigate being free from of any sort of pretending I had been accustomed to.

At school each day, I use to feel like I was an outsider that was gazing into the school from the dirty opaque windows, where no one heard me calling for help. Because I didn't fit in with the boys nor with the girls, nobody noticed me and it was for me easier for me to avoid everyone. At times I liked that feeling – being unknown. Watching. A voyeur observing everyone and not being a part of the school community, yet that was all over.

I was free from the anxious feelings. Free from the gossip, the whispers, and looks that made me feel unclean. Free from fantasising about the boys that would never want to be with me. The end of high school meant that I was free to figure out who I was without external pressures. Soon I was going to be attending the University of Cape Town. University seemed like a place where I could potentially be accepted. Life seemed as though it was finally going start. But that was only in two months ahead and until then, I had to find a way to spend my time.

Zaynab and I were still not speaking, and that brought a new kind of loneliness. There is an indescribable bond that I've had with her my entire life – she was after all the figure that carried me in her womb until I was ready to enter this world. Maybe I should've stayed in her womb and never been born. That way she could've had an easier life. I couldn't imagine Zaynab not having me in her life, therefore, it was weird that we were just living past each other. I missed her – but still I couldn't forgive her. She was the one that did everything to protect and nurture me that's why her betrayal hit the hardest.

"...you need to try to live your life," Riyaaaz's words were still fresh. I felt encouraged me to seek a new sense of freedom.

I wanted to forget about Riyaaaz, as he still consumed a lot of space in my mind, but I also knew that the end of us was inevitable. I was happy that there was concrete lifted off from me, and with a lot of convincing by Raziyah, a girl I went to school, that following day, I let go of the pain both Zaynab and Riyaaaz caused me and I ended up in drunk in Long Street.

Alcohol is *haram*. I had learnt that my entire life. Allah revealed in the Quran that *Shaytaan* desires us to be hostile and hateful through wine and gambling, as he wishes to prevent us from remembering Allah and prayer. The consumption of alcohol is a grave sin, as it intoxicates the mind. Muslims are not allowed to be in a state where they are not in control of their thoughts and bodies. If I'm completely honest, I didn't fear Allah during that part of my life – it shatters me to admit that. At that point, Islam was no longer a way of life for me, so drinking alcohol seemed probable. As I stepped farther away from Allah, the faint line between *haram* acts and me wanting to explore life began to disappear.

Although I was relieved in the moment, I also still felt embarrassed that I couldn't get myself to enter the club with Riyaz and Eldorado-Emilio. That night with Raziyah was my second chance. I needed to prove to myself that I could have fun and I knew that Raziyah would be the perfect person to go with.

Raziyah and I didn't interact much at school, because we were only in the same Visual Art and Drama classes. After the online *Ou Toilet* debacle, Raziyah reached out to me. It was clear to me that she needed a friend more than I needed her, because Raziyah had been outcasted at school for dating one of the Xhosa boys in our grade. Sandile, her boyfriend at the time, was emotionally manipulative. At school, Raziyah had to spend the entire school day with him: she could not sit next to her friends in class, she didn't mix with the Grade 12 group at interval, and she was forced to end all online contact with her friends.

When she explained everything to me, I knew that all she wanted was to be accepted by everyone, not to be ridiculed for the one she loved – I understood that perfectly. She never asked me about my sexuality and love life and I liked her even more. Although she must have had her suspicions about me after the *Ou Toilet* post. We were both outcasts, so our bond was solidified.

“It's always best to come to Long Street after 8pm. We'll hop around a few bars and clubs for now, until about 10pm. I placed us on the guestlist at *The Loop*,” reckoned the Long Street guru, Raziyah, as the cab escorted us from Woodstock to Long Street. Raziyah was also a club promoter, and with that title, she was secured free entry at clubs, personalised guest lists and bar tabs at whichever club she was promoting that night. On the more popular nights, Raziyah was required to sell tickets to the events at the clubs and she made a percentage on each ticket sale. As her friend, I was able to tag along, get free entry and also, according to her, get tipsy from the bar tabs.

As we walked in to a bar called *Ubuntu*, a burly bouncer greeted us at the door. The bar was completely dark, aside from the few lights shining down onto the bar counter.

“Okay, so this place is called *Ubuntu*. I like that name and I guess cause everyone is always together, having fun? I don’t know... It is not a club as you can see, it is a bar,” she continued to explain, as she pointed around the cramped space.

“Wait the bouncer didn’t ask for my I.D. book.” I pulled Raziyah’s hand, but she kept on walking, dragging me inside towards a wooden table inside of the bar. I didn’t want a repeat of being bounced like the previous night.

“Why are you worried? Nobody will ask you for your I.D. if you are with me. Besides, anything goes here at *Ubuntu*. Relax,” reassured Raziyah, whilst pausing in the middle of the empty bar to take a deep puff of her cigarette.

There wasn’t anything happening. *Ubuntu* was empty, as the sun had just set. It was past 8pm and there wasn’t much movement in the always busy Long Street.

“But you’ll like it here. Sandile and I...” she recalculated her words, before continuing, “Well, the alcohol is cheap here. Sit! Don’t look so awkward.”

We both sat down on the a wooden table with benches.

“This place is small it reminds me of a tuckshop,” I whispered even though there weren’t that many people around. There were a few people standing at the white counter, at the bar serving area.

Raziyah just laughed at my observation.

I looked around at the bar. The place was dark because there were no windows. On each of the four walls was the same menu that glowed in the dark. Raziyah revealed that *Ubuntu* was known for its cheap drinks, or shots as Raziyah rectified me, that had silly names like “Starry Night”, “Shit Destroyer”, “Mud Slide”. Raziyah stubbed out her cigarette, jumped up and guided me to the bar counter where she ordered four “Miss My Flight” shots. I didn’t know what a “Miss My Flight” was, but it sounded interesting. The bartender poured different elixirs into the four plastic miniature shot glasses. As the different contents poured out of the speed-pourer, I prepared myself for the unknown. I was finally going to taste what was always describe as highly forbidden.

There weren’t even nerves vibrating inside of me.

I was ready.

Full of bravado.

Excited to finally let go.

“Follow me,” declared Raziyah as she lifted one of the shot glasses. I did as I was told. “Toss it into your mouth and once you’re done drinking the shot, take your one finger and point to the sky... as if to say, ‘Hey, I’ve missed my flight!’” screamed Raziyah, raising her right index finger in the air. It was dumb, but I followed her, merry in laughter. Raziyah handed me another one of the plastic shot glasses, I nearly said *shukran*. Luckily I stopped myself.

When I lifted the plastic shot glass to my lips, I also nearly said *Bismillahi rahmaan niraheem*, an exclamation that we were ingrained to say before eating or drinking, but again, I cut the words off before it left my lips. Allah was still a part of me, despite me wanting to ignore his presence. I quickly diverted my thoughts, and threw the shot into my mouth.

The Miss My Flight surprisingly tasted good. I thought it would be bitter or that I’d have some pained reaction on my face like the actors on TV, but I didn’t. The shot flowed down and warmed my insides. Instantaneously, I wanted more. We ordered another round of four shots. With every toss of the different shot glasses, I let go of each of my worries. All I wanted was not to be so uptight and anxious towards life. I wanted to try to live my life like Riyaaz encouraged, and, with Raziyah by my side, I knew that I was on the right track.

Raziyah and I left *Ubuntu*, and we proceeded to walked down Long Street, or up the street – I couldn’t tell which direction we were going. My head was already beginning to spin, but I kept my cool. It was my first taste of alcohol. I wanted to front that I could handle everything.

“Muhammad, our next stop is the club *Outer Space*, but listen to me carefully... be vigilant of everyone and make sure that you can feel your phone at all times.”

“What do you mean feel my phone?” I was confused.

“Stand against the wall quickly,” demanded Raziyah. She was short yet bossy. I did as I was told even though it was hard to stand up.

“You are *lekker* drunk already *ne*,” Raziyah expressed and started to laugh. I joined in. My face was fuzzy and I couldn’t stop smiling.

“But it’s fine, I am drunk too! Those ‘Miss My Flight’ shots can do the trick,” continued Raziyah. “Okay, so as you are standing, can you feel your phone against your leg?” Raziyah continued with her explanation. My insides were smiling and my body slightly swayed back and forth, yet I was proud that I didn’t fall. I tapped my hand against my leg, “No man! Can you feel it in your pocket without touching your leg with your hand? Like do you feel it on you thigh?”

“Yes I do –“

“Good, so always make sure that you can feel your phone. The people at *Outer Space* can be *kak skelm*.”

We walked up to the main gate outside *Outer Space* at the semi-brightly lit side ally. Flashbacks of the previous time I had been there with Riyaz were popping in my head. The same burly bouncer was at the gate, clicking his flashlight on and off, as he checked the I.D. books of those that wanted to enter. I didn't want to get bounced again. As we walked closer to him, Raziyah dragged me and we walked right past him without any I.D. checking. He just nodded at Raziyah and he didn't even remember me from the weekend before.

We turned entered the club through a side wooden door. From the bottom, I heard the vibrations of base blasting. Raziyah was still holding my hand and pulling me along. We trekked up an unstable flight of stairs, gained our balance on a landing, and trekked up the next flight that connected to the top section of the club. As we moved upward, the staircase would creek and shake, and with each step that I took, the music boomed louder towards me. My heart continued to beat faster, becoming one with the sounds of the house music. I wasn't even nervous any longer, I felt invincible.

When we finally reached the top, walked straight through the crowd towards the bar counter, and Raziyah then ordered a jug. *Outer Space* was different to *Ubuntu*, because I felt as if I could breathe. The area was much bigger. There were giant fans in each corner of the club, and two big doors that were wide open that lead to the outside balcony – this also brought in a lot of ventilation.

“Where's your thirty-rand?” she asked politely. I handed Raziyah my money, she added her thirty-rand and gave it to the bartender. I watched the bartender carefully. He first threw out three out shots from a clear bottle into a silver tiny measuring cup before tossing into the jug. He then he added a few shots from a green bottle with the label ‘Apple Sours’. Finally he mixed everything together pouring in a lemonade fizzy drink. Off we walked to the balcony, and Raziyah and I sat down and looked over the balcony to watch Long Street become busier.

“Drink up, Muhammad! I'm so happy you are here with me!” said Raizyah. I just smiled widely back at her. “You know, I have always felt connected to you in class...” she took a slight pause, as she looked down at her hands whilst fiddling with her fingers. “I am sorry for what happened to you... at school... uhm, you know with the whole *Ou Toilet* thing. Just know... that.. if it is... well if you are...” she chose her words carefully. I could tell that she didn't want to offend me. “What I'm trying to say is that I will be your friend, no matter what... okay?”

I didn't answer Raziyah. I didn't feel the need to and I felt like I wasn't ready to share my secret. The awkwardness that followed between us soon passed, as we sipped from the jug. Within a few minutes, we both finished the jug and immediately I needed to pee. Raziyah escorted me to the boy's toilet. I entered the dark area, nearly stumbling into a stall. I didn't fear going to the toilet of an unknown space, as I always did. The alcohol was clearly a heavy confidence booster. After peeing, I noticed that Raziyah dancing in the middle of the dancefloor. I hadn't danced in front of a crowd before, but in that moment, and again it was perhaps all the alcohol, I didn't feel self-conscious.

"Nice moves, I didn't you could dance," said Raziyah, but I was surprised too. I didn't know that I could dance either. I just moved my body, as best I could to the beat of the house music. The music made me feel alive – that sounds so cliché as I think back to that night, but it was true. It was as if I had become one with the crowd. I didn't feel lost or alone anymore. As I moved, I noticed the beaming lights change from green to pink, and then to blue. The lights bounced onto the walls creating different geometric shapes, hypnotising me.

The crowd then became fuller in comparison to what it looked like when Raziyah and I first stepped into *Outer Space*. So many bodies were brushing against each other. I didn't mind it. Different people were pushing through the crowd. The floor was pounding. The music reverberating. My heart embraced all the different sounds. From time to time, the crowd would scream at their favourite songs. All the unknown faces were most comforting, even though I could only see the outlines of the faces. From the booth ahead of us, the deejay was standing tall with headphones balancing on his ear one ear. He was smiling at everyone with his tongue hanging out, glistening at us. It was as if he was proud to bring about togetherness.

Thereafter the crowd began to shout again, singing along to lyrics unknown to me. I liked that the speakers were blasting in my ears. The cool breeze of the fans and the fresh air of the open balcony doors was still around us, as the wooden floor continued to vibrate. It was as if the floor under the soles of my feet was moving with me. All my senses seemed heightened. I could feel the music bouncing off the floor up into the windows and it sounded as if it was going to shatter. But the windows must have been used to the sound because it wasn't breaking through the loud music. But as I said, that night I became one with the crowd, up to the point where certain dance moves were made in unison. Suddenly, all our arms then flung into the air. Raziyah began to catch my attention. Her eyes kept looking around the club, and I followed her gaze. She would pick someone out of the crowd and encourage me to imitate

their dance moves. Raziyah would scream loudly in laughter when I did, and thereafter she would imitate that person too.

“Hey, it’s almost ten o’ clock! Come!” said Raziyah as she rushed towards the stairs.

“And –”

“Just come! We’re going to be late! Remember I put our names down for the guest list at a different club called *The Side Show*.”

I enjoyed dancing at *Outer Space*, I didn’t want to leave.

Raziyah was rushing so fast down the two flights of stairs to make it in time for the guest list that by the she got closer to the last few steps, she mis-stepped and fell on her bum. I stopped and stood quietly on the landing, I didn’t know what to do. Raziyah began shrieking in laughter, and that was my cue to laugh loudly at her. I tip-toed down the shaky stairs. When I got closer to her, I carefully tried to pick her up.

Off we walked to catch a taxi to *The Side Show*.

We arrived at *The Side Show* just after 9pm. Long Street was bright, buzzing and full of life, but the section of Town that *The Side Show* was situated seemed dark and eerie. We hopped out of the cab that dropped us on the corner of Mechau Street. Mechau Street seemed more like an alleyway. I reminded Raziyah to be vigilant, as we walked up toward the venue. A line of people trailed alongside the outside wall of the club and Raziyah and I skipped ahead after she mumbled a few words into the ear of the burly bouncer. On the right side of the entrance was a small office in which she received her money for promoting the event and a card to retrieve a bottle of vodka from the bar. At the official entrance, the doorwoman stamped our left arms and we entered the club.

The Side Show was a humongous club – I hardly ever used that word, so that’s how big the space was. We stood at the entrance, with our eyes peering ahead at the gigantic open space. It was definitely not one of the crowded clubs from Long Street or Greenpoint that I was accustomed to. Straight ahead of us was the long outstretched bar, so we wiggled our way through the crowd and placed our arms on the white counter. Raziyah handed the barman the card, that she received from the event’s organiser, in exchange for a bottle of vodka that was in a silver ice bucket and surrounded by a few cans of Redbull.

We both grabbed one tall bar glass before jetting over to an empty table at the nearby corner lounge. We weren't even seated yet when Raziyah lifted the vodka bottle, took her left elbow and knocked the bottom of the bottle to apparently break the air seal inside of the bottle to make the alcohol taste better. I wasn't sure if her ritual was true. After that she threw two hefty uncalculated swigs of vodka into our cups. Whilst I in the meantime swiftly opened two cans of Redbull. We did that for three rounds until we ended up without any Redbull to chase the vodka. Raziyah refused to use from her money to buy more Redbull cans, and I didn't have any money on me, therefore we came up with the plan to take gulps of vodka until the bottle was finished.

The elixir was bitter and potent! We passed the bottle back and forth. After each gulp, the vodka didn't become easier to digest, it just became worse. I thought I would get used to it, but I didn't. Neither did I want to seem weak in front of Raziyah, so I kept on gulping. Surprisingly, I hid away the urge to vomit quite well. Once we finished the bottle, we both shuffled towards the main dancefloor.

At that time, the deejay was playing hip-hop music. Although the 90s bangers were a hit with the crowd, Raziyah was not impressed. Apparently there was another dancefloor above us, so I followed her to the upstairs section of the club. We trudged up each stairs, clinging to the railing. The vodka had already kicked into our systems and we tried best not to fall down.

In the upstairs section was indeed another open-spaced dancefloor.

The section seemed emptier than the main dancefloor. From above, I could feel the fans on full blast. Most clubs get stuffy and hot, but not at *The Side Show*, especially on an empty Thursday night. We decided to spend the rest of the night there in that section. The deejay was playing psy-trance and at that stage the vodka made my entire body lame. My chin was shivering and I couldn't see clearly. I had never been that drunk before. There was a slight buzz in my head and it felt like the floor beneath me was moving. I liked all of those feelings. I attempted to stomp to the psy-trance with the rest of the crowd many times, but I failed. Instead, I did long swooshes with my legs and arms, trying not to trip over my feet.

Before I knew it, we were outside of the club.

I couldn't tell how much time had passed when I Raziyah pushed me into the back of cab. I lied on the back seat, watching the street lights appear and disappear from my view in the back window.

I also don't even remember how I got the key in its designated hole nor how managed to walk through the front door. My feet were cemented to the floor. Each step that I took felt like weighted trek.

At some stage I reached the toilet. Carefully, I removed each item of clothing off my body until I swung around in my underwear. The toilet pot and I were ready to become acquainted again. Beside me the walls felt as if it were squeezing in on me. I outstretched my arms and forced my open hands on each side of the walls, slowly sliding down to the floor, trying not to fall forward. My body folded around the toilet pot. I liked the feeling of my overheated body imbibing the icy cold tiles.

A burning sensation erupted past my throat and out of my mouth. I splurged out bitter brownish water. The taste of the bile was so bitter that it made me vomit all from over again – a cycle I must have repeated five times. Each time my stomach clenched and then released the vomit, I begged my body not to emit any more vomit. The begging didn't help, as the vomiting turned into fountains of dirty tasting water exiting my mouth.

Into the shower I climbed. I turned the cold shower knob and a wave of water ignited shivers all over my body. After looking down, I noticed that I forgot to take off my underwear. For some reason I found the sight of myself standing under the streaming water in the shower with my underwear on so funny that I burst out with a guffaw. I felt uncomfortable whilst the cold water still trailed down my body. My underwear was gripping hard to my wet body, so with many slow tugs, I managed to get my underwear to roll down my legs. Everything I was doing seemed so difficult. For the first time ever, being drunk was not fun. I regretted gulping and drinking all of that vodka. Previously, cold showers helped me shake off my drunken state, but it wasn't working. I leaned forward and accepted my defeat.

The shower was wide open, and because I had forgotten to close the shower door, the water was running out onto the floor outside the shower, but to me the water felt like light trickles. I turned the cold knob to a tight close and tip-toed out, landing on a large puddle. Instead of wrapping the towel, that I took from the handle bar, around my body, I let the towel fall to the floor. My foot making circular motions to try to dry up the wet floor, but my efforts were once again futile.

It was time to exit the toilet.

I left behind watered footprints in the kitchen. I was too drunk to care. Zaynab was fast asleep in her room, tired from her long day of being at work and helping at the weekly *gadat*. Finally, I reached my bed, where I lied openly with my wet body.

My bed beneath my was soaking. I tossed my body over to the left, lied on my stomach, and then tossed over to the right to lied on my back. My pillow went from under my head to between my arms to under my legs. I was becoming restless and my stupor felt everlasting, yet I wasn't reaching the point of black out. The buzzing in my head didn't want to go away. As I was lying there, I felt as though I was falling when in actual fact I was just tossing around on my bed. I then clenched my arms around my head and curled my body into a foetal position.

Somehow I was back in the toilet repeating the whole cycle: vomit, cold shower, making the floor wet, out of the toilet, lie on bed – but still, the cold shower routine was not helping me sober up.

Then, I made the mistake of going back to the toilet, for the third time!

Back in the toilet, the vomiting started again. After each vomit, I managed to lift my body up to bend over the basin. With my body folded over the basin, I took huge gulps of water from the tap. At that point, my stomach was empty. There was nothing to release any longer. I begged my body to stop releasing the fluids, as I took another hop into the shower. It was my third attempt at washing away my drunkenness when I noticed my underwear balled up in the corner on the floor. I didn't remember how it got there, or how I had gotten that drunk, or what I was doing. The shower tiles seemed familiar, the toilet did too, but it was as if I was a stranger in my own house. When I turned the handle of the door, to retreat to my room, Zaynab was standing in the passage, waiting for me!

“Why are you making so much noise?!” she screeched at the top of her voice. Never mess with a woman that works twelve hour shifts and her sleep. I was in the doorframe, halfway in the toilet and out in the passageway. Naked! My body swaying side to side, trying not to laugh at her, but like an idiot, I let out a few giggles. I could feel my cheeks pressing up against my closed eyes. I could feel all my face muscles creating large smile. Not only was I caught, but I seemed smug too. I snapped away the funny feelings bubbling inside of me. I tried to push my eyes wide open. I tried to act serious in front of Zaynab. The openings of her eyes converted from two small slits to two wide open. The secret was out. I was not only a disappointment to her for being gay, but I also entered our house drunk.

Zaynab shot toward me and pushed me at my shoulder. Like Fat Joe, I did the ‘Lean Back’ dance move, and lifted my body back up.

“*Astaghfirullah! Ya Allah* forgive me! This boy is drunk!” Zaynab screeched again at me. Her continuously exclamations to Allah morphed into loud wailing. Inside, I wanted to crumbled into a ball and die. The events of the night flashed back. Out of all the actions I’ve done in my short life, I was not proud of making her cry like that. Her crying then stopped for a few second and I swear I could see her fingers slightly twist and curve into a ball to form a fist. With a full blast, she forced her fist onto my face. Because the floor was wet all over, I slipped to the back and landed on my bum. She started crying again and with every sob, she took deep gasps of air. I listened to her crying mix with stutters. From the wet floor of our toilet, I also peeped up at her, as my heart drowned in my chest. Instantly, I was transported to when I was a child; to a time when I didn’t ever want to disappoint her. I wanted to live up to the meaning of my name. I wanted to be the praiseworthy son.

“I’m sorry, Zaynab. I didn’t mean to do this... I can’t help myself anymore,” I wasn’t sure where it came from, but after all that time, I uttered the term that meant the most to me in the world. Just like that, she went from being the woman that I hated to being my Zaynab again, the only woman I loved in this world.

She raced to her room, to fetch a towel. When she returned, she placed the towel over me. Zaynab then helped me up from the floor and wrapped her arms around me. We were united again. Perhaps seeing me naked like that and wrapped in a towel reminded me of the time I was born, because the wailing stopped and her embrace became tighter.

“I wish I could explain to you everything I’ve been going through, but I don’t think I could express myself well enough. My life has been so difficult lately... all I want is to be happy again.”

Zaynab didn’t respond. She just held me tighter and tighter. For the first time in a such a long time I felt some sort of familiarity. With her arms wrapped around me, I knew that life was not that bad.

That night I vowed to never drink alcohol again...

EPILOGUE:

Today, I woke up just after 2 o' clock in the afternoon. I didn't think that it would be possible to sleep that long, but I did. My body felt as if it had been bulldozed, just as Raziyah had predicted. There was a clanging sound in my head and my mouth felt dry. I kept scraping my tongue along the walls of my mouth, but that wasn't helping in getting my mouth moist again. The bed sheets under my body were damp and my skin was sticky. As I lofted myself from my bed, my body felt heavy and I proceeded to shuffle to the toilet.

From the toilet mirror, I saw a hollow figure staring back at me. I looked older, tired... there was so much baggage under my eyes. The euphoric feelings of drinking alcohol and being free had exited my body whilst I was sleeping, along with all sweat that seeped out of my pores. With all the happy feelings out of me, I then felt a weird mixture of grogginess and regret.

A Muslim is not supposed to consume alcohol. Alcohol is haram, Muhammad! You know this.

I could hear the disappointment in my mind, as I continued to examine my face in the mirror. I regretted everything that I had done the previous night. Had I known that my actions were going to lead me into feeling like my body was demolished, I would not have made those choices. Aside from my head and body hurting, once again, I had disappointed Allah. Another sin had been added to my list of bad deeds, and my left shoulder slumped down a few centimetres in heaviness. I knew that I had to make things right with my creator and beg for forgiveness.

Allah had always been described as beneficent and merciful – I knew that off by heart as I had uttered “*Bismillahi rahmaan niraheem*” my whole life. The sound of Allah's other names, *Arahmaan and Araheem*, were embedded in my ears, so surely all I needed to do was perform *tauba*, swear to never drink alcohol and try to live a better life.

After I left the toilet, completing my *ghusl*, I returned to my room and motioned towards my cupboard. As I opened the two doors, out fell the bundle of the clothes that I had worn last night – I had no memory of how it got there. Instantly, my nostrils were invaded with the stench of the previous night. With a quick scan through my hanging clothes, my eyes hopped onto my *salaah thobe*. I picked it up from one of the hangers and pulled it over my body. With my arms wrapped over my chest, I sympathetically hugged myself, because my *salaah thobe* still

smelled the same as it did since I had last worn it. There I was, standing at the opening of my two-doored cupboard, looking down at the whiteness of the *salaah thobe* flowing over my body, remembering who I was.

“Muhammad, don’t ever forget that despite being South African... or Coloured... or a man... or any other label you identify with, you are... and will always be... a Muslim, first!” there were always long pauses when Zaynab made that particular statement. This morning, Zaynab’s words hit me the hardest. Maybe the smell of the *attar* on my *salaah thobe*, that was imported all the way from the holy city of Makkah, wafted the memory of Zaynab’s statement through my nostrils and back into my mind. There I stood, reminded that I was once a practicing Muslim, and on impulse my heart knew that I needed to go mosque to perform the act of *tauba*.

The minute I stepped outside of my home, the bright Cape Town sun shot directly to my face. The glares of the sun’s rays were there to announce that I shouldn’t have been that dramatic, and instead I should’ve stayed home to perform the act of *tauba* in my room. But I couldn’t stay at home. My feet were steering me towards the direction of the mosque!

The path to the mosque was so difficult to navigate that day, even though the route was already engraved under my feet. I struggled as I walked, in fact I trudged towards the mosque. But, despite the heaviness on my walking, my feet were still under a weird compulsion and they dragged me to mosque. I was still hungover with a piercing headache, a body that ached and a mouth as dry as death. Although by being in that state, I should not have been in any close proximity to the house of Allah, but all I needed to do was to tell Allah that I was sorry. I knew that Allah had always been and will always be omnipresent: inside of me, around me, watching over me; but I wanted to feel most closest to Allah when I begged for forgiveness. And, just in that moment, the sound of the *athaan* hovered above me.

The mosque is fairly empty, a few men are scattered around on the large carpet – each of them sitting in anticipation for Sheikh Khaleed to announce “*akimus salaah*”. An older *Boeta* starts reciting the *iqama*. After taking a few steps toward them, suddenly I feel each foot mount to the carpet. It is as if I am stuck and can’t allow myself to join the rest of the men to perform the *Asr salaah*.

“*Allahu Akbar*,” Sheikh Khaleed calls out, signalling that the *salaah* has officially begun. Still I find myself at the back of the mosque, unable to move. I stand there frozen, begging my limbs to lift up and allow me to go stand in front of Allah, but I can’t.

As a child, I was once unaware of how to truly perform my *salaah*, so I would merely imitate the actions of the other men: hands to the earlobes, arms wrapped above my navel, bend over and bow to Allah, stand up straight, drop the body into prostration – all actions completed with my lips moving along unintelligibly; but in that moment I couldn’t even pretend as I used to when I was younger.

The men just continue the *Asr salaah* whilst I continue to watch them; they are too focused on Allah to even realise that I was standing right at the back of the mosque. In this moment, I let go and I fall to the floor. Here I sit with my knees to my chest and my head resting forward to my knees, buried in shame.

“My boy... My boy ...” I am woken up by two heavy hands tugging at my shoulder. “You cannot sleep in the mosque. This is the house of Allah,” I hear a familiar voice whispering in a low tone. As I open my eyes and re-assess my surroundings, I became fearful to the sight of Sheikh Khaleed and his sprouting hoary beard looming over me. I look straight into the Sheikh’s face with my cheeks reddened and my heart pouncing with anxiety. There is a bright light that shines through the dusty windows of the mosque. Immediately, my eyes and head start to pain again. It is clear that I should not have gone to mosque with the biggest, in fact the only, hangover that I had ever had.

Sheikh Khaleed must have been embarrassed for my part too, because in that next moment, he kneels down and sits beside me.

At first, we both sit in silence, sitting faced towards the *qiblah*, looking ahead and not making any attempts to face each other.

“I haven’t seen you in a very long time, my boy... Is everything alright on your side?” enquires Sheikh Khaleed, breaking the awkwardness. He speaks a little louder, but still a bit softly, not wanting the other men in the mosque to hear. I, however, can’t respond. The words in my mouth are shackled. I sit here full of anger, regretting the many mistakes that I have made. My heart wants so badly to unlock my tongue so that I can explain to Sheikh Khaleed what had been happening in my life, but I know that isn’t a good idea. It was indeed after hearing his very sermon on homosexuality that I felt that I didn’t belong in Islam and that Allah potentially hated me and my actions. I obviously can’t tell Sheikh Khaleed the truth of why I

stopped going to mosque. If Sheikh Khaleed knew all the things that I have done, only Allah knows what he might have done to me in return.

“You know, my boy, Allah places so many tests upon us, and the fact that you are sitting here in mosque today, reaching out to Allah, shows how strong you are. *Insha'allah*, this difficulty will pass,” and just as I turn over to answer him, I see the tall figure walking away from me towards a bookshelf to fetch a Quran.

Sheikh Khaleed's words send my mind into a whirlpool. I didn't think that everything that I had experienced over those past few weeks were tests from Allah. Despite being hungover, and the sins I had committed, Allah had given me the internal *hidayat* to go to mosque that day to which Allah had also further sent Sheikh Khaleed to wake me up and to provide me with some sort of enlightenment.

Tears begin to curl and swell in my eyelids. All that I want is to be happy again and live a normal life. As I sit here thinking about my life, Sheikh Khaleed begins reciting the Quran. The echoing of his the voice is comforting and familiar, yet my heart and mind is torn. so I stood up and strolled towards the exit of the mosque.

Whilst strolling back home, I know now that I have many decisions to make. I don't know what was lying ahead or where my journey will take me. I don't know where things would lead with Riyaaz or if I'd develop a better understanding of my sexuality. All I know is that I have a clean slate. I realise that Allah is continuously testing me and will continue to test me. All the decisions I have made was all part of the cliched “learning from my mistakes”.

And for the first time in a very long time, I was content with my life.

GLOSSARY:

<i>du'ah</i>	Page 3	prayer of invocation.
<i>Allahoem maf tahlie abwaaba rahmatieka.</i>	Page 3	Oh God. Open the doors of your Mercy for me
<i>wudhu</i>	Page 3	ablution performed before prayers
<i>salaah</i>	Page 3	prayer
<i>Boeta</i>	Page 3	uncle; term of endearment and respectful title given to an older man
<i>Bismillahi rahmaan niraheem</i>	Page 3	in the name of Allah the most beneficent and most merciful
<i>Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam</i>	Page 4	may peace be upon him
<i>Masjid al-Haram</i>	Page 4	the great mosque
<i>Allahu Akbar</i>	Page 4	God is the greatest
<i>Nabi</i>	Page 5	prophet
<i>Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam</i>	Page 5	may peace be upon him
<i>Maghrieb</i>	Page 5	sunset prayer time
<i>Madrassa</i>	Page 5	school for Islamic and Quranic studies
<i>Ja</i>	Page 7	yes
<i>shukran</i>	Page 7	Thank you
<i>mos</i>	Page 7	after all
<i>saaliegh</i>	Page 8	righteous and religious
<i>Maaf</i>	Page 9	Sorry
<i>boytjie</i>	Page 9	Little boy
<i>Asalaamualaykum</i>	Page 9	Peace be upon you

<i>alhamdulillah</i>	Page 9	praise to God
<i>Ag</i>	Page 9	oh
<i>drukkie</i>	Page 9	small hug
<i>Sjoe</i>	Page 9	wow
<i>kanallah</i>	Page 9	please
<i>gatties</i>	Page 10	marbles
<i>braai</i>	Page 10	barbeque
<i>thikrullah</i>	Page 10	remembrance of Allah
<i>Yaumaul Jumu'ah salaah</i>	Page 10	the day of congregational prayers
<i>Awe</i>	Page 10	hello
<i>Ouens</i>	Page 10	guys
<i>braai buk</i>	Page 11	barbeque grill
<i>okah</i>	Page 12	water pipe
<i>bra</i>	Page 12	brother
<i>Kom, julle! Dit is nou karaoke tyd</i>	Page 14	Come, everyone! it is now time for karaoke
<i>boerewors</i>	Page 14	sausage
<i>haram</i>	Page 15	forbidden
<i>jintoe</i>	Page 15	Prostitute / promiscuous woman
<i>jas</i>	Page 15	promiscuous
<i>barakat</i>	Page 16	take-away food
<i>Rahmatulla Alay Hum</i>	Page 16	may God's mercy be upon them both
<i>insha'allah</i>	Page 16	God willing
<i>al kant ses</i>	Page 22	both sides of the game on six
<i>kak</i>	Page 22	shitty

<i>mu'athien</i>	Page 27	announcer
<i>athaan</i>	Page 27	call-to-prayer
<i>Fajr</i>	Page 27	dawn
<i>baliegh</i>	Page 27	reached the age of puberty
<i>Sheikh</i>	Page 27	a religious community leader
<i>Mualim</i>	Page 27	male teacher
<i>Jahanam</i>	Page 27	hell
<i>sujood</i>	Page 29	prostration during praying
<i>salaah thobe</i>	Page 29	attire for prayer
<i>qiblah</i>	Page 29	the direction of the Holy Kaaba in Makkah
<i>niyyah</i>	Page 29	intention
<i>miyang</i>	Page 31	incense
<i>Wa Alaykum Musalaam</i>	Page 32	peace be upon you too
<i>yus</i>	Page 33	Cape Town colloquialism for the plural of “you”
<i>kak dom</i>	Page 33	Very stupid
<i>my broe</i>	Page 34	my brother
<i>moffie</i>	Page 34	a derogatory term used to describe a gay or effeminate man.
<i>smaaks</i>	Page 34	likes
<i>gaatjies</i>	Page 35	conductors
<i>Dhur</i>	Page 36	afternoon
<i>Asr</i>	Page 36	midday
<i>janaza</i>	Page 40	funeral
<i>kafan</i>	Page 40	white cloth
<i>katel</i>	Page 40	bier
<i>salaatul janaza</i>	Page 40	prayer for the deceased
<i>Jannah</i>	Page 41	heaven
<i>Ai nee, man</i>	Page 43	Oh no, man

<i>tafel</i>	Page 45	table
<i>kruisbane</i>	Page 45	suspenders
<i>smaak</i>	Page 45	like
<i>Eid Mubarak</i>	Page 47	blessings for Eid
<i>bori</i>	Page 51	turmeric
<i>koljana</i>	Page 51	coriander powder
<i>jeera</i>	Page 51	cumin
<i>dhanya</i>	Page 51	coriander
<i>gaatjie</i>	Page 56	conductor
<i>kapping tol</i>	Page 60	spinning tops
<i>kapped</i>	Page 60	spun
<i>kap</i>	Page 60	spin it
<i>bas klappetjies</i>	Page 61	burst fire crackers
<i>bredies</i>	Page 61	stews
<i>my kind</i>	Page 61	my child
<i>tik</i>	Page 67	crystal meth
<i>ouma</i>	Page 67	grandmother
<i>dagga</i>	Page 67	marijuana
<i>ghusl janabat</i>	Page 70	the full-body cleansing ritual
<i>thikr</i>	Page 71	an evening of litany
<i>floppie</i>	Page 71	bucket hat
<i>wors</i>	Page 72	sausage
<i>Sheikh</i>	Page 76	a leader within the Muslim community
<i>khutbah</i>	Page 76	sermon
<i>Jumu'ah</i>	Page 76	congregational
<i>Allah Hum Maf Tah Lee Ab'waaba Rahmatik</i>	Page 77	oh god, open for me the gates of Your mercy
<i>sunnah</i>	Page 77	tradition of the Prophet Muhammad

<i>Nawaytu fardal wudhu'i lil laahi ta aalaa</i>	Page 77	I intend to perform the incumbent ablution for the sake of God
<i>Bismillahi rahmaan niraheem.</i>	Page 77	in the name of God the most beneficent and most merciful
<i>rootis</i>	Page 79	flat breads
<i>Astaghfirullah</i>	Page 79	God, forgive us
<i>Yaumul Qiyama</i>	Page 79	The Day of Judgement
<i>Alay Hissalaam</i>	Page 81	Peace Be Upon Him
<i>hadith</i>	Page 81	statements
<i>Tablighi Jamaat</i>	Page 82	Islamic missionaries
<i>Amala</i>	Page 83	Indian gooseberry
<i>hijab</i>	Page 83	scarf
<i>Hajj</i>	Page 86	Pilgrimage
<i>dom</i>	Page 90	dumb
<i>Ou</i>	Page 92	old
<i>paalie</i>	Page 96	principal
<i>boetie</i>	Page 102	little brother
<i>halal</i>	Page 104	Permissible [to eat] / the opposite of haram
<i>O liewe Jesus!</i>	Page 105	Oh dear Jesus
<i>Vader help ons!</i>	Page 105	Father help us
<i>Fokkit</i>	Page 105	Fuck it
<i>oulik</i>	Page 106	cute
<i>Ag, nee</i>	Page 108	Oh no
<i>bompies</i>	Page 113	freeze pops or ice pops
<i>Shaytaan</i>	Page 114	devil
<i>istinja</i>	Page 115	ablution of the private parts after using the toilet
<i>nur</i>	Page 119	light
<i>bolla</i>	Page 119	hair bun

<i>Tietie</i>	Page 125	Aunty
<i>Mashallah</i>	Page 132	God has willed this
<i>ne</i>	Page 139	eh
<i>kak skelm</i>	Page 140	very sly
<i>Ya Allah</i>	Page 141	Oh God
<i>Arahmaan</i>	Page 143	the most beneficent
<i>Araheem</i>	Page 143	the most merciful
<i>tauba</i>	Page 143	repentance
<i>attar</i>	Page 144	fragrant oil perfume
<i>akimus salaah</i>	Page 144	establish the prayer
<i>iqama</i>	Page 144	the second call-to-prayer
<i>hidayat</i>	Page 146	guidance