

CROSSING BORDERS: JOURNEYS WITH MY FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

This work of creative non-fiction encompasses episodes of travel motivated by the author's desire to expose her children to different cultures and philosophies as an antidote to her own experiences of growing up during apartheid. The journeys are undertaken over a period of 18 years, starting in 1993, just before the birth of a democratic South Africa. Crossing borders refers to both personal and physical expansion, juxtaposing the isolation of apartheid with the freedom to explore that which was foreign.

The main theme is that of leaving home to extend one's view of self in relation to the world, inculcating the possibility of a global community of mutual respect. Minor themes are identity and searching for roots and a sense of belonging; religious tolerance, equality, respect, climate change and children's rights are some of the issues grappled with in countries as diverse as Cuba, Greenland and Sweden.

Although each chapter focuses on a different country, themes of dispossession, discrimination, colonialism and struggle run throughout. The author uses travel as the vehicle to educate her children beyond the borders of a family and a country emerging from a repressive past, teaching them to challenge stereotypes and showing them that people are not that different on the other side of a man-made divide.

Underpinning this family memoir is the joy of travel and discovery of a wealth of culture, history and mythology through the children's eyes. The children's development is traced from infancy through adolescence to early adulthood and concludes with the hope that the foundation has been laid to make a constructive contribution to a more empathetic society.

“If we’re facing in the right direction, all we have to do is keep on walking. If it takes a year, or sixty years, or five lifetimes, as long as we’re heading towards light, that’s all that matters. We want to be facing in the direction of freedom, not going backwards, not going towards more darkness. So whatever each person’s evolution might be, where we are is where we have to start from.”

Joseph Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight*

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FOREWORD

October 2014 Sweden

Mariefred looked like it was preparing to hibernate when I walked around this morning. Ducks stood on the wooden pier with their beaks tucked under their wings and black skeletons of trees stood stark against the steely-grey sky. As I huddled deeper into the collar of my coat, buttoned up to the top, I wondered what it must be like in winter when it's dark for most of the day and the temperature drops way below zero. I'm like an African violet, I need the sun. Yet I find myself yearning to spend time in this place of equal rights, paternity leave and unisex toilets.

Yesterday, at the World's Children's Prize press conference in Stockholm, I introduced a Swedish friend, Marianne, to a fellow South African. She is a young, "white" musician. In fact, he's my polar opposite, since I'm old enough to be his mother and have no musical talent.

"Oh, he's nice, so warm and open," she gushed, "that's what I like about your people..." I stopped listening after she said "your people", struck by the realisation that she saw us only as South Africans. It didn't occur to her that we'd been separated because of the colour of our skin and branded different species.

When I heard that Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani girl who'd been shot while campaigning for the rights of girls to education, would be receiving an award, I was determined to attend. I grabbed the opportunity to extend my visit to work on this thesis. After two years, I needed to retreat, to focus on pulling together all the threads and write a framing chapter.

I was wrestling with the idea of a section on South Africa because we'd never been on a major local trip apart from visits to game reserves and flying around the country during the soccer World Cup in 2010.

“Why does there need to be a South African chapter at all?” my supervisor had asked. It was important for me to examine my ambivalent feelings about travelling around the country. Why, when South Africa was growing in stature as a tourist destination, had we not explored it as we'd done elsewhere? What was it like for Saarah and Rayhaan to travel in a new democracy, compared to my own experiences as a child?

“What about going on a little road trip by yourself?” he suggested. I mulled it over and all the old fears came flooding back. What if I were to stop in a small Karoo dorp and walk in to a hotel displaying the old South African flag behind the bar? What if everyone stopped eating and drinking to stare at this “coloured person” who dared to set foot in their establishment? Would I still feel the need to behave in a certain way, to be representative of that diverse collection of people who didn't fit neatly into a box labelled “black” or “white”? So, instead, in this twentieth year of our democracy, I travelled more than 10 000 kilometres to find a place where I could feel comfortable and equal ... to write a South African chapter.

As I walked through the pine forests surrounding Gripsholm Castle, where the ceremony would be held, I was reminded of my childhood vacations. Growing up in South Africa in the 1960s and 70s meant there were few places we could go on holiday. Steenbras Dam, the main reservoir for Cape Town, in the Hottentots Holland Mountains above Gordon's Bay, was one place we were allowed. Every year, at Easter or during the September school holidays, we'd drive over Sir Lowry's Pass and descend into Grabouw. When I saw the dam with hectares of

pine forests on either side of the national road, I knew school was over. My brothers and I would jostle each other in the back seat trying to be the first to catch a glimpse of water cascading down the 21-metre high dam wall.

My father bought a permit from the council well in advance because the few thatched-roofed rondavels reserved for “coloureds” got booked up quickly. We’d go for walks in the shade of towering trees on ground fragrant with pine-needles and see how many cones we could collect to burn in the fire for the braai. There was a small patch of grass where we played cricket and rugby, and a shallow paddling pool in teasing distance from the big pool, reserved for “whites”. There were many signs warning us how to conduct ourselves – no loud music, appropriate swimming attire – and we children were told to be on our best behaviour because “what would the ‘white’ people think?”

Going on a road trip meant packing all our padkos, including the kitchen sink, because there were no restaurants we could stop at along the way. We’d pass kilometres of white beaches we weren’t allowed to set foot on. We could, however, pull off the road to picnic at the green concrete tables and benches. Out of the back of my father’s blue Valiant Regal would come the floral plastic tablecloth, gas stove, cooler boxes and pots of food that my mother had taped closed to prevent the gravy spilling. Curries or bredies would be heated and served on enamel plates. There’d be canned peaches and cream or wobbly jelly for dessert, followed by sweet tea and coffee. Then everything would go back into the boot and we’d proceed on our way. Clearly, it was too much effort to travel around South Africa. Perhaps that’s why we’ve since stuck to the “safety” of game reserves, to interact with overseas tourists or animals?

INTRODUCTION

– where we are is where we have to start from–

Saarah, aged five, is completing a travel log in the activity book that the steward handed to her when she boarded the plane. The page is divided into four and she's drawing pictures under the following headings: I've been there, I've done that, I'd like to go there, and I never want to go there. I lean over her brother, who's sleeping in the seat between us, to ask about her drawings. The Eiffel Tower is the place she's been to and the Statue of Liberty is the place she'd like to go to. Her "done that" is a picture of the Rotterdam hotel where we stayed a few nights ago.

"It was a five star," she announces excitedly, revealing an early penchant for luxury.

"What's that?" I ask pointing to the last picture, a determined scribble of red and green koki. Above it she has printed "EDY".

"It's In-di-a," she replies. "Don't you remember the dirty beach? I'm never going back there."

*

People we knew didn't travel overseas, except for those who didn't come back. Like Aunty Hilda, who was forced to live in the Netherlands with Bill, her Dutch husband, because they weren't allowed to live together in South Africa. Besides, Uncle Bill couldn't even go to a bar for a drink with his brothers-in-law. We knew her two blue-eyed, blonde daughters only from the pictures she sent every Christmas. And then there was the family from Princess Street who emigrated to Australia to give their children "a better life".

“They think the grass is greener on that side,” my grandmother said. “Let them go, they’ll see, Australians don’t like blacks either.” Later, my grandmother told us that someone had called the little girl a “nigger” at school. “She’s so unhappy but they don’t have money to come back home. Rather be kicked around in your own country than in someone else’s, I say.”

At university I was exposed to a far greater world than the government would’ve liked but I was almost 30 before I had the opportunity to leave the country. Eschewing a fancy wedding, Iqbal and I saved hard for the air tickets that we booked before we even shared our plans with our parents. I’d only been on a plane once, as a third-year occupational therapy student, to do an elective at King Edward Hospital in Durban. Iqbal had been to Paris the previous year to receive an award from Amnesty International for his work, as a medical doctor, with victims of torture. Backpacking on a shoestring budget, we beat a circular path from London to Paris, down through Switzerland to Italy, across to Greece and Turkey, up to Vienna and Amsterdam and back to London. In many of the places we stayed with South Africans or locals involved in the anti-apartheid movement.

It was 1990 and Mandela had been released, but freedom was still a dream. Europe was Utopia – free, exotic and equal. In London I listened, astonished, to black and white children sitting side by side on the bus, speaking with the same accents. After Christmas with South African friends, we set off for Paris, to stay with Ann and Edouard, both doctors who Iqbal had met the year before. Being communists, they didn’t celebrate Christmas but we exchanged gifts with their family and friends at a New Year’s Eve party. In Berne, a mattress on the floor of a friend’s apartment sufficed. Nico and his brother, both objectors, were involved in an anti-conscription campaign. We walked round the city with them, trying not to stare at addicts injecting themselves on a park bench, next to bins for the safe disposal of needles.

We were in Rome when the US congress declared war on Iraq and Kuwait. Bewildered, we floundered about trying to glean information from Italian newspapers and the television screen at the train station, wondering whether we should still take the ferry from Brindisi to Patras. We met two Australians and, after some discussion, decided, “If you go, we’ll go.”

Emboldened by having avoided being blown up by American fighter jets in the Adriatic Sea, we decided to carry on to Turkey. We spent a sleepless night on the train from Athens to Istanbul. A drunken brawl broke out in the passage between khaki-clad soldiers, who we presumed to be Turkish, but who might have been Greek. The compartment door wouldn’t stay shut so Iqbal and one of the Australians sat with their feet jammed against it for the entire journey, afraid the fight might spill into our berth. At the border crossing we were forced to get off the train with our backpacks, in the middle of a freezing January night, to have our passports checked. Only six tourists entered Turkey on that day. We got caught in the middle of an anti-US march after Friday prayers, and left with a carpet and tea glasses.

Wearing borrowed jackets, caps and gloves, we joined a peace protest in Vienna in -17°C, recovering with *apfelstrudel* and hot chocolate to cheer on the anti-apartheid protesters outside South Africa House in Trafalgar Square. There were struggles being fought all over the world.

Discovering how cheap it was to fly from London to New York, we decided to visit Caroline, a friend from university. She’d recently married Paul, an American, and moved to New York. We emerged from the United Nations building with many souvenirs of peace, equality and freedom. We wandered through Central Park, caught yellow taxi cabs and discovered the Metropolitan Museum of Art and 36 TV channels. By the time we went home we’d not only

forged deep friendships but had shaken the foundations of our apartheid education. I learned more about the world in two months than in twelve years at school.

*

Our family journeys started with Saarah at the end of 1993, when South Africa stood on the threshold of a new democracy. The apartheid regime hadn't only oppressed but also brainwashed many of the generation before us. It wasn't uncommon to hear sentiments such as, "the country will go to the dogs when the blacks take over" or "we'd rather live under a white government than a black one". We needed to show our children that people were not that different, despite diverse cultures and experiences. We wanted them to question their beliefs and ideas. It was important to us that they knew where we'd come from, both as a country and as a family. Like all new parents, we pledged to give them all we'd been denied. We'd both grown up with the mantra "no one can take your education away from you" and were determined to educate them beyond the borders of apartheid and South Africa. We knew from personal experience that travel was "fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness", as Mark Twain had put it.

The doomsayers tried to warn us that our travelling days were over ("it isn't easy travelling with small children" and "why would you waste all that money when they won't even remember where they've been?") but Saarah proved to be a dream traveller, adjusting like a chameleon to any environment. Just before her fourth birthday, we were blessed with the arrival of a baby boy. Saarah was sedate, but Rayhaan was born to kick a ball, climb burglar bars and do backflips off the couch. I spent the better part of the first three years of his life saying, "But Saarah didn't do that," until I finally accepted that they'd somehow turned out like chalk and cheese.

Rayhaan was a reluctant traveller. While Saarah took the change in surroundings in her stride, adjusting to time zones, foreign food and people, he needed schedules, normality and deadlines. He was 18 months old before we travelled with him, but then we covered five cities on two continents in one trip, followed soon after by a skiing holiday in Switzerland and a trip to Mauritius. We were probably to blame for his travel phobia.

It was around this time that Iqbal left medicine to pursue a career in business and had meetings in Europe that coincided with the 1998 soccer World Cup in France. Although we booked into a hotel in Paris, we spent most of our time with Ann and Edouard, who lived in a suburb 20 minutes outside the city. Their slightly overgrown garden held surprises: a shady nook revealed a wrought-iron table and chairs for lunch al fresco, a wooden bench invited us to pause for a moment and a mini-trampoline lured Rayhaan into trying it while wearing roller skates. A bicycle leaned against the shed, waiting to be taken down the untarred lane to the municipal swimming pool (heated even though it was summer) or to the local market to fill its basket with fresh produce. Saarah and I were happy to lie in the tall grass with Ann and Edouard's two young daughters while they were at work. Later, they joined us for meals of three or four courses, each one special, made with ingredients bought that day. They indulged in bread, didn't hold back on the cheese and cream, and washed it all down with red wine.

On our first visit to Paris they'd introduced Iqbal and me to the Impressionists at Musée D'Orsay. It was wonderful, in turn, to see Saarah stand entranced before Edgar Degas' paintings of ballet rehearsals and dancers backstage, working women frozen in snapshots. She chose her favourite prints to be framed and hung in her bedroom. At Notre Dame Cathedral she "lit a candle for Quasimodo, and made a wish," having recently discovered Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The digital clock on top of the Eiffel Tower was counting off the

days to the new millennium (540) and Saarah went around asking everyone, “*Qu’est-ce que tu fais?*” ... “What are you doing?”

I got caught up in the World Cup spirit watching Croatia and Netherlands in the third-place play-offs in the St Denis stadium but, when I heard France was through to the final, I offered my ticket to Edouard. Ann and I watched at home with the children after we waved goodbye to Iqbal and Edouard, decked out in the French *tricolor*. We could hear them shouting “*Allez les bleus*” as they walked to the metro. Paris erupted with joy and fireworks when France won. The Arc de Triomphe was lit up as the country danced along the Champs-Élysées to the accompaniment of car hooters. Edouard’s ticket was duly framed and placed on the mantelpiece. Soon we were packing to leave Paris. Rayhaan attached himself to our clothes, and after we’d zipped the bags he took up position on one of them, refusing to budge until we carried them to the car. He only relaxed when we were on our way to the airport and it occurred to me then that he might’ve been worried about being left behind.

The small airplane shuddered all the way to Rotterdam. Little wonder that Saarah vomited over the pristine interior of the sleek black German car sent to fetch us at the airport. The disapproving chauffeur in his dark suit and peaked hat stood holding the door, shaking his head, when we got out at the Steigenberger Hotel. Iqbal immediately went to a meeting and the children and I attempted a walk along the Scheveningen promenade overlooking the North Sea. The icy arctic wind blew us back inside where we stayed until dinner. Saarah was so impressed by the hotel, which resembled a giant sandcastle with turrets and flags flapping in the wind, that it later emerged as her travel “done that”.

At Madurodam, a miniature model of the Netherlands, the children were handed a “passport” that allowed them to visit the 12 provinces. We wandered through Lilliputian streets with old churches, railway stations, post offices, libraries and Houses of Parliament. In each province they learned about Dutch history and geography. There were flags and stickers to be collected, maps to follow, landmarks to be located and games to play.

After a brief stop in London, we flew across the Atlantic where Caroline and I helped Saarah to fulfil her “I’d like to go there” wish. Kitted out with “Statue of Liberty” sunglasses, she posed for a photograph against the Manhattan skyline, her right arm raised in the air, the left bent to cradle a book.

Caroline was keen to show us the realistic reconstruction of a rain forest, with animated models of animals amid lush foliage, in a local mall. Every few minutes an elephant trumpeted, a lion roared or a squawking bird flew low over our heads. At intervals thunder rolled, lights flashed and rain poured from the ceiling. Rayhaan stood on his chair, gaping at each new revelation. He stuffed spaghetti in his mouth with both hands, succeeding in getting most of the tomato sauce in his hair and on his face. He enjoyed the delights of Orlando while his more experienced sister danced along with Mickey and Minnie Mouse at the “Every Day’s a Holiday” show. She was old enough for “Splash Mountain” and “Journey to Atlantis”, both rides ensuring a thorough soaking, but no one was complaining in the Florida heat. While she and Iqbal stood in a queue for more than an hour to meet Ariel, the mermaid, Rayhaan amused himself by running through fountains that squirted up out of the ground at unpredictable intervals.

I encouraged my children to record their experiences in scrapbooks using their ticket stubs, boarding passes, postcards and even sweet papers. They drew pictures or left spaces to

paste photographs. At first they dictated captions to me but were soon old enough to add a sentence or two of their own. It was a quiet and creative activity that they both enjoyed and provided an excuse to relax in a café or hotel room after a day of sightseeing.

Over a period of 18 years we travelled as far as Cuba, Greenland, Sweden, India, Egypt and the USA. It wasn't about going to lie on a Caribbean beach, riding a camel at Giza or posing for a picture at the Taj Mahal. We did that, yes, but we tried as far as possible to learn from the local people, to see how they lived and what made them who they are ... to eat pad Thai, taste reindeer, dance around a maypole and make roti while squatting on the floor of a hut in an Indian village.

They might not remember cheering for France in the World Cup, having deep discussions about Cuban politics or standing in awe before Impressionist art, but on each trip they'd been stimulated by their interactions with, and exposure to, different people, places and cultures. They benefited from the security and pleasure of spending meaningful time together as a family. After every journey they seemed more mature and a little more clued up on the ways of the world.

Travel broke down the walls of the boxes the apartheid government had brainwashed us into believing we fitted into and gave them the opportunity to feel equal to everyone they met. Along the way I hope we nurtured good citizens for the new South Africa – independent, tolerant and compassionate, but above all, human beings. Travelling with two of them had its challenges but they were also our excuse to gaze childlike at the wonders the world had to show us, to slow down to integrate what we'd seen, and to connect as people, not races.

CHAPTER 1: SOUTH AFRICA

–all the verses of the national anthem–

1999-2011

Our first trip to the bush was with Edouard, Ann and their two young daughters when Saarah was six and Rayhaan two. Edouard was afraid of flying and would probably never be back, so we were determined to give him the full South African experience, including a safari. Shamwari Game Reserve had recently opened in the Eastern Cape with the Big Five and had reintroduced animals, once indigenous to the area, on the reclaimed farmland. With its luxurious English décor it was perhaps not typical, but had the advantage of being located in a malaria-free area and the journey along the Garden Route, with four children, could be undertaken at our leisure.

Because we were in a party of eight and had a 4x4 to ourselves, Rayhaan was allowed on the drive, even though he was under the age of six. He was transfixed from the time we left the lodge and spotted the long flowing line of a herd of elephants heading for a waterhole. Their soft gentle shuffle through the feathery grass seemed incongruous with their size. Young elephants walked beneath their mothers' bellies, protected by a circle of females leaning into each other. After quenching their thirst the pachyderms rolled around in the mud or squirted water over their heads. The ranger told us they are the only animals, other than humans, that celebrate birth and mourn death. I fell in love with the matriarchal elephant society, a community of supportive mothers, helping each other with feeding and caring for their young.

We followed them as they left the hole and peeled off into the bushes that our French visitors excitedly recognised as the *plumbago du cap* growing in their garden. Without any warning, we came face to face with a massive bull. Thinking that he'd been cornered, he put on a

fearsome display – raising his trunk, trumpeting loudly, flapping his ears, stamping the ground and threatening to charge. Our ranger jabbed the gear into reverse, and swinging his head back and forth to assess the danger, backed out as fast as he could. We alternated between staring at the advancing elephant and tearing our eyes away to focus on the rutted track we were trying to negotiate. Being on the wrong end of a charging elephant bull would render most speechless, but it had the opposite effect on Rayhaan who, until that moment, had only spoken in monosyllables or relied on his sister to interpret his needs. In the silence of safety, an excited little voice piped up, “Phants come us!”

He was five when he decided that he wanted to be a ranger and tried to convince us to leave him behind in the Kruger Park. We’d spent the day out on the plains following zebra and decided to skip the scheduled afternoon game drive. Rayhaan was disappointed and didn’t need a second invitation when the ranger offered to take him out on his own. A couple of hours later he returned triumphant.

“We saw a lioness, she was hunting,” he began, words tripping over each other as they tumbled out of his mouth, “and we tracked her until she caught her prey. It was a small buck. I was sitting in the front. I could see the whole thing.” The experience was more special for not having us along. “Why do I have to go to school? Everything I need to learn, I can learn here.”

*

The visit of Saarah’s Canadian exchange partner, Jessie, in 2009, coincided with that of Sara, who we’d met at the World’s Children’s Prize ceremony in Sweden the previous year.

“What do you want to see?” we asked the girls, en route to the Kruger.

“Everything,” was Jessie’s prompt reply. And, as if her fairy godmother was listening, her wish was granted.

We’d been hopping from camp to camp on a little plane, dropping off guests, when the pilot shouted, “Eyes left!” Rayhaan was the first to see the lions camouflaged by tall yellowing grass as we came in to land. They were lying on a ridge overlooking the runway as if gazing out over their hunting grounds.

“Three. No, four,” he shouted above the noise of the engine. “One’s a male.” The lion lay at attention like one of the bronze statues at Rhodes Memorial, his eyes slightly closed, his mane blowing back in the wind stirred up by the aircraft. “What if they think we’re prey?”

The young ranger assigned to us had been on the job for two weeks. He must’ve loved the opportunity to take three impressionable teenagers – a blonde, a brunette and a redhead – under his wing. Even Rayhaan didn’t seem to have any objection to being saddled with three sixteen-year-old “sisters”.

Next to oblige Jessie, was a female leopard that the tracker, perched on the front of the Land Rover, spotted from such a distance we thought he might be imagining it. We pulled over to watch and froze in our seats as she climbed out of the tree.

“Something’s distracting her,” whispered the ranger as she padded down the dry riverbed with nervous backward glances. When she turned to retrace her steps, we noticed the cub in the fork of the tree. With her teeth she grabbed it by the scruff of its neck, and slowly made her way down the trunk, out into the open. We’d only ever caught a glimpse of the notoriously shy leopard at night before it disappeared into the undergrowth. This time we were treated to an

uninterrupted view of a mother grooming and rough-and-tumbling with her cub for almost an hour. She was in no hurry, clearly satisfied with her earlier reconnaissance.

A host of other animals provided sideshows. Giraffe were easy to spot with their long necks and knobbly antennae on heads hovering over trees in the distance, as they chewed the choicest leaves with apparent nonchalance. We were dismissed with haughty looks from under impossibly long lashes, before they headed off across the plain with a slow-motion grace. One morning we came across a band of baboons passed out on the bridge over the crocodile-infested Sabie River. Asleep on their backs, limbs splayed out, you'd swear they were much higher on the food chain. We amused ourselves by imagining the shenanigans they might have been up to the night before – a drunken orgy after a marula berry feast got everyone's vote.

The girls were delighted by the exuberance of impalas that jumped around as if they had pogo-sticks fitted to their legs. Actually, I was reminded of teenagers. The ranger dubbed them the "fast food" of the bush because they are small and easy prey for predators.

"Look, the "M" for McDonalds," he teased, pointing to the white markings on their rumps (as if they'd sat down on a freshly painted toilet seat). At least I could now identify impala even if I still mixed up my kudu and my gemsbok.

Three days in the bush felt like a week as we focused on tracking, observing and photographing animals, adjusting to the rhythm of the lodge. At dinner, talk inevitably turned to animals and we swapped stories with other guests about what we'd seen that day and what we hoped to see the next. On camp chairs around a fire in the boma, under a sky studded with stars, civilisation could've been a million miles away. Even Saarah and Iqbal, confirmed city slickers, were prepared to rise before dawn for drives, pacified by the promise of an afternoon siesta.

When animals were thin on the ground we followed spoor, squinted at birds or examined foliage. On a coffee stop the ranger challenged the children to a “bokdrol-spoeg-kompetisie”, or, buck-dropping-spitting competition. He convinced his young charges there was no harm in putting “recycled grass” in their mouths to see who could project it furthest. Ironically, Jessie, who’d come with the most health precautions, won the impromptu contest. Before the girls arrived, I’d emailed their parents to inform them of our plans to take them to the Kruger, in a malaria area. Since July wasn’t a high-risk period, we decided against taking prophylactic medication, but used topical sprays as a precaution and covered up after sunset. Sara’s father, Björn, had promptly replied that he was happy to go along with whatever we were doing. Jessie, however, arrived in Africa with anti-malaria drugs and pointed out places in her upper arms and buttocks that had been punctured by needles to vaccinate her against a host of diseases. I decided to let her explain the “kompetisie” to her parents.

On our last day, the ranger stopped the Land Rover under a “friendship tree” and broke off a tiny twig for each one. The legend, that you’d always have a friend if you kept it in your pocket, appealed to the sentimentality of three teenage girls who’d soon be on opposite ends of the globe again.

In Nelspruit we hired a car and headed for the Cradle of Humankind, a World Heritage site 40 kilometres outside Johannesburg. We broke our journey by stopping at towns like White River and Pilgrim’s Rest, that date back to South Africa’s 1870s gold rush era, and Blyde River Canyon, the third largest in the world. The lookout point, God’s Window, offered panoramic views of the Lowveld, plummeting down almost a kilometre into forested ravines.

There are 12 major fossil sites at Sterkfontein, Swartkrans and Kromdraai caves, stretching across Gauteng, Limpopo and the North Western Provinces. The excavation, the longest-running in history, was initiated by Philip Tobias, a South African paleoanthropologist, who first visited the site in 1943. It has produced one of the largest collections of early humans ever discovered, including the famous Little Foot, which at between 4,1 and 3,3 million years old, is one of our oldest ancestors.

Our tour of the caves started in two-seater boats that transported us along a subterranean stream as we traced the history of humankind from the Stone Age and the taming of fire right through to the 21st century. The interactive museum on the site has enough bells and buttons to push and pull to satisfy the curiosity of teenagers and adults alike.

We continued our voyage of discovery at Wits University's Origins Centre, in Johannesburg, the only museum in the world dedicated to exploring and celebrating the history of modern humankind. An extensive collection of rock art showcases the heritage of the San, the aboriginal people of southern Africa, whose DNA contain the earliest genetic print, linking them to Homo sapiens who lived 160 000 years ago. The San had been hunter-gatherers for 40 000 years, before they split up into two groups – herders who became known as Khoi and hunters who continued to be called San. When the Dutch arrived they called the Khoi Hottentots, in imitation of the clicking language they spoke; the San were called *Bossiesmans* or Bushmen. The indigenous people integrated with the Dutch and English colonisers, and later with Malay slaves and Indian indentured labourers brought from Asia, to form a special blend of people of the Western Cape. These were my roots and I felt a stirring of pride, denied me by a history of apartheid. My mother didn't know the names of her grandparents; there were whispers of mixed marriages and things we weren't allowed to talk about when we were growing up. Learning

history at school had reinforced a sense of shame about being descended from “uneducated savages” who had to be “saved” by the coming of the “white man”. Now I had the opportunity to show off a part of my heritage to Saarah and Rayhaan.

We’d taken them to the Cederberg where guided walks reveal a gallery of painted records hidden amid the stark beauty of the mountains, wide open plains and rock formations sculpted by wind and water over millions of years. This area of the Western Cape has an abundant heritage of San paintings, executed from rich ochre, red, yellow, black and white pigments of the earth. Rock art in southern Africa spans tens of thousands of years and represents the continent’s history, opening a window to the spirituality, culture and identity of the indigenous people, a library of their traditions and rituals – trance dancing, hunting and daily life. Saarah and Rayhaan had gone on “expeditions” with rangers, fished in the river with makeshift rods, slept under the stars and experimented with rock painting, mixing colours obtained from the earth and binding them with egg and water. This seemed normal to them, but I was constantly amazed by the more inclusive history they were learning at school.

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Johannesburg’s mine dumps and sparse brown grass growing out of dusty red earth make me homesick for the coast’s green trees and rain. As the gateway to our neighbouring countries, it’s an Afrocentric city, with a diverse population navigating pavements packed with vendors selling clothing, fruit and vegetables, and traditional crafts from Zimbabwe, Mozambique or Kenya.

Under the bridge near the Chris Hani Hospital, the largest hospital in the southern hemisphere, rows of taxis lined up, touting for business below giant adverts for cellphone companies, doctors, dentists, food and drink. Among discarded supermarket trolleys, a broken

table propped on empty crates and sheltered by black plastic doubled as a cobbler and a barber. The stall was manned by someone hidden behind a pyramid of shoes that had seen better days. An electric hair cutter hung from the roof alongside a poster of popular hairstyles. Saarah pointed to African potato, beetroot and a variety of roots to cure all manner of ills, bestow good luck or cleanse the house, that sat in little piles on a billboard repurposed as a platform for traditional medicines and herbs. Dogs sniffed at old fridges, piles of rubbish and furniture losing its stuffing.

Sara and Jessie clicked their cameras at animals being skinned and chopped up to be braaied on open fires in oil drums cut in half lengthwise. The “butcher”, with naked torso, wore a sheet of white, bloodied plastic tied around his waist. He hacked at a hunk of unrecognisable meat, probably a sheep or goat, a sawn-off log his chopping block. Chickens were there in all stages of production – alive in cages, beheaded, immersed in hot water to be plucked and finally cooked in big metal pots on braziers, hot coals glowing through holes in the drums. Traders haggled and taxi-guards shouted to entice customers against a background of traditional kwaito music and the constant hooting of mini-bus taxis. African women, blankets wrapped around their bodies and balancing loads on their heads, conducted loud conversations with each other. When it came to sampling traditional food, we opted for the safety of Moyo’s restaurant where women came to our table with bowls and jugs of water to wash our hands and offered to decorate our faces with white dots snaking under and over our eyes or cheeks, while we waited for our meal.

Soweto, the large “black” township outside the city centre, was at the heart of political uprisings during the apartheid years, the most memorable of which was the 1976 student boycotts. Students had gathered along Vilakazi Street next to Orlando West High School, intending to march peacefully to Orlando Stadium, in protest against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in “black” schools, when police opened fire on them. Sam Nzima’s iconic

photograph of Mbusisa Makhubu carrying the lifeless body of Hector Pieteron, the first person to fall, became the symbol of the youth struggle in South Africa. Pieteron was one of three laureates honoured at the first World's Children's Prize ceremony in Sweden in 2000. Vilakazi Street gave birth to many famous South Africans, including Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, both Nobel Peace Prize winners and World's Children's Prize patrons. Their humble council houses stand opposite each other.

I was shocked to see the broken altar, the bullet holes in the ceiling and the statue of Christ without any hands at Regina Mundi, Soweto's largest Catholic Church. Police had followed the students who sought sanctuary here, shooting first teargas canisters and then live ammunition that ricocheted around the church. Had nothing been sacred? Archbishop Tutu presided over the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings held here after the end of apartheid. The church's "scars" bore silent testimony to the brutality while the human rights violations were recorded.

The sombre weather on the day we visited the Apartheid Museum, echoed in the ugly façade of the building that held the documentation of our dark past. Our tickets randomly classified us into racial groups, determining which entrance we were allowed to use. This formed a powerful bridge to the old days of separate development as we were forced to explain apartheid policies to Jessie and Sara before we passed through the unwelcoming turnstiles. They stared at us in shocked disbelief as they tried to digest what we were telling them. It sounded bizarre even to my ears.

In one room, rows and rows of nooses, 121 in total, pay homage to the political prisoners hanged by the apartheid government. I didn't feel like talking to anyone and toured at my own

pace, immersing myself in photographic exhibits, oral testimonies and video installations illustrating the atrocities of the system. I sat behind Saarah and Rayhaan in a dimly lit annexe as they watched a film clip. They were leaning into each other, as if for support, clearly affected by what they'd seen. As the video came to an end, the national anthem started up and I watched, humbled, as they sang all the verses of the national anthem, including those of the old South African anthem that I identified with the oppressive and brutal regime we'd lived through. By the time we emerged, the rain was pelting down and I was tempted to stand under the shower to be washed clean.

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The next time we were in Johannesburg was for the opening ceremony of the 2010 soccer World Cup. A tournament held in South Africa was a dream come true for Iqbal and Rayhaan and we had tickets for all the matches to be played in Cape Town, as well as the semi-finals and final. People have been appeased by sporting spectacles staged in amphitheatres since time immemorial and the soccer World Cup provided the perfect vehicle to mobilise millions of fans in parks and stadiums. About a billion more watched television or listened to radio commentary. Johannesburg's supersized malls – sleek chrome, glass and marble affairs – were packed and we stood in a queue for an hour outside a sports shop to have Rayhaan's name printed on the back of a Number 10 Argentinian shirt.

Bafana Bafana, the South African team, had only been included in the line-up as the host country, but played the Mexican side to a 1-1 draw in the opening match. Perhaps it was the way the crowd at Soccer City sang the national anthem, hands over hearts or folded together in prayer, the drone of the vuvuzelas or the waving flags that spurred them on. Up until then, if you

believed the media, the stadiums were never going to be ready in time, all our visitors would be robbed, raped or killed and our team was sure to cause national embarrassment. We watched the next two South African games at home, wearing green and yellow beanies and scarves, our attention focused on the television screen, ignoring telephones and visitors.

It has been quoted by so many as a favourite time in the country that it's almost clichéd, but the only other time I felt a similar national pride was on Election Day 1994. The flags fluttering from houses, car roofs, side-view mirrors and headrests, recalled a patriotism I'd only ever seen displayed by Americans who had flagpoles planted in their front yards and yellow ribbons tied around trees to welcome their soldiers home.

We hadn't booked for any matches in Port Elizabeth but, when Iqbal heard that Brazil would be playing the Netherlands there in a quarter final, he quickly made a plan. We flew there with two giant Dutch supporters, who took up half the space on the 12-seater plane. The owner of an out-of-town guesthouse we'd be staying at, met us at the airport and dropped us as close as she could to the stadium. We were immediately swallowed up by a sea of orange, green and gold. Iqbal blended in with his hooded top in the national colours of Brazil. Two men, dressed as giant orange balls, walked by, followed by another in an orange bathrobe and wig. Behind me drumbeats and Mexican waves ebbed and flowed around the stadium. I was tempted to break out into the samba along with the Brazilian fans in carnival dress.

After a hesitant start, the Netherlands showed the samba kings a few steps of their own. The crowd was stunned into silence. Iqbal stood there, gaping, reluctant to believe his team, the hosts of the next World Cup, were out of the tournament. At the stadium gates people milled about, grumbling, and tried to sell the tickets they'd bought for matches they'd presumed Brazil

would be playing later. That evening, while our Dutch co-travellers were getting drunk in a bar in town, we watched the controversial game between Uruguay and Ghana. Luis Suarez intercepted a goal-bound ball with his hand in the final moments of the match. Had it gone into the net, the Black Stars would've been the first African side to ever reach the semi-finals of a soccer World Cup. I hadn't realised until then how much I cared.

Back in Cape Town the next evening, Rayhaan was shattered when the Germans demolished the Argentinians (4-0) in the quarter final. Next to me, in his "Messi" T-shirt, Argentine cap and scarf, he sank deeper into his seat with every ball that thundered into the goals. By the time Spain and Netherlands played the final, I was firmly Spanish.

We'd collected an impressive array of soccer-themed paraphernalia, including glasses in the shape of 2010, the Brazilian flag, enormous clown-like red cat's-eyes, beaded wire frames and even ones with flashing lights. I donned a traditional red Zulu hat (my African take on the Spanish colours) and Saarah and Rayhaan had their faces painted in the car park. Iqbal steadfastly wore his Brazil top while we sat in the middle of a group of enthusiastic Madrileños and chanted: "*Yo soy español*" ... "I am Spanish." Spain became the first European team to win the World Cup on foreign soil, while the Netherlands collected seven yellow cards and a red in what was the third time they'd failed to win the final. The tournament came to a glorious end with dancing, music and fireworks and the surprise bonus appearance of Nelson Mandela wrapped up in furs against the cold Highveld weather. We sang and danced for a long time afterwards and posed for many photographs with the Spanish flag.

It had been all-consuming. I calculated that I'd watched 720 minutes of live soccer. Added to that were the games we watched on television, time spent travelling between stadiums

and cities, hours of post-mortems and recording results on the poster on the wall in Rayhaan's room. Surrounded by people of all nationalities, I had a glimpse of what we'd fought for, possibly for the first time since 1994. I wanted to commit every minute to memory. I wanted Saarah and Rayhaan to soak up the pride, hope, passion and loyalty into their pores, like sponges, and hold their heads high because they were South African and, beyond that, part of the African continent.

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"Let the beautiful ladies step forward," he said as we tiptoed into the living room behind Iqbal. The little flirtation broke the ice. It was Nelson Mandela we were being ushered in to see and Saarah and I were the beautiful ladies he was talking about.

We'd been looking forward to this meeting for a fortnight but were too nervous to jinx it, as Saarah put it, by telling anyone where we were going. We pretended a wedding was the main reason for flying to East London and then driving north along the N2 for three hours, through the Wild Coast, formerly the Transkei, an apartheid-era homeland and the Xhosa heartland. It rained steadily, the heavy grey skies contrasting sharply with bright green foliage and ochre-coloured earth. To our right was a rugged coastline pockmarked with secluded beaches, to the left forests, mountains and rivers. The national road cut straight through the CBD of small towns. In Butterworth, pedestrians, hawkers, obnoxious taxis and speeding traffic clashed in the chaotic main road. It was two days before Christmas and queues of people snaked around corners, waiting to withdraw hard-earned cash.

The number of potholes in the road seemed to be in direct proportion to how rural the surrounding countryside was. Cows grazed along the roadside while goats risked their lives, and

ours, by running across the tarmac with little regard for traffic. While our driver was forced to slow down to negotiate the obstacle course, Saarah and Rayhaan pointed to scatterings of thatched-roofed mud huts, sprinkled on the slopes of hills. Small cultivated patches of soil produced the vegetables to be cooked in black pots hung over open fires. Women, their faces and bodies decorated with white clay, collected water in pots from the river and carried them home, balanced on turbaned heads.

“People still practise witchcraft here,” our driver observed. “The villagers won’t send children to the river alone.”

I was surprised by how undeveloped the area was. In his autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela speaks fondly of his childhood in Qunu – swimming in the river, stick-fighting with his friends, tending sheep and drinking milk straight from cows’ udders. I was sure not much had changed since then. Qunu, where the family took refuge after Mandela’s father was deposed as chief, is right next door to his birthplace, Mvezo. Without any ceremony, just before Mthatha, we came upon the protective iron gates. If not for the strong contingent of policemen and the South African flag flapping on the pole, the fairly modest house, surrounded by a bushy garden, could belong to anybody. After some discussion we were allowed in and shown to a simply furnished sitting room. A full lion skin, head attached, lay on the floor. Mandela’s grandson, Mandla, came to greet us.

“So,” he said in a slow, measured voice, “my grandfather has just seen the doctor. I’ll have to check if he can receive visitors.”

“Aren’t you guys lucky?” whispered Iqbal as Mandla disappeared down the passage. He’d been Madiba’s doctor when he was released from prison and we’d been fortunate to meet

him before, but Madiba's failing health had been a media focus for many months and we were anxious to see how he was.

"What if Madiba isn't feeling well?" asked Saarah. "What if we've come all this way and have to leave again without seeing him?" We speculated in hushed tones while we waited.

"Maybe we'll only be able to say hello and goodbye," said Rayhaan.

"So, my grandfather is feeling well today," Mandla reported after a few minutes. "The doctor says it's all right for him to sit in the lounge."

The most famous grandpa in the world was sitting in an armchair at the window, a blanket covering his legs that rested on an ottoman. Was that really the Afrikaans newspaper, *Die Beeld*, I spied on his lap? He welcomed us with a three-part African handshake and a twitch of his nose. He indicated where we should sit, told Mandla to push the coffee table closer, asked who preferred Rooibos and ordered tea. He made us feel we were the most important people in the world.

We reminded him that he'd met Rayhaan at the unveiling of the statue in front of Victor Verster Prison, where he spent the last years of his incarceration. In the middle of the ceremony, the rain that had been threatening came pelting down, sending us scattering in different directions. Eleven-year-old Rayhaan had found himself on the stage and Madiba had invited him to sit beside him. Photographer Benny Gool had clicked away and a few days later a set of A5 black and white photographs of the encounter was delivered to our house. Madiba told Rayhaan to stand up so he could see how much he'd grown. Rayhaan, who was probably almost a metre taller, unfolded his long legs from the couch and grinned self-consciously while Madiba looked him up and down.

It seems old habits die hard: he told us that he'd been used to reading Afrikaans newspapers in prison. He was also still accustomed to only eating twice a day – brunch at 11h00 and supper at 16h00, so he didn't take tea with us. Later Graça Machel joined us. Madiba had become quite deaf and his hearing aid emitted a piercing ring. Irritated, he asked for it to be turned off. This meant he could no longer engage in the conversation with ease. From time to time his head dropped to his chest as he dozed. The hands resting in his lap were swollen and Graça told us he was no longer able to walk without assistance. I was sad to see him so old: he could no longer jump to his feet to do the jive or tower over everyone as he worked the room in one of his trademark shirts. I feared that he'd come to Qunu to die. When he accepted the award from the World's Children's Prize, he'd sent a message to the children of the world that he'd support them whether he was "alive or in the grave". We'd all hoped he would somehow defy his harsh treatment by the old South African government and be around for a long time yet to show us how to forgive, how to relate to all kinds of people and be masters of our fate.

"Thank you for bringing the lovely ladies," he said to Iqbal, at the end of the afternoon. He was still a charmer.

"That must be the best Christmas present anyone could wish for," I said, as we got into the car.

"No one's going to believe it when I tell them," said Saarah.

"Worth coming all the way, right?" asked Iqbal, not really needing an answer.

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The wedding was in Mvezo the following day, so we booked into the rather dingy Garden Court Hotel in Mthatha. I was puzzled by the lack of development in the area and the limited accommodation options, since Mthatha is a convenient place to break the journey between Durban and Cape Town. Apart from its natural beauty, the region is rich in the history of the apartheid struggle, having also produced Walter Sisulu, Thabo Mbeki, Steve Biko, Chris Hani and Oliver Tambo.

After a simple buffet dinner of roast chicken and vegetables, Rayhaan suggested that, since it was Friday evening, we see a movie but the only mall in town closed at 17h00. We were sitting in the deserted bar drinking coffee when two men, wearing headdresses of springbok skin and feathers, walked in looking for a Blackberry charger. We offered them one that they plugged in at reception while they ordered drinks and made small talk. We discovered they were part of the bride's advance party from Pietermaritzburg. The bar closed at 22h00 and the wedding invitation was for 09h00 the next day, so we turned in, anticipating an early start to negotiate the unfamiliar road.

The village is nearby as the crow flies, but it was still raining and the dirt road had been reduced to potholes filled with muddy water. As we traversed the slippery terrain, we imagined what a difficult journey it must've been for Madiba from herd-boy to president. Little wonder he advocated education as the single most powerful weapon to change the world. The site for the planned Nelson Mandela Science and Technology High School, sponsored by Siemens, had been marked out. It struck me as almost more important a landmark than the small open-air museum nearby.

We arrived at a deserted cluster of thatched-roof buildings around a brand new community centre. We wandered around the compound where we presumed the wedding would be taking place. A few rondavels with stable doors were strung out in a semi-circle and a number of white and brown cows were enclosed in a low-walled kraal. A fire was spluttering in a clearing where black three-legged pots stood next to a stack of wood protected from the rain with plastic. Mongrels, perhaps anticipating a feast, sniffed at the pots.

Eventually men started to arrive, some in Western clothing, others in traditional skins, feathers and beads, carrying knobkieries. The groom was barefoot. Blue and white beads covered his chest and adorned his head, upper arms, wrists and ankles. A terracotta-coloured cloth trimmed with black ribbon was wrapped around the lower half of his body and a full antelope skin was draped across his torso and over one shoulder. Even in his bare feet he towered above us all. Iqbal, Rayhaan and the Blackberry chiefs were invited to join the negotiations. The men stood in a circle looking serious while Saarah and I tried to figure out where we fitted in.

Three old men, wearing gumboots, blue overalls and battered felt hats, were sitting on the wall of the kraal. The groom pointed out the ox that had to be slaughtered. The animal put up a fight, running to and fro, followed by the other cows. In spite of having its hind legs tied with a thick rope, the beast seemed determined to try and outwit its potential butchers. More men climbed into the enclosure to assist. After a while, its front legs were also tied causing it to trip and land on its side. By this time there were probably about 12 to 15 men holding onto the ropes and tail. With a surprisingly small knife one of them started cutting behind the head, just below the horns. The beast kicked and bellowed, its large brown eyes looked both mournful and panicky.

I'd expected the process to be more humane and swift, like the ritual killing of a sheep or goat on the Muslim festival of Eid. It seemed sacrilegious that one of the men had a cellphone wedged between his shoulder and ear while he participated in the slaughter. Finally, the spinal cord was severed and the animal died. It didn't get up so that meant the wedding could go ahead. After that, killing goats seemed a simple matter. The men spent the rest of the morning skinning animals, cutting up meat and preparing the feast.

"The bride is on the way," someone shouted. Women ululated and ran to the entrance of the compound to welcome the entourage while children and dogs wove in and out of the group, trying to be part of the excitement. The bride's black doek matched the ribbons and buttons trimming her white skirt and shawl. A curtain of blue beads hung down from the doek to the tip of her nose. As in many other cultures, her face was covered. Her neck rose long and regal above a collar of beads and a pretty smile showed even white teeth. I noticed her French manicure and pedicure. She looked dainty, out of place in this arena of death. I wondered how prepared she was for village life.

The men who had cooked the meat shared the heart and gave the neck meat to the maidens who had followed the bride into one of the unfurnished dwellings. Saarah and I joined them on mats on the floor. There was no ceiling and we could see the sheaves of plaited grass and reeds through the rough wooden beams.

Outside, the first wife carrying her son on her back, was hailed with a "Halala!" Her position was secure but how did she feel about her husband taking another wife? She was dressed in a similar fashion to the bride except her clothes were the same terracotta as her husband's and she wore a green doek. She had flat leather sandals on her feet and beads around

her ankles. A row of painted white dots started under one eye, crossed over the bridge of her nose and continued above the other brow. She looked distant, irritated, as if she wished to be somewhere else.

“Are you sad?” someone asked.

“No, just tired,” she replied. “I have to feed my baby.” She sat down on a stool, unwrapped the shawl tied across her chest, swung the boy around and put him to her breast, taking refuge in an acceptable activity.

We also needed feeding. It was now past 13h00 and there wasn't any sign of a meal. Gifts, mostly blankets and aprons, were being exchanged in the middle of the compound. Names were read from a list to make sure no one was forgotten. As each gift was handed over, a cheer went up from the crowd that had made a circle around the bridal party seated on the grass matting on the ground. Beer flowed, men strutted around and women sang and danced. Saarah and I stood on the low kraal wall to see over the crowd but were told by one of the elders that it wasn't polite to do so. We found a plastic crate to sit on instead and shared a muffin and drank juice from enamel mugs while we looked over a vista of hills and valleys.

Three girls and two boys, aged from seven to about thirteen, were following Iqbal and Rayhaan as if they were a pair of pied pipers. When we eventually sat down to eat, we invited them to join our table. They ate as if it had been a long time since their last meal. They kept getting up to replenish their plates, piling them so high with meat and vegetables that the food spilled onto the table. They were fascinated by Rayhaan's ability to communicate in Xhosa.

“iBlackberry touch screen,” shouted the youngest, recognising my smartphone. I was pretty certain they lived in huts without running water or electricity. I was a little worried when

Iqbal invited them all to Cape Town for a few days and they promptly brought their father to make introductions and exchange phone numbers.

By the time we'd eaten it was 18h00 and we were anxious to leave before nightfall made our journey more difficult. We'd planned to spend two nights in Mthatha but couldn't face returning to the Holiday Inn so decided to take our chances in East London. "It's Christmas Eve and we don't have a place to stay," Saarah joked before we found a hotel looking out over the sandy beach that not so long ago, had been almost entirely reserved for whites.

CHAPTER 2: INDIA AND NEPAL

–leave everything familiar behind–

December 1995–January 1996 (Saarah 2 years 9 months)

Everybody thought we were mad to travel to India with a two-year-old. Especially Iqbal’s sister, Fatima, also a medical doctor.

“What if she gets sick?” she asked. “Malaria is a risk, so you’ll have to start prophylaxis. You *must* take Hepatitis A and Typhoid because you’re visiting small cities and, oh my word, you’re going to the village. You can pick up all sorts of diseases from contaminated food or water, never mind where you’ll be eating or staying.” I’d checked with the travel clinic. There were no compulsory vaccinations but a string of recommended ones.

“If I were you,” she continued, “I’d give Saarah *everything*.” She counted off shots for yellow fever, cholera, Hepatitis B and tetanus, on her fingers.

Every time Saarah heard the word India, she’d frown and say, “But no more injections, hey, Mommy?”

Iqbal’s great-grandfather had come to South Africa from India in the 19th century and there were still strong ties to the country. His father’s sister lived in Bombay and other family members were in outlying villages. My father-in-law had been planning a visit the year before, after an absence of 30 years, when he'd died of a heart attack.

“I should do this trip with my mother,” Iqbal said. “It’s something I can do for my dad. Besides, I was two years old when I was there. It will be good to check out my roots.”

We'd be abroad for two months and thought we had enough experience to cope with whatever the sub-continent had in store. We were slightly delusional, since our travels up to that point was to Mauritius, Europe and the USA. I was glad to have Helowise, a physiotherapist and wife of one of Iqbal's colleagues, along for moral support, even though we didn't know each other well and she was even less informed than I about the journey we were embarking on. After two miscarriages earlier that year, I was prepared to lose myself in a novel experience. I suspected she had her own reasons for wanting to be away from her husband for so long.

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Stepping off the plane into the heat and humidity of Bombay is like walking into a solid wall. The air is thick and sticky. Noise, people and pollution assault us. Long queues wait to pass through passport and customs control. All the brochures mentioning "land Bombay airport, take connecting flight to..." suddenly make a lot of sense. In spite of fifteen hours of travelling, I have a good mind to turn around and board another plane to Madras or Delhi, rather than join the teeming mass of people ahead of me.

A man is standing on the luggage carousel tossing suitcases onto a jumbled pile on the floor. There's a lot of yelling and gesturing as people clamour to find their belongings. Ma, the only one with any experience of India, says, "See, I told you, they don't care. It's terrible how they just throw the people's bags around. This is why I said buy strong bags." We are having difficulty finding our sturdy Delsey's that were heavy even before they were packed.

Aunty Ayesha and her daughter, Shireen, are waiting for us and take charge after greetings and introductions. Ayesha shrieks something in Hindi, infuriated by the disorder. Gold bangles jingle on her arms as she motions to the man-on-the-carousel to hurry up. His face falls

as he probably realises no one is going to grease his palm to hand over our bags. I steal a glance at the matriarch of the family, about who I've heard so much. She's wearing a gold stud in her nose and a blue sari showing more than a glimpse of fat rolls around the middle. Her hair, dyed black and uncovered, hangs loose around her shoulders. In contrast, my mother-in-law is covered from neck to ankle and has a scarf wound around her head.

“You must cover up, especially when we go to the village,” she warned before we left, worried that I wouldn't pack “suitable” clothing.

Soon we have our luggage and Ayesha leads us outside where she quickly commandeers two black and yellow taxis. There's more shouting as she coordinates drop-off points with the drivers. We divide the bags between the vehicles and squash into the back. Shireen and Ayesha take the front passenger seat in each car. Soon we are swallowed up by the traffic and, bewildered, I start to wonder if we've come to die on the streets of Bombay.

At the mercy of taxi-demons, we speed along in old cars with garishly decorated dashboards bearing allegiance to one or another god or guru, lucky charms dangling from rear-view mirrors. We dodge motorbikes carrying entire families (wearing sandals and no helmets). Men on bicycles balance stainless steel tiffins of food they're delivering from dutiful wives to husbands at work. Red double-decker buses, green and yellow tuk-tuks and streams of people add to the confusion. When we do stop at traffic lights, beggars are drawn to our car as if we're displaying a sign advertising we're tourists. Women holding babies compete for our attention with children in filthy, tattered clothes shaking cans. A snotty-nosed boy wearing a hooded top with a Japanese TV character on the front, taps on the car window. The upturned hand he extends is wrapped in a soiled bandage.

“Don’t open the window,” warns Ayesha. “If you are giving money to one, a whole gang will come.” The boy persists with his staccato tapping as if testing our limits. Helowise and I exchange looks. The same distress I’m feeling is reflected in her face.

“Oh my God,” she says, pointing to my side of the car. A man with a naked torso, arms amputated at the shoulders, is simply standing in the middle of the traffic. “How did he lose both arms? There’s no way that could’ve been an accident. Do you think it’s true what they say about professional beggars who’ve been modified?” she asks. We both work with people with disabilities so it’s not that we’re squeamish. On her side, a man with a distended belly covered with open sores oozing yellow pus is pressing up against the window.

Horns are honking. Traffic rules seem to have little impact. Cars try to squeeze through any gaps they can and we’re now in the middle of about six lanes although I can only see three white lines painted on the road. Pedestrians and animals dart in and out of the chaos. Many of the vehicles are battered or scraped and are missing side-view mirrors. I realise I’m holding my breath and sucking in my stomach, instinctively making myself as thin as I can because we are hemmed in on either side.

Black plastic shanties have been erected in higgledy-piggledy fashion on the side of the road. The shacks lean on each other precariously and a nudge in the right place will probably send them falling down like a stack of dominoes. Mongrels rummage through piles of rubbish. A woman squats on her haunches next to a deep open gutter, cooking and washing dishes. And the noise never lets up. It seems mandatory to lean constantly on your hooter.

We’re caught in a stalemate of traffic and nothing is moving. The taxi driver decides to make a U-turn and continues on the wrong side of the road. I shut my eyes, hold onto my child

and pray that the statue on the dashboard, of the Hindu god, Ganesh-the-remover-of-obstacles, has some magical power.

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“I don’t think you should be going to Calcutta,” said the local travel agent who was helping us to plan our trip around the sub-continent, after one look at our shell-shocked faces. “If you are not handling Bombay, that’s going to be very difficult for you.” A visit to Kashmir that we’d heard was beautiful, wasn’t possible either because of fighting in the area. So we planned a round trip that included the splendours of Rajasthan, sacred Varanasi and the balmy south. Since we’d be close to the Nepalese border, we decided to go to Kathmandu as well.

Bombay was all about shopping. In Fashion Street we could get Western-style clothing and fake brand names (“cheap, cheap”). In Chor Bazaar more traditional wares like bronze and antiques were on offer, and in Crawford Market, we could find anything from aromatic spices, fruit and vegetables to a selection of live animals. Ma proved to be adept at bargaining and her knowledge of the language made her our secret weapon. Helowise learned quickly but I wasn’t as good. Anyway, everything seemed so cheap when I did the conversion to rands, that I wondered if the clothes would disintegrate in the first wash.

Helowise may have been mastering her bargaining skills but she was causing quite a stir with her dress that barely reached her knees. Men leered and had pointed discussions. She seemed oblivious to their reaction, or maybe she was faking ignorance.

“Look how they’re talking about her,” complained Ma, flustered and uncomfortable. “Why’s she wearing such a short dress?”

“Leave her alone, Ma, it’s hot,” responded Iqbal, trying to keep the peace.

“But I told her she can’t go out like that. She doesn’t listen to me. This isn’t Cape Town.”

I think Helowise was mounting a passive rebellion. Earlier, she’d lost her temper with a beggar.

“Are they born like that, with one hand out for money?” she snarled. It couldn’t have been easy for her without any previous exposure to Indian culture. She was sharing a room with Ma who rose early to pray and went to bed even before Saarah. Though she didn’t mention anything, I guessed she was trying to work through her own problems.

One evening the driver took us along Marine Drive. “Look, Queen’s Necklace,” he indicated the double row of lights snaking along either side of the road. People were out for a stroll on the promenade or flocking to buy from the many stalls selling food and drink. Fishermen hauled in nets and children played at the water’s edge. He pulled over at Chowpatty Beach so we could mingle with local families and other tourists. A thin, dark man came up to us in the twilight and offered Iqbal a head massage. We left him to his fate on the sand and went off to sample bhel puri, a snack of rice and dhal with flat bread.

“Look, Mommy,” said Saarah, spotting a rudimentary Ferris wheel. “I want a ride.” I wasn’t so sure about the rickety contraption but when I saw it was hand-operated, I presumed it would be safe. I placed her in the seat, the operator cranked the handle and next minute she was flung up into the air, with him dangling from the opposite side to balance it.

“Hold on tight,” I shouted but I needn’t have worried as the wheel continued slowly, creaking as it brought her down safely.

A little while later, reeking of coconut oil, Iqbal pronounced he'd just had the best head massage of all time. However, while reading the newspaper at breakfast the next morning, he exclaimed, "You're not going to believe this." I peered over his shoulder to see what he was looking at. A black and white photograph of a beach strewn with rubbish took up half the page. Underneath was the following caption: "A thick carpet of garbage awaits those who dare to tread on Bombay's Chowpatty Beach."

"Oh, how disgusting," he said. "They mention human faeces too. I was lying on that sand."

"What can you do? Too many people in India," responded Ma, with a shrug of her shoulders and a lift of her eyebrows. We were to hear that refrain many times during the trip.

At the Khyber Restaurant we tried North Indian dishes, like Tandoori chicken spiced with garam masala, chillies, ginger and garlic, mixed with yoghurt. This was followed by traditional desserts of khulfi ice cream and gulab jamun, both achingly sweet. Later, we washed down our meal with falooda, a drink made with ice cream and rose syrup, at the "Badsha Cold Drink Depot and Annexe" standing beneath the "Do not Spit" sign.

We'd brought a pushchair for Saarah, to make it easier to move around when she got tired, but the roadside was bustling with activity accompanied by the chewing of paan and subsequent release of red juice into the street.

"I'm not putting my daughter so close to the ground," Iqbal shouted to me over his shoulder. "She's right in the firing line of spit and germs. In any case, there's no pavement to walk on, never mind push a stroller."

Vendors had set up shop on the sidewalk and so we took our chances in the road, walking shoulder to shoulder with locals who instinctively manoeuvred their way through the traffic. Millions of villagers were pouring into the city in search of better job opportunities. Every bit of space was at a premium. There were even people living on what was meant to be the island in the middle of the road and performing their ablutions in the gutter. I wondered how one lived here without feeling guilty all the time.

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Our ferry to the 7th-century cave temples on Elephanta Island left from the quay outside the Taj Palace Hotel, five-star luxury surrounded by beggars and people selling things we didn't need. We passed the Gateway of India, an arch built to commemorate the royal visit in 1911, and a motley collection of sailing vessels, oil tankers and modern liners. No sooner had we alighted from the ferry than people rushed to help. Ma, looking regal with her scarf wrapped around her head and shoulders, was carried off on a palanquin by four porters dressed in lungis, the local sarong-like wear. Saarah pursed her lips and shook her head at a man who offered to carry her up the 125 steps to the caves.

Even with my limited knowledge of Hindu mythology, I stood in awe of the elaborate wall panels that had been chiselled out of the rock by anonymous artists hoping to earn credit for future lifetimes. The statues of the god Shiva and his consort, Parvathi, looked down at us, the serenity of their facial expressions undiminished by the damage caused by Portuguese soldiers when they occupied the island in the 1800s. The central attraction was a work depicting the three faces of Shiva, Lord of the Universe, the destroyer, creator and reconciler. Placing my hands on the stone carvings I was moved by the mystery of continuity. How did some things persist in the

midst of a constantly changing world and others not? How could something built hundreds of years ago still affect me?

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We made short trips from Bombay to the village where Iqbal's family lived. Helowise chose to stay behind at the hotel, probably a wise decision as I doubted she would've tolerated the rustic charms of the countryside. The village was a six-hour drive away and lush green vegetation rushed by as we went deeper into the rural areas and back in time. We passed fields ploughed by oxen and road construction workers carrying small rocks in baskets. Women glided past us in rainbow-coloured saris, bearing water in plastic buckets or aluminium pots on their heads.

Ma started crying even before she embraced her sister who she hadn't seen for 30 years. No one spoke any English so it was left to Ma to act as interpreter. She explained that her sister was working on a *gudari* for me. The cotton patchwork quilt had been pieced together with yellow, orange and blue triangles of patterned fabric and she was finishing it off by hand with neat running stitches.

"She started it when she heard you were coming," explained Ma. Every so often her sister would look up from her sewing and smile, gesticulating that the quilt was for me.

"It will be finished by the time you leave India."

I'm sure that wasn't all they spoke about. From the surreptitious glances in my direction, I knew that my short hair and not being Indian was also discussed. Ma admitted to this. "I said to her, what can you do? You can't tell them who to marry any more."

The house, made of mud and stone, was sparsely furnished and there was no electricity or running water. A young girl squatted at an open fire on the floor in the middle of the kitchen preparing chapattis for our dinner, following the same recipe women had been using for generations. We watched as her nimble fingers kneaded the dough and rolled out the circular bread with a narrow rolling pin that looked like a drumstick. She placed it in the middle of a flat, black, iron griddle to cook. With a slight shift of weight on her feet, she reached over and lifted the lid of a pot to stir the chicken and lentils, releasing smells of cumin, coriander, turmeric, ginger and garlic. In a mortar and pestle she ground together fresh coconut and green chillies to make a chutney to accompany our meal.

Iqbal had embraced village life and was wearing the lungi that had been placed at the end of his bed. Saarah, however, was horrified when she saw the toilet. She took one look at the pit in the ground and declared, “I don’t have a wee any more.”

“You told me that you needed to wee,” I reminded her.

“But I don’t have a wee now. I’m not going,” she said, turning back to the house.

The toilet was proving to be one of the biggest challenges of travelling in India. Not only did I have to squat while arranging myself (thank goodness I wasn’t wearing seven metres of sari) but hygiene clearly wasn’t a priority. It was clean in the village, though, and Saarah had no choice but to learn to use the toilet. Perhaps she imagined she might fall in. Iqbal’s aunt gave me a potty that I took into the outhouse but no amount of cajoling could convince her. It was time to assert my maternal authority. She started to cry but I put her on to the potty and sighed in relief as I heard the tinkling sound.

It had been a dry, hot day with temperatures above 30°C. We joined the women sitting on the steps outside the houses, taking advantage of the cool breeze as the sun started to set. They modestly posed for a photograph but moved inside when Iqbal joined us. Bombay seemed on another planet compared to this serene village. Here people still built their houses with mud and stone, ploughed their fields with oxen and lived the same way their grandparents had, following a calendar dictated by the crops they grew.

“I can’t imagine how my great-grandfather had the vision to leave this place to come all the way to Cape Town,” said Iqbal, leaning back on his elbows on the step, gazing out over the deep green rice fields. “I wonder what motivated him.”

“When was that?” I asked.

“I don’t know the exact date but it must have been the late 1850s because my dad was born in 1933.”

“Around the time when the British were importing labourers to work on the sugar plantations?”

“Yes, but he came as a free man, along with five friends. It took a few months to come by ship from Bombay to Durban. Then they *walked* all the way to Cape Town, following the railway line. My great-grandfather started selling fruit, vegetables and spices. He had to go back to India every three years because of the colonial immigration laws. So half of his children were born here and the other half in Cape Town. He built a small two-bedroom house near Kenilworth Station and started the café on the corner of Kenilworth and Wessels Road. My father had 11 brothers and sisters. The shop provided the means to educate and support everyone.”

“I wonder if he knew anybody. Did he know what to expect? What did he know about the food or the climate? Cape Town was the end of the continent, as far as he could go. Wasn't he afraid that he'd never be able to go back home or see his family again?”

“You have to have courage to immigrate. I think you take the chance, leave everything familiar behind and venture into the unknown, hoping for a better life.”

“I suppose that's why people hug their culture like a security blanket. Clinging to what they knew must've brought a level of solace and comfort, especially when apartheid became law.”

Later Iqbal's family was forced to move from Kenilworth after it was declared a “white” area. The five friends returned to India, deciding that life in South Africa wasn't for them.

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After a week in Bombay, we set off with a driver in a 1950s white Ambassador for Aurangabad, stopping along the way to see the shrines carved out of the mountains. At Ellora a series of caves were scooped out to create temples and frescoed halls spanning three religions – Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. A guide informed us that generations of monks had worked with simple tools and mirrors, to reflect light, coaxing the images out of the rock. They toiled with religious fervour, caring for neither earthly glory nor recognition.

At Ajanta, murals of nobility, harem beauties, ogres, elephants and winged horses depict scenes of Indian court life and legends of the Buddha's time. Natural light brightened the caves so that here and there we caught glimpses of the vivid jewel colours used by monks over two

thousand years ago. The remote retreat was set above a horse-shoe-shaped canyon, overlooking a stream flowing through the jungle below.

“If it was not for a most exalted British hunting party spotting the temples from the opposite side of the canyon in 1819, all this,” said the guide, indicating the masterpieces with a sweep of his arm, “world-class sculptures and paintings, I am assuring you most humbly, would still be hidden. For more than 1 000 years, everywhere it was almost completely covered with creepers. It would have been a most colossal tragedy if only tigers were enjoying all this exquisite artwork.”

In Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, “the Land of the Kings”, we apprehensively climbed onto a seat atop an elephant decked out with bright paisley-patterned throws and with floral designs painted on its head and trunk. Led by a turbaned mahout, we waddled from side to side up to the Amber Fort. Saarah was delighted as she recalled a favourite nursery rhyme:

The elephant is big and fat,

he walks like this, like that...

I wasn't quite as enchanted. The next morning, my aching arms bore testimony to how tightly I'd been holding on.

Walking through the old town, painted pink in the 19th century in honour of Prince Albert's visit, we admired the design of Hawa Mahal, the Palace of the Winds. Ma pointed out that her name is Hawa. The five-storey building in the shape of the crown of the god, Krishna, was constructed so that the westerly winds could blow through the windows to keep its inhabitants cool. I pictured the women of the palace standing at the latticed windows, looking out

onto the street below, safe from men's prying eyes. Perhaps a royal lady's heart would miss a beat when she spied a handsome young man walking by at the same time every day. I imagined the heady fragrance of milky jasmine flowers threaded into her long plait, the intricate henna pattern painted on her hands, and her mother and younger sisters waiting to drape the red silk wedding sari, heavy with gold embroidery. With a sigh she'd turn away from the grille, her father having decided on a suitable boy who would bring honour and advantage to the family.

We allowed our driver to take us to shops where he promised we'd get "a good deal". It was probably no coincidence that the people who worked in the shop bore a close resemblance to him. We tossed a couple of Rajasthani puppets, with shimmering mirror skirts and vests, on to the growing pile of presents and mementoes in the back of the car.

As we travelled north, the temperature dropped sharply and, by the time we got to Delhi, thick jackets and scarves were necessary. We found embroidered shawls and carpets, intricately carved woodwork and painted papier-mâché bowls and candlesticks at a Kashmiri trade fair. I thought the carpets too beautiful for the floor, but the fair-skinned, blue-eyed salesman assured me they were "everyday" carpets, like the ones he used in his tent at home in the snow-capped mountains. Snake-charmers with baskets and wailing music, and monkey-wallahs with chained monkeys, plied their trade around this area. I made sure Saarah kept her distance, not quite comfortable with cobras popping out of baskets, in spite of being assured the venom had been removed.

We visited the old and new parts of the city, negotiating the teeming streets on bicycle rickshaws. Overhead a jumble of thick telephone and electricity cords looped across the narrow lanes, connecting and powering the inhabitants of modern India's global capital. Washing

flapped on sagging lines strung up between balconies. We dodged a man balancing six or seven tiers of egg trays, held together with a blue string, on his shoulder, and another with a bicycle piled so high with bolts of fabric that there was no place for him to sit.

The streets were lined with squat buildings, their cramped storefronts at ground level. A printmaker was wedged into a shop the size of a cupboard, his worktable and chair fitted underneath shelves laden with the tools of his trade. Next door an overhead sign grandly proclaimed: “Singh’s Copper and Brass Palace, the exporter of all kinds of Indian Handicrafts”. Further down the road, Anil Kumar and Sons had arranged their spices in perfect pyramids of red, orange, ochre and brown.

From there, it was a five-hour drive to the Taj Mahal in Agra. Iqbal sat in front with the driver, the four of us squashed in the back. Saarah was happy for me to read *Noddy Gets into Trouble*, over and over again. Before the end of the trip, I’d memorised whole passages of the book. En route, there were numerous sights to distract a little girl. Camels loped by or sat folded up on the side of the road, waiting for passengers. Elephants and cows halted defiantly in the middle of our path, slowing our progress. We were trapped behind a truck that appeared to be on its way to a festival with its saffron-coloured marigold garlands and green tinsel decorations. On the tailgate, a hand-painted sign said, “Stop honk please.” and, “Relax. 40 km/hr.” We pulled off the road often to stretch our legs and to buy glasses of cardamom-and-ginger infused tea boiled with milk and sugar, sold by the chai wallahs.

“Is it safe to drink?” asked Helowise.

“This tea’s been boiling all day,” said Iqbal. “If that doesn’t kill the germs, the masala will. It’s certainly better than drinking the water.”

We remained optimistic about the toilets, sending Iqbal in first, reasoning that at least he could stand. Perhaps, if the men's bathroom could pass muster, the women's might be acceptable too. Usually he came out almost gagging, giving it a thumbs-down. Somehow Saarah managed to control her bladder until she could get to a hotel with a Western-style toilet.

In the early morning, without the hordes of tourists, the Taj Mahal took on a translucent beauty, like a mirage in the mist. In the middle of the day, the cool marble offered us a welcome respite from the heat. Almost 350 years ago, skilled craftsmen from all over the world had come together, pooling their expertise. Twenty thousand labourers had worked on the construction of the mausoleum for 17 years. Intricate flowers had been carved from semi-precious stones and seamlessly laid into the smooth marble. Verses from the Quran were inscribed on the walls. Helowise agreed with me that, if we bore any man 14 children, nothing less than a Taj Mahal would do.

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We returned to Delhi to catch our flight to Varanasi, one of the oldest cities in the world. Millions of Hindus come to this religious capital from afar to purify their body and soul in the holy Ganges River. They hope to die there and so find release from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Crowded temples lined the banks of the river and sadhus sat and meditated under canopies. Washer-women beat clothes clean against smooth stones along the river's edge, spreading colourful saris and white kurtas out to dry in the sun. Makeshift shrines with offerings of bananas, coconut and garlands of fresh flowers were dotted around the banks. Smoke from

smouldering funeral pyres mixed with scents of sandalwood and marigolds. Once the fires died down, the ashes would be released into the river.

Men and women descended the slippery, well-worn ghats to bathe, fully clothed, in the water. After ritually washing their bodies they pinched their nostrils between thumb and forefinger and immersed themselves in the river they believed could cure any ailment. Not only did they clean themselves in the dark murky water, but they drank it too. It was so polluted it looked more like oil. No promises of salvation could induce me to step in.

At dawn, we left Saarah to sleep with her grandmother and, swathed in shawls against the morning chill, tiptoed out to meet Jeetesh, a guide who would take us on a boat ride down the river. We paused in the half-light at the top of the steep steps to watch the mist rise above the water. Jeetesh urged us to join our hands in prayer and bow a greeting to Mother Ganges. Before we set off he handed us each a candle.

We left the bustle on the banks behind, detaching from everyday life to become immersed in the rhythm of the water. In the middle of the river, Jeetesh motioned for us to light our candles and ceremoniously float them on the water. As the wind carried the faint sound of mantra chants from the banks, we each sat quietly with our own thoughts, embracing the stillness. There were no rules, no religion. We were simply connecting with each other, with those who had gone before and would follow after. In that space before the world had woken, it wasn't difficult to feel part of the rich spiritual history that stretched back 5 000 years. The sun rose over the great curve of the river, creating a gilded path on the surface, the mist dissipated and we turned around and headed for the shore.

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From Varanasi we flew over the foothills of the Himalayas to Kathmandu, where snow lay on the ground. Wrapped up against the cold in her pure wool hand-knitted cap and jersey, Saarah blended in with the locals who she captivated with her Namaste greeting.

We contemplated taking a flight to Pokhara but, because of the weather, decided it would be safer to take the bus and enjoy the scenery at our leisure. Perhaps we should've done more research. For half of the six-hour journey along the Prithvi Highway we clutched the seats in front of us. The road jack-knifed along the edge of the Himalayas and twisted and turned around terraced rice fields. It was the main artery for heavy trucks and we passed more than one broken down on the side of the road.

“Allah,” Ma was praying next to me. “What will we do if another bus comes from the other direction?”

When I was brave enough to look, the view of the Anapurna mountain range, mirrored in the lakes, was magnificent. The sky was a crisp blue and the Ganges, clean and clear, bubbling with life, gushed down toward Varanasi. Roaring rapids of melted Himalayan snow were crossed by precarious suspension bridges. We stopped at roadhouses for snacks eaten off tin plates at tables and benches cemented into the ground. We passed houses with unplastered walls and corrugated iron roofs held in place with logs, stones or old tyres. Streamers of prayer flags fluttered in the wind, sending vibrations of mantras for good fortune and compassion into the universe.

A guide collected us at our hotel in the middle of the night to watch the sun rise over Mount Everest. He drove a short distance and parked at the bottom of a hill. We detected more people in the dark as we followed him up the precipitous incline to the vantage point. Gravel and

small stones, displaced by our feet, rolled down the path. We kept close together, as much for heat as for security.

“These woollies are coming in handy,” whispered Helowise, who had her hat pulled low over her forehead and was wearing mittens.

I wanted to ask why she was whispering but I had a scarf wrapped around the bottom half of my face. I’m sure it must’ve been with reverence for Sagarmatha, Mother Goddess of the Universe, as the locals called their mountain. We peered into the sky, trying to catch a glimpse of the peak but as the sun rose, all we could see were clouds. And then the curtain drew back and the mountain revealed itself. There was a pregnant pause and a collective release of breath as the sun hit the snow-capped peak, causing it to glow while we remained in the semi-dark.

“Do you think you could ever climb Everest?” asked Helowise, no longer whispering.

“No, I don’t think I want to,” I replied. “To witness this beauty from afar is good enough for me.” I was filled with a sense of gratitude and wonder for the spirit of the place.

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From Nepal we travelled south to Bangalore, where Ma took a flight back to Bombay to spend more time with the family while we headed to the beach in Goa. Here the climate was warmer and less humid. When I saw women working at the hotel front desk, it occurred to me that up until then, we’d only been served by men in shops and markets. I’d heard the south was more progressive. It seemed less populated and less polluted than the cities in the north too. The bellboy who showed us to our room was wearing a name tag that identified him as “John Fernandez”.

“Are you Indian?” the South African in me couldn’t help asking.

“Yes, Madam, I am.”

“But, your surname?”

“I am assuring your good self that I am from here.” He explained that the Malabar Coast had been colonised by the Portuguese and there was still a large Catholic population.

We changed into the bathing costumes I’d packed at the top of the bag, and raced down to the beach to plunge our travel-weary bodies into the warm Indian Ocean. After so much poverty and pollution, the miles of soft white sand and swaying palms were a gift straight out of a travel brochure. I could see how the beaches dotted with lagoons and surrounded by mango and banana groves might have seduced the Portuguese seamen under the command of Admiral Da Gama. As we watched the fishermen bring in the day’s catch, I felt tears of relief roll down my cheeks. Over lunch at a makeshift restaurant with our feet in the sand, we reflected on our journey.

“This has been tough with a small child and Ma hasn’t always been able to keep up,” I voiced my thoughts. “Perhaps we took on a bit too much – eight weeks with a toddler and a granny in tow?”

“It hasn’t been all bad though,” replied Iqbal.

“Yes, but I just don’t get those Brits we met in reception who were raving about the wonderful time they were having,” said Helowise. “When I asked, it sounded like they’d skipped all the bad bits. All temples and Taj Mahals for them. They didn’t even go to Bombay.”

“I guess we’ve experienced the splendour with the squalor,” I said. “The palaces and the hovels ... the glamour of movie stars ... the horror of maimed beggars. I think you have to be slightly schizophrenic to survive here. It’s like living in different centuries at the same time. One minute you’re looking at a five-thousand-year-old temple and the next you see on the news that India has launched a spaceship.”

“Or made a nuclear bomb,” added Iqbal. “This country challenges you all the time. You can’t go home unchanged.”

“I want to go home to Cape Town because I’m missing NikNaks,” announced Saarah. This didn’t make sense to me, as she hardly ate the orange corn snacks at home.

“You don’t eat NikNaks.”

“But I’m missing them now,” she said, with toddler logic.

Iqbal confessed he felt the same way about Coke. Thums Up was not quite doing it for him. I could identify. I recalled an inexplicable craving for Bar One chocolate the first time we went overseas.

“I wonder what my father would’ve thought about India if he’d been able to visit after all these years,” said Iqbal. “I’m sure a lot has changed. I must admit I don’t feel Indian. I’m South African, with Indian roots.”

“I feel like I’ve missed something, the essence of India,” I said. “I’ve practised yoga half my life, I was expecting to feel the spiritual energy all around me. Instead, I feel completely overwhelmed by the intensity of this place. Where’s the peace?”

“Did you expect to find skinny Indian men, in loincloths, contorting their bodies into pretzel shapes in order to reach enlightenment?” teased Helowise.

“Not exactly, but I expected to have more spiritual moments. Instead, I sometimes felt I wanted to crawl into a hole and hide from the constant stimulation and bombardment. I’m not sure how one finds the balance within the extremes that exist in India.”

We did have our moments on the Ganges and at the foot of Everest. The gods were everywhere, carved out of stone or painted in garish colours, in shrines in shops, on the road and even in the cars. Here, there was little separation of the religious and the secular, and finding peace wasn’t restricted to temples, synagogues, mosques or churches. It was important to experience all of life, the beauty and joy, grief and pain, laughter and sorrow, in order to grow stronger. Indians seemed to accept their lot in life, irrespective of whether they were rich or poor, high or low caste. And what they didn’t achieve in this lifetime might be accomplished in the next. I’m sure yoga was the key to India’s survival. There must be a reason why it was still relevant after 5 000 years of invasions, colonisation, violence and poverty. I knew that in deep meditation when the senses, the mind and the body are stilled, it’s possible to enter a different state of knowing, separate but still part of the world. When we become more at one with ourselves, our relationship with the world is improved.

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We returned to Bombay via hovercraft. It was fast and convenient but I was so seasick that I spent half the journey throwing up. On the evening before our departure, Helowise and I slipped out to the night market for last-minute shopping. While considering the merits of mirrored and

embroidered cushion covers over block-printed ones, we were confronted by a rat as large as a cat sauntering, not scurrying, across the road.

“It’s time to go home,” we both said.

A week later, on a relatively traffic-free Sunday morning in Cape Town, we were driving on the N2. It seemed deserted, almost eerie after India.

“What a pleasure to drive along these highways,” Iqbal observed, “nothing like travel to put home in perspective.”

A little voice piped up from the back. “No cows will come here on our big roads, hey, Mommy?”

CHAPTER 3: ITALY

–embrace the past, bring it into the present–

June-July 2004 (Saarah 11/Rayhaan 7)

Designer bags had already been claimed by well-heeled owners, backpackers were reunited with rucksacks crammed with dirty T-shirts and wanderlust; even the stroller had been found by the harassed mother whose wailing baby had kept us up all night. Nondescript grey, battered suitcases kept making the rounds, their owners possibly waiting for them in vain at another airport. I watched the luggage do another circuit on the carousel. Mine wasn't there. On the way to the lost-and-found counter, I stole glances at bags guarded at the feet of the more fortunate. I filled in the requisite forms and spelled out our itinerary to a clerk with whom I battled to communicate. We followed the signs out of Malpensa Airport and boarded the bus to Como, where we were to spend the night.

The clothes I was wearing were more suited to a Cape Town winter than an Italian summer. I hoped no one would notice the stain where aeroplane salad dressing from the impossible-to-open plastic bottle had splattered when the foil-cap gave way. I was bemoaning the fact that I didn't even have a change of underwear when I realised I'd left my cellphone charging on my desk at home – how would we communicate if we decided to split up? I also needed to attend to the temperature that Saarah had spiked on the plane. What else could go wrong?

It was thus no surprise, then, that the hotel room wasn't ready when we arrived. We left our bags with the concierge and headed off, hot and irritable, to kill time with a promenade along Lake Como, followed by a ride on the funicular for an aerial view of the town. Next to me,

Saarah was pale and nauseous, and couldn't have cared less about the shimmering blue lake and picturesque hillsides. The school term had ended the day before, and the stress of exams, coupled with almost 20 hours of travelling, had taken their toll. I was sure a shower and a nap would fix that. In fact, that's what we all needed, but I first had to buy something to change into.

“Can't you borrow something from Saarah?” asked Iqbal.

“It's been a while since I wore Saarah's size. And who knows how long my bag will take to get here? I can't wait to get out of these clothes. We've never lost a bag before. Just my luck.” Since we planned to use trains and cars we'd minimised luggage by not bringing on-board bags.

“You know Italian cars are like matchboxes,” I said, “and it's no joke jumping on and off trains burdened with too much luggage. Remember when we went skiing and had to do a two-minute inter-platform dash in our big jackets, lugging those heavy bags? We just made it aboard before the conductor blew his whistle and the doors shut.”

“I remember, we were in the wrong carriage and had to find our seats on the moving train. The Swiss trains were so punctual we could set our watches by them. Don't worry, the Italians are more relaxed. Besides, the children are bigger now and we're not carrying all the ski gear.”

Before returning to the hotel, we stopped at a *farmacia* to get deodorant and cream. The brand names were easily recognisable. Buying lingerie in my non-existent Italian, though, turned into a pantomime as I cupped my breasts and gestured to my groin in an effort to communicate my needs. This resulted in a stream of Italian that sounded neither complimentary nor helpful, between two uncomprehending assistants. The list of basic phrases I'd pasted on the fridge prior

to our departure hadn't included the vocabulary for bra-and-panty-shopping, and how was I supposed to know European sizes? Embarrassed, I grabbed what I could and hoped for the best.

*

Next morning we were on the move again, catching a train to Venice. There'd hardly been time to acclimatise but at least Saarah was feeling better and I was wearing Italian clothes. By the time we arrived, there was a nation-wide taxi strike that included the *vaporettos* (water-taxis). So instead of whizzing along the canals from the station and arriving at our hotel door, we navigated the maze of narrow streets, dragging bags behind us in the July heat, dodging hordes of tourists who, judging from the accents around us, seemed to be mainly North American. I was happy for the night we'd spent in Como.

Since the gondolas were operating, we treated ourselves to a cruise along the waterways, content to sit back and soak up impressions of Venice in a more leisurely fashion, rather than with the teeming mass of tourists on land. The gondolier poled us along, his cellphone wedged between his shoulder and ear, while he conducted animated conversations with someone on the other end of the line.

To the sound of water gently lapping the sides of the boat, we floated under arched bridges and past weather-worn, pastel-coloured buildings with ornate cornices, losing their plaster in chunks. The land versus sea battle being waged was evidenced in the boarded-up ground-floor windows and steps disappearing into murky water. Wisteria creepers tumbling over walls, laundry artfully draped from window to window and red pelargoniums in terracotta pots on wrought iron balconies, cheerfully ignored the decay below.

The best way to get the feel of the city, however, was on foot, losing ourselves in streets that ran every way but parallel. Many cobbled walkways led to dead-end squares. The bridges and lanes, all so similar, challenged our sense of direction. It was easy to walk in a circle without realising it. Pizzerias and shops offering cheap, made-in-China shoes were tucked in between places selling jewellery, masks, lace and glass. Artisans worked according to the same traditions from Marco Polo's time, when the city controlled the trade routes to the East.

Saarah and Rayhaan started recognising landmarks, like the coffee bar with rows of colourful macaroons in the window. We eventually realised that the corners of the buildings were marked with directions to Rialto Bridge and San Marco's Piazza that was a short distance from our hotel. We used the square as our reference point and Rayhaan managed to work it into every route we took. He ran through the piazza, sending hundreds of pigeons swirling into the air. Saarah, scared of birds from a young age, stuck to the perimeter arcaded walkways while her brother let birds eat out of his hand, posed for photographs with them sitting on his head and collected feathers for his scrapbook.

At night, when there were no pigeons about, it was easier for Saarah. We sat on the stone steps, still warm from the day's sun, and imagined a time when the square had been the scene of pageants, processions, political rallies and carnival festivities. The piazza looked like a stage set, with the pink and gold domed architecture of St Mark's as backdrop. As classical music wafted into the cooler night air from the quintet playing at Café Florian, Venice took on an enchanting mantle, recalling its days of elegance and excess. We could almost hear the sounds of laughter and gaiety as Casanova cavorted in the streets.

The strike was over. Though nothing appeared to have been resolved, no one seemed to care. We took a vaporetto across the Grand Canal, moving past glorious domed churches and under bridges, to the Peggy Guggenheim Museum. Guggenheim built up the eclectic art collection, one of the most important of the 20th century, in the pre-war years in Europe and managed to escape from Paris before the Nazis entered. The light-filled rooms and large modern canvases on display in the sumptuous palace were in stark contrast to the Renaissance art at the Accademia Gallery. Rayhaan thought he could do better than some of the Cubist, Surreal and Abstract works exhibited and was happier to explore the sculptures in the garden. I joined Saarah where she stood entranced before René Magritte's "Empire of Light".

"It's night and day at the same time," she said. "Look, the sky's light blue and the house is in darkness. The street lamp is on. Can you see?" I hadn't noticed the visual trickery of the contrast at first glance. The luminescent sky above the dark street scene was slightly disconcerting.

"I'm going to buy the postcard for my scrapbook," she said, heading off to the museum shop.

*

On the island of Murano we visited a factory where craftsmen gave us a demonstration of the ancient art of glass-blowing that had been handed down over generations. We watched, fascinated, as molten blobs of glass were sculpted into wine-stoppers, mirrors and magnificent chandeliers. In the 13th century, the Venetian Republic had ordered the glass-blowers to move to Murano as their furnaces posed a fire hazard to the mostly wooden buildings in the city. The craftsmen soon became leading citizens who enjoyed immunity from prosecution and whose

children were allowed to marry nobility. However, leaving and taking their secrets elsewhere was an offence punishable by death.

Rather than remain with the tourists who lingered over paperweights, beads and knick-knacks, we wandered into the almost-deserted village and found a small trattoria, frequented by locals. The restaurant was filled with bare wooden tables, family memorabilia and old men, speaking their musical language in raised voices, arms flying around their heads. We tried to make sense of the menu written in chalk on a board. The man, who came from behind the bar to take our order, greeted us with an unintelligible string of words. Somehow Iqbal mimed to him that we'd have whatever he recommended. The grilled sardines, pasta and salad we were served was probably one of the best, and certainly the cheapest, meals we ate in Italy. Afterwards, he pressed on us cold and syrupy *limoncello* in thimble-sized glasses. The lemon digestive was tart and sweet and rounded off the meal perfectly. By the time we bade our host farewell, we felt cradled in hospitality and warmth.

Back on the mainland we decided to hire a guide for the day, the advantage being that we could avoid the long queues in the baking sun. The Basilica of San Marco, built in 828 AD to reflect Venice's power, is home to the tomb of St Mark. All ships returning from expeditions had, by law, to bring back a precious gift to adorn the house of the saint. His body, confiscated secretly from Alexandria, (hidden under a layer of pickled pork) was brought to rest here, as were the four bronze horses looted from Constantinople. The imposing golden staircase of the Doges Palace led up to the perfectly proportioned giant statues of Mars and Neptune, another display of power. Works by the great Venetian artists, Tintoretto and Veronese hung in the grand marble building. We took a sombre walk across the Bridge of Sighs, following in the footsteps of those unfortunate souls who'd been led to execution from the palace dungeons, and shivered at

the eerie feel of the damp cold stone, untouched by the sun. We could see the whole city from the top of the Campanile – the bustling piazza and the snaking lagoon, over the red-tiled rooftops, chimneys and church spires, to the Alps in the distance and out to the Adriatic Sea. I tipped the bell-boy handsomely when, on our return to the hotel, I recognised my bag in reception.

*

The guide we hired in Rome was intent on rushing us around the city in record time. In her frenzy to show us as much as possible, she was unsympathetic to the children's pace and drummed her fingers on the table restlessly when we stopped at a pavement café for lunch, no doubt wishing we'd popped into one of the coffee shops that had a bar without stools and an industrial-sized espresso machine. I'd observed how most people came in alone, ordered an espresso and lit a cigarette. When their coffee arrived, they downed it in one gulp, threw some money on the counter and walked out the door.

When Iqbal and I had backpacked through Europe, we hadn't been charmed by the city. Conmen in the guise of taxi drivers or hotel touts seemed to be lying in wait at every corner, to trick us out of our carefully saved money. Now we wanted to enjoy the art all around us, at our leisure. Flamboyant fountains, classical statues, paintings, churches and palazzos stood alongside ruins recalling the ancient glories of this, the centre of power of the Roman Empire. We took our time over bowls of pasta at the iron café tables placed under striped awnings and watched the passing parade of Romans going about their everyday errands. They didn't seem to mind being jostled by the unending flow of tourists coming to visit their eternal city. I loved how they

embraced their past, bringing it into the present with designer stores and hotels trading out of 15th-century palazzos.

After a leisurely breakfast we explored the elegant Borghese Gardens next to our hotel. The green space within the metropolis had been created in 1605 and contained museums, a theatre, fountains and sculptures. Rollerbladers and skateboarders wove between pedestrians strolling under tall plane trees. Iqbal and Rayhaan canoed on the lake then we hired a pedal car (powered by Iqbal) and sampled gelato from stands offering a selection in brilliant colours and irresistible flavours. Floating in the pool later, it was hard to believe we were in the middle of the city, a few streets away from where the Romans had raced their chariots. Following advice from Fodor's, we visited the *Time Elevator Roma* show. We paired up for a quick quiz on Roman history, that the girls won, and then strapped ourselves into our chairs for a 3D movie experience, vibrating and rollicking along on a journey through 2 700 years of history, much appreciated by Saarah and Rayhaan. I wondered if the experience was anything like being jerked along uneven bumpy roads in chariots, long before shock absorbers. In the evening, we followed a "Rome by Night" tour with dinner to the accompaniment of a trio of opera singers.

It was sobering to walk through the streets of the capital of the greatest empire in the Ancient World, over the same stones that emperors and slaves must have trodden more than 2000 years before. Rayhaan cooled down by sticking his head under every one of the numerous cast-iron street taps. The ice cold water still flowed from the bowels of the earth, through aqueducts built hundreds of years before, connecting all of Rome. He was less interested in the skeleton of what was the greatest arena in the ancient world.

“I’m tired of ruins,” he said when he saw the Colosseum. I tried to entertain him with stories of gladiators and fights between men and animals, opening celebrations that had lasted for 100 days in 80AD and how the arena had been filled with water to enact real sea battles. He was unimpressed by what remained after popes pillaged the site of travertine slabs to build their palaces and St Peter’s church. My heart sank. I exchanged looks with Iqbal. Pompeii was still ahead. Rayhaan could be stubborn when he decided that he had had enough. In Switzerland he declared after two days that he didn’t want to go to “skeeling” school any more and had retired, with the au pair, to her parents’ farmhouse to milk cows and take afternoon naps.

When we heard that we’d still have to join the considerable queues outside the Vatican, at dawn, even if we bought tickets beforehand, we decided to leave it for another visit. Iqbal and I had both been before. Perhaps Saarah and Rayhaan would return on their own one day. They increased the chances of that happening by making wishes and tossing coins into the Trevi fountain. On my pillow that night there was a message:

To Mom

Como to Venice and to Roma and then Napoli and then Florence and then Milan and then Joberg and then back to Cape Town the lovely city

from Rayhaan

Under his signature he’d drawn a heart pierced with an arrow. He was obviously seeking order and reassurance amid the unfamiliarity. A casual “I wonder how the dogs are doing at home” was another indication that he was homesick.

“Are you missing home?” I’d ask.

“No, I just want to know how the dogs are.”

He seemed to be handling this trip well, though, soothed by pizza and pasta, gelato at all hours of the day, and having his cheeks pinched by adoring Italians, who pronounced him to be a *trezorro*.

“Can you please sing our country’s song?” he asked, while we were waiting for the train to Naples. I had no idea what he was talking about. “You *know*, the song that we sing about our country. I’m missing my country.”

So there we stood, on Roma Termini, patriotically singing the national anthem under the sign on the wall: “*sic transit Gloria mundi*”, “so passes away the glory of the world”.

*

Iqbal was having a spirited conversation with a taxi driver outside Naples station, using sign language, pointing to our bags on the ground and then to the roof of the car. The driver proceeded to shove our belongings into the boot of his dilapidated vehicle that could then no longer close. He shrugged off our suggestions that we perhaps engage a second taxi. Surrendering to the inevitable, we piled into the car that careered off, sending one of the bags flying. Gathering our belongings again, we managed to reach our destination, despite traffic and taxi drivers.

Naples seemed as chaotic, wild and raucous as Bombay and every second car appeared to have been in a serious accident. We were only spending a night here in order to visit Mount Vesuvius and Pompeii. Travellers like Goethe, Dumas and Dickens had also come here to be charmed and astonished by the beauty of the mighty volcano. While Saarah and I stood on the

balcony of our room and took pleasure in the scene of an old castle on the edge overlooking Santa Lucia harbour, Iqbal and Rayhaan explored the city.

“It was like walking through the Cape Flats, like Manenberg or Hanover Park,” said Iqbal, looking rattled, on their return. “It’s pretty rough out there. There are guys playing soccer in the streets, stray dogs running around rubbish dumps and youths loitering on the corners. There’s washing hanging out to dry on every balcony and strung from one run-down building to another.”

“And I saw a policeman with a rifle riding on a motorcycle,” exclaimed Rayhaan.

“More than one,” added Iqbal. “They weren’t joking at reception when they warned us to be careful. We’d better watch our bags and cameras when we go out.”

That evening, we ventured forth rather gingerly, in search of dinner, deciding to stay close to the hotel. At the restaurant, which seemed to be frequented by locals, we ordered the famous Napoletana pizza: a perfect paper-thin crust, topped with tomato, garlic, oregano, basil and anchovies. On the way back Saarah wanted to stop at a corner café to buy a glue stick, for her scrapbooking. We managed to ask for it without too much difficulty. The shop evoked a familiar scene from home – the shopkeeper squashed behind a raised counter between floor-to-ceiling shelves stacked high with groceries, selling individual cigarettes and cheap sweets. Even the old man, sitting on an upended crate outside, was recognisable. He and Iqbal engaged in a sign language discussion about local soccer.

Having been given ample warning of a possible mutiny in Pompeii, I decided to give Rayhaan a history lesson on the bus. I didn’t need to work too hard to inject drama into the allure that volcanoes already held for him.

“Do you know we’re on our way to the most dangerous volcano in the world?” I asked. “It’s the only active volcano in Europe. You’ll even be able to see a tiny spiral of smoke coming out the top.”

“Can it erupt while we’re there?” he asked, his interest clearly piqued.

“The last time it erupted was in 1944, during WWII. The Allied soldiers who were stationed at Pompeii were forced to evacuate. It destroyed their planes.”

“Tell him about the time there was the *really* big eruption,” prompted Saarah.

“That happened nearly 2000 years ago. It was the day after the festival of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire. Pompeii was slowly recovering from an earthquake. Many of the buildings had been damaged and reconstruction was under way. The people of Pompeii were used to earthquakes but no one alive had ever experienced a volcanic eruption. They were unprepared for the violent explosion when Mount Vesuvius suddenly blasted up into the atmosphere. The people were so fascinated that, instead of running away as they should have, they stopped and stared. There were hours of eruptions and bolts of fire flying into the air. And then a hurricane of hot gas and rock hurtled toward Pompeii. They didn’t stand a chance.”

“What about lava? Didn’t lava pour down and burn them?” he asked.

“That’s the hot gas and rocks, silly,” said Saarah.

“Before the lava could burn them they choked and suffocated to death from the dust, molten ash, and sulphur fumes.”

“Most of the victims died instantly as super-hot air burned their lungs and contracted their muscles,” said Iqbal. “You’ll see their bodies were left in a semi-curved position and then buried in ash and preserved for hundreds of years.

“How do you know what happened?” asked Rayhaan.

“Well, there were witnesses, like Pliny the Younger who lived with his uncle Pliny the Elder, across the bay,” I replied. “He wrote hundreds of letters that have survived. By the way, the two Pliny’s were both born in Como, where we started our trip.”

“And there was a tsunami, a giant wave, at the climax of the eruption that is recorded in history,” added Iqbal.

“Pliny’s uncle was the commander of the Roman naval fleet stationed in the Bay of Naples,” I continued. “Shortly after noon on that day it suddenly grew dark. He saw a strange tree-shaped cloud rising up from the mountain in the distance. He ordered that his boat be made ready and set off for Pompeii.”

“Wasn’t he scared?”

“He must’ve been a little. But the scientist in him wanted to examine what was happening more closely. As he approached, it got darker and ash and rocks, charred and cracked by the flames, were raining down into the sea and hit his ship. It was getting hotter and more difficult to see and the waves were wild but he ordered his crew to carry on. The wind carried his ship into the shore. He could hear the shrieks of women, the crying of babies, and the shouting of men calling out for their parents, children or wives. People with pillows on their heads, tied down with cloths, were running to and fro, trying to save some of their belongings. Buildings and

houses shook and started to tumble, as if there was an earthquake and roofs collapsed under the weight of the volcanic ash.

By 13h00 the sun had been completely blocked out. It was darker than night in the middle of the day. Meanwhile, on Mount Vesuvius leaping flames blazed at several points, their bright glare emphasized by the darkness. People prayed to the gods for help, others imagined there were no gods left, and that the universe had been plunged into darkness for ever. Two thousand Pompeians died over the four days. The town was buried in six metres of pumice and ash. Tons of falling debris filled the streets until nothing remained of the once-thriving port city. It would be almost 1 700 years before the petrified city was discovered and excavation began. The perfectly preserved ruins have taught scientists most of what they know about everyday life during the Roman Empire.”

“What happened to Pliny’s uncle?”

“The dust and fumes blocked his windpipe when he got off his ship. His body was found uninjured, still fully clothed. It looked like he’d gone to sleep on the side of the road.”

At the site we bought a book of Pompeii, with transparent overlays showing what the ancient town must have looked like. Rayhaan walked ahead, pausing in front of buildings to locate them in his book and then compared them with pictures of the reconstruction. Pompeii had been a Roman settlement since 80BC, with a population of 10–20 000. A babble of languages had rung out in the streets. Wealthy Romans lived or had holiday homes there. Houses of rich merchants took up a whole block while poorer people had rented out their front rooms as shops. The facades were simple but the private areas were usually designed around a garden, an atrium with columns and a fountain.

We walked through the town that had been laid out along a grid pattern with two main intersecting streets. Rayhaan hopped along the raised stones placed at crossings in the middle of the roads so that pedestrians didn't get their feet wet in the sewerage and rainwater that collected in the streets. On the floor of the House of the Tragic Poet, he was excited to find the faded mosaic of a chained dog and the warning inscription, *Cave Canem*, "Beware of the Dog".

There were taverns and food shops on almost every corner and an amphitheatre that had produced regular shows. Public fountains and toilets had been fed by huge cisterns connected by lead pipes beneath the pavements. Communal baths were built over underground furnaces, so that water temperature could be set. There were the remains of temples, bakeries with carbonised loaves of bread and 25 brothels. Pompeii had been a busy seaport in its day and sailors had called in from all over the world. The walls of the brothels were decorated with frescoes of erotic services on offer. Paintings and sculptures have survived and graffiti – announcing shows, sales, elections and houses for sale – was still visible on street walls.

We climbed up the steep, grey ash hill to the edge of the crater, resting halfway to recover from the heat and dust. There was no shade and it was difficult to find footing on the gravelly path. Rayhaan urged us on, thrilled by the prospect of danger suggested by the constant stream of sulphuric smoke emitting by the crater.

It was far cooler on top of the hill than on the slopes. While Rayhaan tried to get as close as he could to the mouth of the volcano, I gazed out over the Bay of Naples, at the boats tethered in the harbour. It was shrouded in an oppressive haze. A chilly wind whipped up, cutting through my thin cotton top. Down below lay the ghostly city, ruined and empty. I thought of the citizens whose everyday life had become frozen in time. We'd seen where they'd once slept, baked

bread, made loving homes and raised their families. Naples was located halfway between Vesuvius and another volcanic area. It was the second most populated metropolitan area in Italy and the one of the largest in Europe. What made people rebuild in the face of danger?

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There's nothing glamorous about being packed, sardine-like, into a tin-can, strapped into a seat to breathe recycled air and eat pre-packed food while defying gravity to be transported in a plane from A to B. All the journeys were the same; we could have been going anywhere. I didn't sleep on planes, and emerged at my destination bleary-eyed and dehydrated, with creaking joints. The only advantage to flight is speed.

In contrast, travelling by rail revived the rhythm and romance of the journey. It was a far more civilised and friendly way to go, a conscious part of the trip, not just the means to the end. We could catch our train minutes before it left. There was no two-hour check-in or stifling security. Once we'd queued for our tickets we became part of a greater design. We deciphered the fluttering electronic schedule and made our way to the departure platform, remembering to validate the tickets in the easy-to-miss machine. We joined the loosely knit groups waiting on the platform, roughly the same distance apart as the train doors would be. A light and whistle indicated the approaching train. We picked up our suitcases, making sure the children did the same and stepped toward the yellow line. As the train glided into the station and came to a halt with a hiss of opening doors, we joined the rush to board and secure our seats.

With a lurch the train moved on, while we stacked our bags and swayed to our places on either side of the aisle, as if drunk. We settled back into the plush seats on the sleek Eurostar to be lulled by the beat of the wheels on the track and the flow of landscape observed through the

panoramic windows. The white noise of unfamiliar languages drifted around us. Here, a man was conducting a one-sided telephone conversation; there, a daily newspaper was being shaken out. Two seats down, a laptop was being powered up.

Travelling by rail was a novel experience for Saarah and Rayhaan. Saarah unpacked her snack on the table under the window and made herself at home as soon as she boarded. Her nose was soon in the latest Jacqueline Wilson, or she updated her scrapbook with recently acquired mementoes, processing where she'd been. Before long she was sprawled out across the seat, fast asleep.

Rayhaan played a game of chess against himself after having made short work of all of us. He took the aircraft cushion out of his backpack, inflated it and placed it around his neck. He drew his knees to chin, wrapped his arms around his legs and gazed dreamily out the window. Occasionally, he pointed to something, perhaps a child playing in a back garden or a herd of cows, before also nodding off. Rather than the monotony of the plane, the train offered inspiring glimpses of foreign places. The train plunged us into the heart of the countryside unlike any other mode of travel.

Later, Saarah and Rayhaan woke from their naps, stretched their legs, and peered out the window to take in the details on the platform, or checked the time on the big station clock. Passengers got off to be replaced by other people with places to go. The children returned to their books and games or connected with each other, in the absence of friends or the distractions of normal term-time pursuits.

The countryside filtered in through the window in bytes that my brain could more easily comprehend. The scenery was varied: mountain lakes, rolling wheat fields, the swell of hills, the

sudden darkness as we hurtled through a tunnel. We snaked along, perfectly level without any of the turbulence often experienced in planes. We went just fast enough to not get exasperated, just slowly enough to absorb the succession of snippets of the daily life of the country we were exploring. I wrote in my journal, catching up with where my body had been, or read up on the city we were heading toward.

From time to time, Iqbal read aloud extracts from Dan Brown's, *The Da Vinci Code*, not his normal choice of reading matter but the only English book he'd been able to find in Rome. The shop assistant had suggested it, saying that it had been recently released amid much controversy. It provided food for discussion on a journey that made the story come alive. We were able to recognise many of the issues surrounding the Church and the painting of *The Last Supper*. It didn't seem such a far-fetched conspiracy theory after listening to stories of the conflicted relationship the Catholic Church had with money, wealth and prosperity. We'd heard intriguing tales of supposedly-celibate popes, appointing their sons to positions of power to safeguard their hold on the Church.

We arrived at our destination with all our bags (because they'd been where we could see them all along) and stepped out on to the platform, rested and ready for the next stage of the adventure.

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Villa Mangiacane is a 16th-century mansion that was once the home of the Machiavelli family. It was built on a hill with a view over the terracotta roofs of Florence and in a direct line with the dome of the Duomo. During the renovation, traces of frescoes by Michelangelo had been discovered and sensitively restored. At night, I slept on crisp white linen in a canopied feather

bed. In the morning, I drew back the heavy red drapes and flung open the huge casement windows to look out over terraced vineyards and a patchwork of greens and browns that drew the eye up to the row of slender cypress trees standing tall on the crest of the hill in the distance. In the afternoons, taking a tip from the locals, I retired from the heat to siesta on the balcony on a wide daybed heaped with cushions and bolsters. Businesses were closed from 12h00 to 16h00: eating and resting took priority over making money. I revelled in the privilege of being in this beautiful place, relaxing with a book and a cup of tea, savouring the simple pleasures of company and food, and inhaling the fragrance of lavender that drifted up on a breeze.

Saarah and Rayhaan tagged along with two young workers who inspected the vineyards on a quad-bike. Afterwards, they cooled off with a swim in the pool and threw themselves down on the grass and lay spread-eagled under the warm sun, watching birds circling lazily in the dry air above them. It was a stillness seldom experienced amid the frenzy of city life.

We rented a Fiat Punto and intended to use the villa as a base from where we could explore the surrounding towns. Iqbal seemed to have a built-in GPS and Rayhaan didn't do too badly with a map either, but we did get lost on the way back from our forays more than once. En route was a busy traffic circle with a bewildering array of sign posts and arrows pointing in all directions. There was no time to hesitate: with a leap of faith, we took the gap, whether or not we'd worked out which signs we were meant to follow.

On our first day, we stopped to ask directions from a man walking along the road. Unable to find words in English, he was still determined to help. Recognising the name, Villa Mangiacane, he motioned for pen and paper and drew a map, explaining as much as he could with limited vocabulary. A few days later, we saw him in the village with a companion. He

greeted us as if we were old friends, smiling and miming. We needed no translation to understand he was relieved we were safe.

We visited well-preserved towns separated by golden fields dotted with bales of hay. We drove on winding roads, up and down hillsides, and parked outside town walls since the streets were too narrow for regular traffic. One afternoon we got stuck in a gridlock on the highway. The other drivers got out to investigate the cause of the congestion, walking around gesticulating angrily, while shouting into their cellphones.

“Imagine if we had a Vespa, then we could fit in anywhere,” said Rayhaan. “Or two Vespas. One for Saarah and Mom and one for Dad and me.” The oversized mosquito-like motorcycles would’ve been good for darting through crowds of people and down cramped streets and would certainly have solved the problem of parking. But I wasn’t sure that I could manage to drive on the right side of the road, while coping with intimidating drivers who tended to lean on their hooters and hadn’t heard about safe following distances. If you wanted to avoid anyone sitting on your tail, it was best to just get out of the way and let them pass.

“Or a Smart car,” suggested Saarah. “That would also have been cool.” The car she was talking about was so small we could’ve parked at right angles to the kerb. They weren’t very practical in terms of accommodating a family, but that didn’t seem to be an important criterion for car choice in Italy.

In Lucca, we followed mediaeval alleyways in the footsteps of Puccini and Da Vinci. Saarah was more interested in the poster advertising a concert featuring Dido, Pink, Michael Bublé and Alicia Keys, who’d all be performing later in the summer when she was back at school. Rayhaan ran along the top of the solid wide rampart, built to keep enemies at bay, and

imagined fierce battles being waged, the air filling with smoke and the pitiful cries of the doomed. Now the wall served to keep the traffic out, making it pleasant to walk about the town's winding lanes.

The streets were lined on both sides by two- and three-storey buildings in variations of pinks, oranges and yellows, with arches and heavy studded doors built to withstand battering rams. We happened upon an exhibit dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci. All four of us were fascinated by the reconstructed replicas of his famous designs – flying machines, that are considered the ancestors of the modern helicopter, and measuring tools.

Pisa was hot and packed with tourists. The tower, which defied the law of gravity as it cut the horizon with its characteristic tilt, was surrounded by scaffolding and closed to the public. We stayed long enough to humour Saarah and Rayhaan by posing for pictures pretending to prop up the campanile, but avoided the rows of white vendors' tents selling cheesy souvenirs.

In Siena, we walked through cool dark alleys hidden from the sun and poked our noses into shops selling books, antiques and pottery. We smelled dusty old leather and paper when we pushed open the heavy wood and glass doors. While we relaxed over lunch in one of the restaurants on the Piazza del Campo, Rayhaan galloped around the circumference of the sloped fan-shaped square, pretending to take part in the twice-yearly *Palio*. The horse race is preceded by days of colourful pageantry, costume processions and heavy betting. The red-brick-paved piazza had also been the setting for executions and bullfights.

“Saraah and Rayhaan should've come with us,” complained Iqbal at the Uffizi gallery. “They're missing out on a valuable opportunity. We've come so far to see this.”

“They wanted to stay at the villa,” I said. “I think they would’ve been overwhelmed by the scale of this gallery. Besides, I’m enjoying the opportunity to absorb all this at my leisure.” With a guide and without children, was the wisest way to move through one of the world’s greatest art collections, with masterpieces by Michelangelo, Titian, Raphael, Botticelli and Giotto.

When we returned to the villa they were in the kitchen with the chef, Massimo. A large black kettle of sauce, to go with a steaming bowl of pasta, simmered on the stove. Sitting in the cool cellar we ate food with operatic names like bruschetta, carpaccio, risotto and ciabatta. There was a parade of antipasti made with simple fresh quality ingredients, a salad of greens with a drizzle of olive oil and a spritz of red-wine vinegar and fresh buffalo mozzarella. Aubergines and tomatoes picked from the garden, tasted of sunshine, enhanced by a pinch of rock salt. Lunch turned into a feast, a celebration of the essence of the ingredients. We ate slowly, lingering over our meals with joy. We wiped our bowls with torn chunks of warm crusty bread. The whole concept of deserving pleasure seemed part of Italians’ DNA.

Dr Ruth Westheimer, the sex therapist who’d caused a stir in South Africa when she appeared on 1980’s apartheid-era television, was also staying at the villa. The children didn’t know her but the pint-sized bundle of energy in size two trainers delighted them all the same by charging around the vineyards with them on the quad-bike.

“Where is Iqbal?” she asked one morning at breakfast. In spite of having left Germany as a young girl, her accent was heaving with rolling “r’s” and a confusion of “v’s” and “w’s”.

“He’s in bed with one of your books,” I replied. “He said he was only getting up once he finished it.”

“So, vot did you think?” she asked when she saw him later, hardly able to contain her excitement. “I vill send you more books ven I get home.” True to her word, a parcel arrived shortly after our return to South Africa. It included a celebration of erotic art throughout history, her autobiography, and the aptly-named children’s book, *Grandma on Wheels*.

Since we were flying home from Milan, we spent our last night in the business and fashion centre of Italy. Situated in the country’s richest region, the cosmopolitan city was very much the “new world”, inhabited by exceptionally well-dressed Italians in business suits or chic outfits. Even when walking the streets casually dressed in a white shirt, red chinos and leather loafers, they deserved a second glance. As if to challenge the industrialisation and commercial character of the city, trams still trundled by with a clang-clang from the past.

“It’s amazing how the chaos of Italy, strikes, mafia and politics seem to fly right over the heads of people while they enjoy *la dolce vita*,” I said, while we waited for our flight. “This is such a sensual country. Sights, smells and sounds compete for your attention. I read somewhere that Freud’s theories never took off with the Italians. They didn’t need psychoanalysis to ‘talk out’ their feelings because they didn’t repress any.”

“If you think about it,” said Iqbal, “there’s no end to the good things that come with the label, ‘Made in Italy’: bags, shoes, clothes, food, music, art, ice cream. Armani, Gucci, Versace...”

“And what about Ferrari and Maserati and Lamborghini?” asked Rayhaan, clearly having absorbed his share of the good life.

“We seem to have found the right balance with this trip. Enough history, culture and relaxation to keep everyone happy,” I said.

“I think it was a good idea to end with this week in Florence,” said Iqbal.

“If we miss the flight to Johannesburg, can we go back to Florence?” asked Rayhaan, who a week before had been counting the days until we returned to “Cape Town, the lovely city”.

CHAPTER 4: TURKEY via LONDON

—every effort slowly widened our circle—

June-July 2005 (Saarah 12/Rayhaan 8)

The men sucked hookah pipes on pavements in front of shisha cafes and coffee houses while their women, dressed in black *abayas*, trudged home carrying bags of groceries or pushing prams. The Odeon Cinema was advertising a film in Arabic. Clubs lined both sides of the road and kebab and shwarma restaurants did a brisk trade until after midnight on any day of the week.

“I love this late-night buzz. This is the time to eat,” said Iqbal, who preferred his meals later than the times dictated by young children.

We explored the city during the day and came “home” to dine on an array of Middle Eastern dishes: hummus and aubergine dips, lamb baked in flaky pastry, delicately spiced chicken and an abundance of fruit and vegetables. Desserts, packed with nuts, dripped with honey. The food, served in small platters and bowls, was placed in the centre of the table with a basket of hot flatbread, encouraging us to share and socialise. The combination of herbs and spices was perfect for our palates, used to a fusion of Indian and Cape Malay cuisine. Often, when eating overseas, we yearned for the bottle of piquant sauce in our fridge at home. Iqbal often reminded us wars had been waged and trade routes forged in the pursuit of spices.

No, we hadn’t arrived in Istanbul yet. Arab migrants have been attracted to this stretch of Edgware Road, near Marble Arch, since the late 19th century when they came as a result of increased trade with the Ottoman Empire. Later, Egyptians, Lebanese, Iranians and Algerians, all fleeing unrest or wars raging in their home countries, followed. Before that, it had been a

destination for Huguenot migrants. The road had originated as an ancient track through the Great Middlesex Forest and inns along the route had served as coach stops. It ran in a straight line for about 15 kilometres, all the way from Victoria Station to Edgware.

This turned out to be the busiest weekend of the year. Two hundred thousand people were attending Bob Geldof's "Live 8" concert in Hyde Park, convened to "make poverty history", while the G8 meeting was in progress. The list of performers included Madonna, Elton John and Sting. The concert was being watched by more than a billion people internationally. In addition, the Wimbledon finals were being played and Federer proved himself to be "better-er", as the British headlines proclaimed at the end of the tournament.

"So, I've booked," Iqbal had said, a few days previously, phoning from his office in Cape Town.

"Booked what? Where?" I asked, bewildered.

"Turkey, of course. We leave on Friday. My mother and Paree are coming with us," he said, referring to his teenage niece.

It was Monday. We'd discussed the upcoming holiday over the weekend, and Turkey had been mentioned, but I couldn't recall any decisions being made. Fortunately, I'd learned a long time ago to keep our passports up to date. My preferred modus operandi was to put a suitcase out in the guest room, at least two weeks before the time, and to slowly fill it with items I thought indispensable. I ticked off my list as I deposited "essentials" like WetWipes, suntan lotion, tablets for pain and fever, anti-histamine cream and swimming goggles into the bag. Over the years, the list had diminished as the children grew older and I realised that anything left behind could easily be bought, substituted or done without.

The best flights we could find at such short notice were via Heathrow, hence the weekend visit. This wasn't our first visit to London, so we didn't feel the need for a frenetic rush from one tourist spot to the next. Instead, we opted for a "flight" in the London Eye to jog the children's memories, walked through the city looking in store windows and at passers-by, and visited the Natural History and Science museums. The latter, with its interactive exhibits on space exploration, transport, photography and the human body, had the distinction of being the only museum that Saarah and Rayhaan had begged to return to twice during the same trip. No doubt the "Grossology" exhibit covering the "Impolite Science of the Human Body" was the draw card.

Besides music concerts and tennis in the headlines, London had been selected to host the 2012 Summer Olympics, and the city celebrated in the streets. Another hot topic was the outcome of a recently-held referendum where France and the Netherlands had both voted against Turkey's admission to the European Union.

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This time, we were booked into a hotel in the Sultan Ahmet area, in the old city. The weather promised to be good and no wars were being waged in the immediate vicinity. We'd hardly checked in when we heard the news. Fifty-two people had been killed and over 700 more injured when terrorists targeted the underground trains and a bus in London's Tavistock Square, in a series of coordinated suicide bombings. We deposited our belongings in the rooms and gathered in the garden.

“Can you believe it?” asked Iqbal. “The attacks occurred on the Piccadilly line and at Edgware station, exactly where we were this weekend, on our route each day.” His cellphone rang.

“We’re fine. In Istanbul. Yes. Don’t worry, we’re safe,” he spoke into the phone.

“That was Fatima,” he said. “They’re all frantic at home.”

“It’s terrible,” said Ma. “How can they do something like this? Everybody was so happy about the Olympics.”

I couldn’t help thinking about the people who must have been packed into the tube, scurrying in all directions, panicked and disorientated. And then, when they thought they’d made it safely out of there, were faced with the carnage of the bus attack.

“It was probably meant as a show of force against the G8 meeting,” suggested Iqbal. “Or possibly in retaliation for Blair’s support of Bush’s policy in Iraq. Who knows?”

The hotel, which resembled a fortress, felt like a refuge from the crazy world outside. We weren’t surprised to learn it was a former prison that had once held dissident Turkish writers and politicians. We sat on the roof terrace and breathed in the fragrant scent from rose bushes and orange trees gently swaying in the breeze. We were surrounded by towering minarets and domes of mosques and hamams. The cooing of doves mingled with the muezzins’ chanted calls to prayer. We were centrally situated in the old city and could step out of the sanctuary of the hotel and make our way through twisting streets to Topkapi Palace, the Blue Mosque, Hagia Sofia, and any one of eight different entrances to the Grand Bazaar.

People have shopped at this bazaar for more than 600 years. It hummed with purposeful activity as tourists rummaged for bargains and locals carried on with their daily lives. The convoluted tangle of walkways comprised a myriad of tiny shops, traditionally grouped together according to the types of goods on offer. It remained a bewildering maze of rugs, evil-eye bracelets, hookahs, and silver jewellery. Stacks of copper pots, goblets, trays and jugs, glinted in the light. Rows of silver swords, their sheaths richly engraved, were mounted on a wall, and decorative plates took up every available space next to jingling belly dance outfits. Carpets, still dusty from their journeys from Tabriz, Isfahan or Herat, were piled up in shops. A cacophony of classical, cabaret and pop music blared from shops selling CDs, and competed with the calls of beckoning merchants sitting on their doorsteps, as ready as ever to entice potential customers. Smells of saffron, pepper and cardamom drifted into the air and combined with the fragrance of burning incense sticks.

Tucked away in the passages were banks, mosques, police stations and restaurants with one or two laminated tables and a few chairs. A man, wearing a white apron and chef's hat, brandished a long knife that he used to shave ribbons of succulent lamb from the stack of meat rotating on a vertical spit. Juicy slivers were stuffed into pita bread and garnished with our choice of peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes and pickles, then dressed with a dollop of thick yogurt. Eating was a delicious messy business as juices from the meat and vegetables combined with the yoghurt and seeped through our fingers.

“Smoking will be fined by 462.400.000 TL,” Rayhaan read from a sign on a pillar above my head. “What does that mean?”

“That sign must be very old,” I replied. “When we were here the last time, the Turkish lira had so many noughts we felt like millionaires. Now they’ve trimmed off all the zeroes and call it the Yeni Turkish Lira (YTL). Fifteen million lira is now the equivalent of 15YTL.”

“That’s so cool,” said Rayhaan. “I wish I could pay for something with a million bucks.”

While I looked at leather jackets, Saarah and Paree disappeared into a shop selling belly dancing outfits, and Rayhaan dragged Iqbal off to buy a sword. I decided to check on the girls and entered the shop to see Paree emerge from the back in a revealing bright blue ensemble, to the delight of the young merchant.

“Oh, my gosh,” I exclaimed, with the sudden realisation that we were responsible for a sixteen-year-old, comfortable with her voluptuous physique and aware of her feminine charms. I wondered where on earth there’d been enough space to change. Saarah stood to one side, a forlorn figure, at that awkward stage of adolescence when she was still trying to figure out what was happening to her body. She was 12 and had recently started wearing braces that made her even more self-conscious. We quickly wrapped the purchase and left.

Just outside the bazaar, we were invited to “come to my shop” by a young merchant selling tapestry handbags, a fusion of modern and traditional craft. Before we even had a chance to sit down, a boy was summoned to fetch tea. He returned a few minutes later, bearing a brass tray with steaming slim-waisted tea-glasses that he carefully placed on a low table in front of us. As we slurped the hot amber liquid, we exchanged stories about everything from politics to daily life.

Our host was of the opinion that the European Union’s demands for Turkey’s “progress”, in a number of areas, were unfair. Seventy percent of Turkey’s trade was with EU countries, he

told us, and millions of Turks were living throughout Europe. Turkey had been aspiring to join the EU bloc for more than 40 years. The partnership between certain European countries had been created in the aftermath of WWII to foster trade between countries as a deterrent to conflict. The result was the European Economic Community founded in 1958 that later became the EU when the union evolved into an organisation spanning policy areas from developmental aid to the environment. The merchant confided to us that he didn't feel there was a sincere basis to the relationship between the EU and his country. Besides the negative responses from France and the Netherlands, Austria wanted a reference inserted giving Turkey "privileged partnership", rather than full membership, a proposal that had been rejected by Ankara. He wasn't hopeful about the outcome of the talks that were scheduled to re-open in October.

The Orient House, next to the bazaar, had functioned as a theatre since the early 20th century. Set inside a restored Ottoman cellar, it was quite touristy, but had been recommended as a good place to see folk dancing. The performances included belly dancing, a Turkish wedding ceremony, whirling dervish dancers and an Ottoman janissary, or military band, in red and white uniforms. The belly dancers, in shimmery bras and sheer skirts with slits to their hips, were introduced as being among the region's best. They twisted and turned in graceful arcs, spines moving in undulating waves. One woman balanced a sword on a spot above her belly button while she looped her hips in figure-of-eights. The audience applauded loudly, some stomped their feet, men shouted and let out long high-pitched whistles. Others showed their appreciation by tucking bills into the dancers' costumes and were rewarded by having their pictures taken with them.

This provocative display was a far cry from the art form that historians estimate began as early as 4 000 BC. In the ancient goddess traditions, dancing was performed as a ritual among

women to promote fertility in themselves as well as the earth. They would dance for one another to aid childbirth, and to pantomime the sowing and harvesting of crops. The name “belly dance” was coined in America in 1893 from the French, *dance du ventre*, that translated as “dance of the stomach”. It’s this Hollywood version that the world has come to know.

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The whirling dervishes, wearing tall camel-hair hats meant to symbolise gravestones, walked onto the stage and, facing us, bowed deeply from the waist. They cast off their tomb-like black cloaks, symbolically setting aside all worldly ties and revealing the white robes, equated with death shrouds, that they wore underneath. Around their waists they had wrapped black sashes. They crossed their arms over their chests, one hand on each shoulder, and bowed to each other. As the melancholic strains of the reed flute started up, they moved to the centre of the stage, one by one, and slowly started to turn. The music called and begged, sometimes plaintive, sometimes joyful. As they gained momentum, their arms dropped down to their hearts, then rose up to the sides of their heads and lifted skywards, the right palm up to the heavens, the left facing the ground. With their heads cocked to one side, full circular skirts billowing out around their legs, they gathered speed, channelling what they believed to be the mystical energy that makes the world turn. The music rose and fell, teased and lured until I, too, was mesmerised by the hypnotic whirling.

“Why are they turning?” interrupted Rayhaan.

“That’s how they pray,” I replied. “They believe turning touches the heart and helps them to find their way back to God. I think it’s like meditating.”

“They’re like spinning tops,” said Saarah. “How come they don’t get dizzy and fall over?”

“Let’s watch and see,” I answered, trying to observe the feet of the dancers, to deduce their secret. One foot remained rooted to the ground, while the other drew a circle and propelled the body round. It reminded me of the two arms of a pair of compasses. One arm remained centred and focused while the other expanded. It seemed a good analogy for our travels. Though rooted in South Africa, we were continually exploring, discovering and connecting with what was foreign and that we may have feared.

Rumi, the 13th-century Sufi poet, mystic and theologian, believed in art as a spiritual exercise to attain a state of union with God. After his death, his followers founded the Mevlevi Sufi Order that the whirling dervishes belonged to. From the 14th to 20th century they had a huge impact on Turkish society, influencing music, dance, poetry, calligraphy and other visual arts. The development of religious music, frowned upon by orthodox Islam, was an important contribution to Ottoman culture. The dervishes had brought Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, to Turkey. The ritual sacred dance ceremony was representative of stepping out of the tomb of the self. The music helped devotees to focus so intensely on the divine that their souls might be destroyed and resurrected. The turning symbolised the search for truth and the abandonment of ego in order to attain perfection. The seeker returned from the journey to love and serve the whole of creation, without discrimination.

On the stage, the men slowly wound down and came to a standstill, without any sign of vertigo. There was a hush and then we burst into applause that seemed to lift the far-away look in their eyes, like a veil. The music evoked a feeling of deep spiritual loss, a sense of grief and

anguish as a result of trying in vain to get close to God. The Turks call this feeling *hüzün*, and speak about another melancholic ache, that of the loss of a glorious civilisation. The Ottoman Empire, which ended after Turkey lost WWI, was the longest continuous dynasty in history. They say an air of resignation hangs over the people of Istanbul as they go about their daily lives amid the ruins of a legendary past. I wondered if I'd detected that same air among the citizens of Rome, who carried on surrounded by the remains of all they'd lost – grand cathedrals, palaces, ruined city walls and dreams of long-gone riches.

When Mustafa Kemal, or Atatürk, came to power in 1923, he set about aggressively westernising the country. Islamic courts were dissolved, polygamy was abolished and secular law codes were instituted. Alcohol was legalised, religious schools were closed and the wearing of the fez and veil were banned. He further purged all Arabic and Persian influences on language and names. Some of the more positive reforms related to women's rights. It was no longer legal to force young girls into marriage and they could be educated. Women were incorporated into society, given the vote and were no longer under the control of their husbands. The result of these changes was that Turkey had a secular government although 99% of the population was Muslim.

Atatürk had ruled that all religion be removed from the sphere of public policy. Laws were passed restricting religion to personal morals, behaviours and faith. Dervish lodges and centres of pilgrimage had been closed. Sufi orders were dissolved and the use of mystical names, titles and costumes, as well as meetings and ceremonies had been banned. Separation of state and religion made sense to me, especially coming from a country that had been ruled by the Bible and the gun. However, many of the Sufi rituals had been viciously repressed and had only recently been allowed to resurface.

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Many evenings we walked back to our hotel guided by floodlights illuminating the Blue Mosque. Built by Sultan Ahmet in response to Constantine's Hagia Sofia Church, the mosque gets its name from the blue-green Iznik mosaic tiles used on the interior. Since no human forms are allowed to be represented in Islam, the only ornaments in the mosque were repetitive geometric patterns, such as multiple invocations of praise: God is great ... God is great. The artists had expressed their devotion through the use of carved stonework, calligraphy, and marble and wood inlaid with floral mother-of-pearl or ivory designs. A heavy metal chain across the entrance made it mandatory for even the Sultan to bow in respect every time he rode his horse through the gate.

Ma settled down on the floor on her heels to pray, her hands upturned in her lap to receive grace. I heard a few phrases of the opening prayer of the Quran, her lips quietly moving over the familiar words, as she asked for protection and blessings on her family. I watched as she "washed" her face with her hands, signalling the end of her prayer.

"Your mother's happy," I whispered to Iqbal.

"She's in heaven," he answered.

Before entering the mosque, we were required to cover our heads and shoulders and remove our shoes, that were then stored on rows of shelves.

"How do you say thank you?" Saarah and Paree asked the old man who handed us a shoe-bag. They could easily have used the Arabic, *shukran*, that they were both familiar with,

but they were determined to use the correct term. The girls had been learning some rudimentary Turkish by questioning everyone they met.

“Teşekkür edirem?” he asked. They nodded, recognising the words they’d heard earlier.

“I’ll tell you a trick,” he said. “Try saying “tea-sugar-eggs-and-rum” really fast.”

They copied him, huge smiles lit up their faces when the words tripped off their tongues more easily. He beamed back at them from under his thick moustache, making the wrinkles around his eyes deepen.

Behind the Blue Mosque, a park had been created around the Hippodrome, the remains of an ancient Roman circus. It was a good place to observe the locals out for a stroll in the late afternoon. A common sight was groups of boys, of six or seven years, dressed in formal white suits with red hats and matching capes. The festive scene belied the fact that they were about to be circumcised and were either going to or coming from the nearby holy tomb to pray for an uncomplicated operation.

At the time of its construction, the Hagia Sofia was probably the grandest building in the world. It survived a cycle of devastation and restoration, including desecration by the Crusaders, who mocked the Eastern Christian Church. The Byzantines reclaimed the church until the Ottomans took over and converted it into a mosque. They added minarets and covered the mosaics that depicted images of Jesus, Mary, John the Baptist and Byzantine rulers, with a layer of plaster. Now huge discs with the names of Allah and Muhammad hang opposite the uncovered images, two religions co-existing in one building. In 1932 Hagia Sofia, which means divine wisdom, was diplomatically converted into a museum by Atatürk.

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We entered Topkapi Palace, headquarters of the Ottoman Empire, through the Gate of Peaceful Salutations to journey through a period of power and glory. Behind the palace walls lay courts, landscaped gardens and terraces, stables, dungeons, libraries and art collections, and the scene of real power, the Harem, where the sultan's mother presided over proceedings. The valuable collection of art included portraits, clocks, miniatures, Chinese porcelain and relics, including the bones of John the Baptist.

From the terrace we could look out along the Golden Horn, to where it met the Bosphorous Strait and Sea of Marmara, the waters ruffled by wind and waves. Istanbul owed much of its spirit to this strait: its maritime situation has influenced its character and history. Ulysses and Byzas, who founded Byzantium, both passed through here. Mehmet the Conqueror ordered the construction of mighty fortresses so he could control the strait, and, during WWI, the Bosphorus was the key to the Black Sea and Russia. The strait, which slices through the city and joins Marmara and the Black Sea, is one of the planet's most strategic waterways. It's never quiet. Commuter ferries and commercial ships criss-cross the narrow channel of water all day and night, and pedestrians and motorists cross the bridge in a constant stream from one continent to the other.

On weekends, a flood of people descend to its shores, stretching out on small patches of grass next to picnic baskets or standing guard over fishing lines. Istanbul is the only city to have been three different imperial capitals, the Greek Byzantium, Roman Constantinople and the Ottoman Istanbul. Simultaneously ancient and modern, the city stands at the intersection between

Asia and Europe, at the crossroads between two civilisations, forming a bridge between the East and the West, straddling Islam and Christianity.

The distillation of so many influences has resulted in the creation of unique and appetising dishes that explode with flavours and reflect the country's rich past. Ottoman cuisine has evolved into a fusion of tastes and flavours, spanning hundreds of years and incorporating different geographical, cultural and climatic influences. Nomadic and Islamic traditions have been layered onto Roman and Byzantine heritages. As a consequence, Istanbulites seemed to worship good food, socialising over shared meals in a celebration of life.

Iqbal became almost as enthusiastic about the olives displayed by the bucketful in the market, as the Turks themselves. The fruit has been treasured for 8 000 years for its nutritional and medicinal properties. He tried the black and green fruit, marinated in Mediterranean herbs, with strips of lemon zest, red chili flakes, garlic cloves or crushed coriander and cumin seeds. The small black olives were a staple at breakfast, with a slice of bread and salty white cheese. While he delighted in the savoury product of the tree that has long stood as a symbol of abundance, glory and peace, I allowed myself to be seduced by something sweeter: glossy mahogany brown dates, the delicate aroma and flavour of luscious purple figs and the jewel-like ruby-coloured sacs of juicy pomegranates, and all kinds of sweets, including Turkish delight, pots of jam and liqueur, flavoured with sensuous rose essence.

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I'd only ever seen Ma without her head scarf when she was at home, unlikely to be viewed by anyone outside of the family. She was from a generation of women who adhered to strict rules about how to conduct themselves and dressed conservatively. There was a certain level of

reserve in our interaction with each other. I'd always felt that I wasn't Indian or religious enough, in spite of Iqbal being neither traditional nor religious. Being married to the only son of an Indian family came with unspoken expectations to fulfil the duties of a wife and daughter-in-law. So when the four of us, three generations of women, visited a traditional hamam, the idea of stripping naked in front of her was daunting.

In the centre of the splendid entrance hall an ornate marble fountain gurgled peacefully. A string of international flags decorated one entire wall, like bunting at a festival. Above that, striped and checked towels hung to dry over the balcony that ran around the perimeter of the first floor. Iqbal and Rayhaan were taken through one of a number of glass-and-wood doors that led off from all sides of the internal courtyard. We girls followed an attendant through another door, to dressing rooms on the first of several stories of wooden cubicles. We were each given a pair of slippers and a soft cotton fringed towel, and were told to remove all our clothes and store our belongings.

“Must we take off *everything*?” asked Saarah, embarrassed.

Ma also tried to protest about removing her underwear. The attendant, a big-breasted, large-bottomed woman, frowned at us. With her hands on her hips, she set her lips into a stern line, wordlessly indicating that she wasn't to be disobeyed. She was fair-complexioned with dark shoulder-length hair pinned behind her ears and wore a red-and-white checked sarong, tied around her waist and neck over a bathing suit. Her fleshy arms looked soft and pale from working in the steamy baths all day.

“Don't worry, Ma,” I whispered, hoping to reassure all of us. “It's only women in there.” I had no idea what to expect but at least we'd be in it together.

When we were ready, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around our torsos from below the armpits to mid-thigh, and slippers on our feet, we followed the woman into an impressive room, with arches and pillars, dominated by a raised octagonal platform, like an altar in a Roman temple. Rays of light filtered into the room from a high central dome, pierced with circular windows, illuminating the steam and creating an otherworldly sensation. This was reinforced by the lack of colour. Self-consciously clutching our towels over our breasts, we looked around. Women of all shapes, sizes and skin tones were lolling about in various stages of ablutions. No one was wearing anything.

We were ushered to one of the washing areas, featuring a basin with copper taps, separated from the others by marble panels, to create some sense of privacy. Two attendants motioned for us to sit on the wet, slippery floor between their feet. Paree and I took our places, Saarah and Ma waiting their turns apprehensively. First, my towel was unceremoniously whipped off and I was soaked with warm water. Then, before I knew it, every inch of my body was being scrubbed briskly with a coarse soapy mitt. I realised it was best to surrender into the hands of this stranger who took charge of my body in a way that no one had since I was a child. Giving up control was at once both invigorating and liberating. Next, a bucketful of warm water was upended over my head and I was led to the central heated marble plinth. Timid Saarah took my place on the conveyor belt, for her scrubbing. Another woman, ready with a lacy, foam-filled cloth, proceeded to give me a wet massage.

That done, Saarah and I exchanged places. My hair was vigorously shampooed until my scalp tingled and my hair squeaked. Without much ado, I was doused with a final deluge of cold water and escorted back to the plinth, where my body was pummelled into shape with such intensity, I was afraid I might leave an imprint on the marble. Finally, pink and tingling all over,

we were left to linger and sweat next to one of the basins, a jug for cold water nearby. We'd gone through the unfamiliar rituals silently, amid the noise of laughter and chattering, splashing and slapping. Women, otherwise restricted to their homes, found this a safe space to socialise.

"Phew," said Pree. "That was like a carwash. All we had to do was move through under their hands."

"It reminded me of swimming across rapids," I replied. "Once we entered the water, the only thing to do was surrender to the flow."

"They massaged so hard," said Saarah, with her arms folded across her upper body. "I don't think I want to do that again."

Hair wrapped turban-style, with a dry towel around our torsos, and the fresh smell of soap exuding from every pore, we went back to the changing room. Here we were allowed to relax with tea while our bodies returned to their regular temperatures.

"I went to the men's section with Dad," said Rayhaan, bubbling over with excitement from the experience. "They massage very well. The baths are 300 years old. The sultan built it. He sat where me and Dad sat."

Although the amenities were separate, it sounded as if they'd been similarly manhandled, albeit by burly sweaty masseurs who "liked to shout at each other", according to Rayhaan. He'd clearly enjoyed the chance to be one of the "men".

Historians don't know exactly when people started to bathe indoors. Public baths were originally founded by the Romans who passed the tradition on to the Byzantines and from them to the Ottoman Turks. They were adapted to Turkish tastes, and called "hamam". The baths had

been a gift to the city from the sultan in 1741. People of every rank and class, young and old, could go in freely. What started out as a public service because of water shortages provided a perfect marriage between the Quran's demand for cleanliness and the pleasure of indulgence. With the Islamic emphasis on ritual ablutions before each of the day's five prayers, the baths had been a customary part of daily life since mediaeval times. Although modern Turks did most of their showering at home, the public hamam was still a major part of the culture.

“What a great way to end the day,” said Iqbal. “It's made me hungry. Let's stop for a snack. We should do this every night.”

I caught my mother-in-law looking at me. There was no need for words. Her expression conveyed clearly what she thought about Iqbal's suggestion. He'd be going to the hamam by himself if she had any choice in the matter. I imagined that the experience of the baths might have been a bit of a shock, like an initiation into a secret society or club. I was sure not even her own daughters had shared such an intimate experience with her. I felt we'd connected, through our vulnerability, on a deeper level. I suspected Saarah and Paree felt the same way although they hadn't verbalised it.

Women hold the society together – we care for our children, gather the food and draw the water from the well. We set the tone for how our children view themselves and their bodies. From our mothers we learn what it means to be a woman and how to take care of ourselves. However, rituals, especially those around becoming a woman, no longer form a major part of our lives. Grandmothers hold the stories, memories and wisdom of the community; they keep alive the rituals and beliefs. My mother-in-law came from a generation where pregnancy was a taboo topic, hidden by voluminous dresses. Even I'd been brought up in a time when menstruation

meant no longer “running around with your brothers like a tom-boy”, according to my mother. By sharing this space and time in the hamam, a sense of cohesion had been created between us, forging a foundation for future intimacy. Our self-consciousness was stripped off with our outer coverings. It didn’t matter so much that we were from different generations and cultures, or whether we fitted into someone’s notion of the ideal woman’s shape. We emerged from the hamam in an altered state: steamed, scrubbed, and stretched. I wouldn’t be surprised if we all glowed as we loped back to the hotel.

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Mark Antony is said to have picked the Turkish Riviera as the most beautiful wedding gift for his beloved Cleopatra. After a week of soaking up the culture of Istanbul, we flew south to Antalya, the principal holiday resort of the region, to bathe in the sunlight. We hired a car to explore the area, using our resort-style hotel as a base. We’d learned in Italy that our children were content to imbibe their share of art, history and culture if they knew they’d be free to relax at the end of the day with a swim or lying around the pool. Going at their pace also gave us an excuse to rest and absorb all we’d seen and heard.

The resort was modern, with a spa, big pools, and many activities. The large dining areas served food all day. It was perfect for the children, since they could eat whenever they wanted, unbound by routine. Every evening after dinner, a man would push an ice-cream trolley out into the garden and our main care would be whether to choose coconut, Turkish delight or pistachio flavours. We’d sit on the pebbly beach, the warm Mediterranean Sea lapping our feet, licking our ice-cream while we reflected on the day’s excursion.

This part of the coast in the south-west of Turkey was more rural: shepherds, farmers and women in dark pantaloons and black scarves on their heads, tended the fields. We explored a short stretch of the thousands of kilometres of shoreline and historical sites, with the cool blue colours of the Aegean and Mediterranean seas on one side, and the forests on the slopes of the Taurus Mountains on the other. In contrast to Istanbul, there were very few English-speakers around. Needing directions and unable to make himself understood in English, Iqbal tried out his rusty high-school-German on an old man walking beside the road. The stranger, his face tanned and furrowed from working in the open air, was happy to assist.

“What made you use German?” I asked.

“Germany and Turkey have had diplomatic relations since before WWI,” he replied. He explained that in the 1960s there had been a great demand for migrant labourers in what was then West Germany. Turkey at the time had been experiencing high levels of unemployment and was happy to provide the manpower. Turks now formed the largest ethnic minority in Germany.

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The theatre at Aspendos, built by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, is the best-preserved theatre in Turkey and one of the finest in the world. It is still in use and our visit coincided with the Aspendos International Opera and Ballet Festival. We bought tickets for the ballet, *Don Quixote*, that started at 21h30. Aspendos had been one of the first cities in the region to strike coinage under its own name. While our tickets were computer-generated, theirs had been made of metal, ivory, bone, or in most cases, fired clay, with a picture on one side and a row and seat number on the other. None of us were ballet fans but the entertainment was irrelevant. While we waited for the show to start, I related the story of the theatre to the children.

The king of Aspendos had held a contest to see who could render the greatest service to the city. His daughter's hand in marriage was the prize. Hearing this, the artisans of the area worked at great speed. At last, when the day of the decision came and the king had examined all their efforts one by one, he designated two candidates. The first of them had succeeded in setting up a system of aqueducts that enabled water to be brought to the city from great distances. The second had built the theatre. Just as the king was on the point of deciding in favour of the first candidate, he was asked to have one more look at the theatre. While wandering about in the upper galleries, a deep voice from an unknown source could be heard: "The king's daughter must be given to me". Astonished, the king looked around for the speaker but could find no one. It was, of course, the architect himself, speaking in a low voice from the stage. In the end, it was he who won the hand of the princess and the wedding ceremony took place in the theatre.

Beneath a sky like dark silk, we sat on grey stone seats, polished by the elements and worn into smooth soft curves by spectators over two thousand years. They were surprisingly more comfortable than suggested by first impressions. Music filled the night and nimble dancers pirouetted across the stage. The theatre was still famous for its magnificent acoustics and the slightest sound made at the centre of the orchestral pit could easily be heard in the uppermost galleries. Enchanted, we hardly noticed the passage of two hours.

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We were shocked out of our happy reverie by a bomb blast in the nearby Aegean resort of Kuşadası. The bomb had been planted on a minibus, filled with passengers, bound for the beach. The bus had been ripped apart in the explosion that killed five people and injured thirteen. The resort was popular with both Turkish and foreign tourists, and a favourite destination of Britons.

We heard that 20 people had also been injured in an attack six days earlier. Security was tightened at resorts across the region, and police closely monitored all vehicles entering and leaving towns and hotels.

After the attack, life returned to normal, people returned to work and tourists returned to the beaches. Meanwhile, halfway across the world, hundreds of people gathered in a US Army base to quietly mark the anniversary of the first test of an atomic bomb 60 years earlier, where a black obelisk marks the first Ground Zero.

“You should come home,” said Fatima, when she spoke to us again. “It seems like South Africa is the safest place to be.”

It was ironic that, until very recently, our leaders had been branded terrorists and people had left the country in fear of what might happen after South Africa’s first democratic elections. The US and its allies were waging a war against terrorism, a “crusade” according to George W Bush. However, political and economic conflicts that were transformed into religious wars, served only to strengthen the hand of fundamentalists and conservatives, against those who were more enlightened. By bombing Afghanistan, the US seemed to care only about taking revenge for 9/11 regardless of who was hurt in the process. All this had achieved was a rise in fundamentalism. Rather than exploring more humane ways of reacting to violence, of crossing borders and learning to live interdependently, so much effort is invested in demonising and destroying the “other”. Politicians would like us to believe there’s no alternative to war, but surely diplomacy or negotiation would be a more effective means of dealing with the situation, rather than bombing innocent women and children? War reduced us from being human to being a country, or a race, to what we looked like on the outside. But how could we expect there to be

peace when two thirds of the planet had problems? Millions of people, in our country and the world, lived in poverty, starvation and despair without access to basic necessities like clean drinking water. These were the root issues. Those who had food, security and prospects weren't likely to kill or be killed.

Terrorism sought to destroy civilisation whether it was Christian, Muslim or secular. They wanted to frighten us so that we stayed in our little holes and didn't talk to each other. In South Africa, the apartheid regime had separated us from those who were different. We lived, went to school, married and worshipped with people who looked like us, and thought like we did. We were forced to surround ourselves with our mirror image and had little or no connection with worlds beyond the one we took for granted. More than ten years post-apartheid, I found the delineations between different population groups were still clear to see, as many South Africans still clung rigidly to their beliefs, practised their religions conservatively and stayed in the communities they'd been confined to.

One of the most noteworthy attributes of the Ottoman Empire was the toleration of different religious beliefs. The Turks were Muslim and, as such, had accepted the existence of the "People of the Book", the monotheistic religions. Large Christian and Jewish communities flourished in the Ottoman lands until the end of the empire. Christians and Jews went about their own business, prayed in their own temples and taught their own children. In Europe at the time, only one religion was tolerated. Conversion, exile or death, were the choices for those who dissented. When Spain was conquered by Christian rulers, they expelled the Muslims and Jews who'd lived there for centuries. The Ottomans, realising that religious tolerance was a sound basis for government, took them in. They believed that people who were allowed to freely practise their religions were less likely to revolt. Tolerance wasn't enough, though, if it wasn't

supported by genuine social interaction and a real knowledge of the other. When we are unable to recognise, accept and celebrate our differences, they threaten to divide us.

Given our backgrounds, Iqbal and I felt a responsibility to teach Saarah and Rayhaan to challenge the stereotypes that people might hold of each other, whether religious or cultural. We'd seen how travelling helped to break down these walls. It encouraged us to embrace the "other", and fed our curiosities about their religion, history, economics and politics. Every effort slowly widened our circle, helping us to step out of our tombs like whirling dervishes, to shed discrimination and prejudices.

At the entrance to the airport we were pulled aside and asked to open one of our bags as we went through the scanner. It was Rayhaan's, and I remembered it contained his sword. I didn't understand why they were making us open it, since it wasn't hand luggage. The over-cautious staff consulted with each other, glaring at us as if we were terrorists planning to hijack the plane with a replica of an Ottoman sword. We were allowed to close the bag again, with the proviso that it be checked in.

"Obviously they're being super-security-conscious after the attacks," said Iqbal. "On top of it we're travelling from a Muslim country through the UK."

"Turkey doesn't look like a Muslim country," said Paree. "Not all the women wore scarves and we hardly saw any men with big beards. And they served wine and Raki everywhere."

"That doesn't mean the people aren't Muslim," said Saarah.

CHAPTER 5: CUBA via MADRID

–a sense of renewal and transition–

April 2006 (Saarah 13/ Rayhaan 9)

I had heard that Madrid's weather could be *nueve meses de invierno y tres de infierno*, nine months of winter and three of hell, but we seemed to have found a few days of heaven. It was April and there was neither the humidity nor the showers I'd expected. The locals were emerging from hibernation to bask in the sun. Couples of all ages were walking, arms interlocked, without any purpose, no fixed destination in mind. Elegant women in sensible heels, with paisley scarves tucked into the collars of crisp white blouses, stood beside distinguished grey-haired gentlemen wearing jackets, and smiled at their grandchildren's antics. Young lovers chatted over red wine and tapas at tables spilling out onto the piazza.

Saarah, Rayhaan and I had arrived in the early hours of the morning, without incident. Iqbal would be joining us from the UK and we'd fly to Cuba together. This was the first time we'd travelled without him and I'd been anxious at the prospect. Usually he forged ahead, dealing with passports, tickets, taxis and hotels, while I brought up the rear with children and bags. We stowed our luggage at the hotel, ate breakfast (they were impressed to discover *churros*, or fried doughnuts dipped in hot chocolate, were a breakfast staple for Madrileños) and went for a walk. The main thoroughfare was abuzz with police and photographers.

"Maybe it's someone famous," said Saarah, starry-eyed. "Do you know Posh and Becks live in Madrid?" I didn't think the former member of a British pop group and a soccer player were the cause of congestion in the grand avenue.

Our reconnaissance revealed that we were in the centre of the art district and I made a mental note to return to the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and the Museo del Prado later. I noticed the botanical gardens next to the museums. A visit there would be perfect to clear the head of a young boy overcome by too much art and culture. We returned to the hotel via side streets in order to bypass the police barricades. The Senegalese doorman, who flashed a smile at us, explained that we'd arrived during the opening of Parliament.

“Oh, boring,” said Saarah, disappointed by the lack of glamour. We settled down for what was supposed to be a catnap, and managed to sleep right through lunch. An early supper sounded like a good idea, but was met with shock by the hotel staff who informed us that it was impossible to dine at 18h30.

“I’m on the brink of starvation,” said Saarah. “I’ve never been anywhere where you can’t eat when you want to.”

“We’ll have to learn to time our siestas better,” I replied.

“I saw a Starbucks when we came back from our walk,” she said. “That’s where people in the movies go. Maybe we’ll see someone famous.”

Once she had her caramel macchiato, we set off to explore. Close to the hotel, we found a patisserie specialising in marzipan, candied fruit and *turrón*, or nougat, traditionally eaten at Christmas. An embossed silver plaque on the side of the shop announced that the city of Madrid had recognised the store in 1855. Confectionery, displayed in the window on rotating plate stands, extended an invitation to enter. Smells of toasted almond and caramel greeted us as we pushed open the door, causing bells to tinkle. The crest of the Spanish royal family, bestowed by Isabel II, was exhibited in a prominent place. Mahogany wood gleamed and light bounced off

mirrors on panelled walls and glass cases with row upon row of sweet temptations. The elderly staff spoke only Spanish and we pointed to what we wanted.

“With Dad we’re the Fantastic Four,” said Rayhaan as we left, “and without him, we’re the Lamé Three”. Iqbal had started travelling when Rayhaan was young and he’d always struggled with the separation. Saarah, however, was gearing up for “Operation Siesta”.

“This is what I’m going to do for the next few days: have breakfast, do stuff, then coffee and tapas, do more stuff, have lunch, siesta, and eat supper at 21h00.”

The Prado was on her list of “stuff” to do. Audio guides helped us to focus on a selection of Flemish and Dutch works from the 12th to 19th centuries. The museum also housed more than a hundred Francisco Goya paintings, the biggest collection in the world. Rayhaan dismissed them as “old paintings” but Saarah was intrigued by the way Goya had experimented with colour and light in his earlier works. The artist, regarded as one of the last of the Old Masters and the first of the moderns, had tried to capture the strong colours of the Spanish landscape, the contrasts and accents of the seasons, and the intensity of the sun and sea.

“The rest of the paintings are just too depressing,” she said. “They’re all Jesus on the cross.”

By the time Iqbal arrived, we were ready to guide him to the modern art at Reina Sofia where Picasso’s *Guernica* was the centrepiece. We were all drawn to the sombre, colourless work. The brutality and bloodshed of the Spanish Civil War had inspired this dramatic and powerful mural-sized canvas. Almost a third of the inhabitants of the Basque capital had been killed during the intense aerial bombardment of the town by Nazi planes, under the orders of General Franco. Picasso had been commissioned to do a painting to decorate the Spanish

pavilion during the World Fair in Paris in 1937. However, when he heard what happened in Guernica, he began painting this instead. On completion, he presented the painting to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, stipulating that it be returned to Spain when democracy was restored. In 1981, five years after Franco's death, the mural came home. I sat in front of the haunting painting, trying to make sense of the contorted and twisted images of humans and animals. The bull standing guard over the mother, who screamed over the limp body of the child in her arms, seemed to me a symbol of hope, showing the strength and continuity of the Spanish people. The artist had managed to infuse the work with anguish, evoking in me the same empathy I felt when looking at the photograph of Hector Pieterse, one of the first fatalities of the 1976 student riots in South Africa.

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El Rastro, one of the oldest markets in Europe, has been operating on the Plaza Mayor on Sundays and public holidays since mediaeval times. The vast square was designed and built during the 16th and 17th centuries, the Golden Age of cultural and economic prosperity. Thousands of stalls spread out from under arcades and wound down side streets, extending through one of the city's oldest working-class neighbourhoods. Old and new clothing, jewellery, household items, music, crafts, food, old coins and stamps were all on sale. African men sold knock-off designer handbags and sunglasses. In Painters' Street, Saarah and Rayhaan stopped to watch an artist working on a still-life of a vase of vibrant orange flowers, against a background of warm yellows. They were attracted by his technique of using an ordinary table knife to smear thick oil paint onto canvas, creating a three-dimensional effect. They'd already introduced themselves to Gallego and begged us to buy the artwork that would be "perfect in our kitchen".

In front of a stall selling large posters, copies of old announcements for flamenco shows and bullfights, a memory marched through my head. The pictures of the dancer and matador reminded me of my mother who never had the opportunity to travel but often told us she had “Spanish blood”. A 60-centimetre tall Spanish doll stood on the lounge floor and a smaller version on top of the display cabinet. Both dancers, wearing flouncy, frilly dresses, were in typical flamenco poses, one arm above the head, holding a minute set of castanets, a fan in the other hand. Their jet-black hair was swept into tight buns. Lace mantillas hung from black combs. Each had a red carnation stuck behind an ear. When my mother accompanied my granny to church, she’d drape a similar scarf over her head and shoulders, reinforcing the image in our minds.

I can only imagine what a struggle her life must’ve been with five children before she turned 30. She stayed at home while my father worked two jobs. Sometimes she’d joke that she was going to pack her bags and move to Spain to find a matador. She must have found some escape in the Spanish knick-knacks on the mantelpiece and the framed print of a bullfighter on the wall. Maybe when she shut her eyes she heard the clack of castanets, the pounding of high heels and the swish of ruffled skirts, as dancers went through their paces accompanied by a swarthy-skinned flamenco guitarist. Perhaps this fantasy gave her reason to cope with the drudgery of her daily life. She grew up in a family split by racial classification and knew very little about her heritage. She’d invented a romantic history that we, as children, had no reason to doubt. I understood her need to identify with something greater, a culture, a tribe. Our well-being is dependent on a sense of belonging that starts with our friends and family, and extends to our country.

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It was hard not to compare Madrid to the cities we'd visited in Italy. The cobblestone streets, the centuries-old buildings and the Latin language were all similar. But Madrid felt more organised and friendlier than any other European city we'd been to. The Mediterranean climate and intertwined Islamic and Christian influences that had moulded the city, were familiar to me. Spain has a diverse history of occupation by Romans, Arabs, French, Phoenicians and Greeks. As the capital of Spain, modern-day Madrid had attracted immigrants from Latin America, Europe, Asia and North and West Africa. Cultural influences have penetrated it from every corner of the globe. It was rich with different faces, languages, customs, attitudes and histories. I felt, for the first time, that I was in a place where I could blend in with the locals. I liked the sound of the language and the look of the people. Perhaps it was the echoes of Arabia and the olive skin tones of the people that had also attracted my mother.

I had major surgery scheduled shortly after our return to Cape Town and had been informed of a lengthy convalescence and certain restrictions. A friend, who'd undergone a similar operation, had advised me to find something that I *could* do, rather than focus on not being able to drive or exercise. I'd always wanted to learn a foreign language and now couldn't see any reason why it shouldn't be Spanish.

The primary reason for our visit to Madrid had been as a convenient route to Havana (Iberia Airlines offered weekly flights). Iqbal had visited the island in 1998-1999, as part of a team tasked with building medical and trade relations between South Africa and Cuba as well as investigating the possibilities of an exchange of doctors and the importation of vaccines. He was flying from Miami via Cancun, Mexico, to Havana. However, when he checked in, the immigration authorities refused to acknowledge his final destination as Havana and demanded

that he produce a visa for Mexico. He missed his flight and spent the night in the airport lounge waiting for the extra documents.

Spain had a complicated relationship with Cuba, the last of its colonies to revolt at the end of the 19th century. The 500-year-old association had been violent and turbulent and there are still many unresolved issues. However, in 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Spain's socialist government rushed to its former colony with aid and investment. After the Cuban government relaxed its rules regarding foreign ownership of businesses, Spanish hotel chains had invested millions in the tourism industry. In 1996, a conservative government came to power in Spain and withdrew most of its financial assistance, calling for reform. Before long, though, business relations were restored.

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“What did you pack in the bags?” Iqbal asked, irritated by the two-hour wait to clear customs at Havana's José Martí airport. We'd also been delayed for more than an hour in Madrid. “They're checking the bags as if there's something suspicious in them.” A nervous government official, there to meet us, hovered behind Iqbal.

“I packed a few bottles of mineral water,” I said.

“What did you do that for?” he rolled his eyes. “They must think we dissolved something in the water.” I'd read that water on the island wasn't potable, and not knowing what to expect, had come prepared in case of an emergency involving bad plumbing and thirsty children. One list I'd consulted had recommended that we take along toilet paper, disposable nappies, tampons, candles and a bath plug. Eventually reason prevailed and, relieved that we didn't pose any

danger to the security of the island, our escort piled us into the car and delivered us to our hotel in Old Havana.

The 19th-century establishment had recently re-opened, after a Spanish-funded restoration. The renovations seemed to have been done sensitively, mosaic tile by mosaic tile, with close attention to the original exuberant Art Deco style. Glass was etched or sand-blasted, furniture was trimmed with chrome, vine leaves and trailing tendrils decorated mirror frames, and geometric patterns dominated fabrics and rugs. The mezzanine bar, under an atrium skylight, harked back to a more glamorous era with cane furniture and gigantic lush indoor plants in pots on the black and white chequerboard floor. Large murals depicting Cuban landscapes decorated the walls.

We were across the street from the Capitolio, Gran Teatro (home of the Cuban National Ballet) and the Partagas Cigar Factory. The Capitol, inspired by and bearing a marked resemblance to the building in Washington, stood in the middle of Havana like a monument to the old regime. Its domed presence seemed almost an act of defiance, not merely incongruous. To combat jet lag and to stretch our legs, we took a stroll down Paseo del Prado, the pedestrian boulevard. Benches were placed at regular intervals along the wide palm-tree-lined main street so we could pause and contemplate the grand buildings. Isolation had served to give Havana a small-town feel, unspoilt by multi-national chain stores and restaurants. The glory of the former colony was evident in the baroque and neoclassical architecture. However, the edifices looked worn and dilapidated, weathered and warped by ocean spray and humidity. Many of the decaying apartment buildings and mansions had been on the UN World Heritage list since 1982 and were now obscured by shrouds of scaffolding. Everywhere construction crews were hard at work to the sound of jackhammers. In most cases, facades were being maintained while the interiors were

guttled and refurbished. The flimsy scaffolding appeared to be little more than bamboo lashed together with rope. It looked more suitable for trellising to support garden creepers, than platforms for builders to clamber on.

Iqbal had been keen for us to visit “before things changed”, to come to Cuba before drive-through McDonald’s outlets and supermarket chains. It had been 17 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. The tightening of the US embargo had come at the same time as the drying up of funds from the former Soviet Union, choking the growth of the country. However, Cuba was slowly shifting from its socialist past to become a major Caribbean tourist destination. The renaissance of the country was attracting increasing numbers of visitors. An institute had been created to teach residents skills such as carpentry, building and art restoration. The revenue from tourism was being ploughed back into the renovation of, not only hotels, but also schools and residences. In an ironic twist, capitalist reforms were being used to preserve socialist ideals. There was a sense of renewal and transition in the air. After its tumultuous history the country was ready to embrace a new phase, rebranded and reinvented.

The wiry man, bent with age, who offered to take our photograph on the steps of the Museum of the Republic, looked as decrepit as his old box camera, similar to the one my father had when we were children. This device, standing on a tripod, was held together with elastic bands and clothes pegs and I had serious doubts about what it could produce. The blurry black-and-white image that emerged after some time wouldn’t have been out of place in my grandmother’s photo album. Coming from a society where it’s always cheaper and easier to replace than to preserve, I was astonished to see how Cubans took care of their possessions and

recycled. With enforced ingenuity they extended the life of easily-replaceable items, like watches, bicycles and tyres.

Groups of school children, wearing red tunics over white shirts, sang and played games on the roadside. Young and old sat around eating, chatting or smoking on benches and steps along the shaded promenade. The people in the streets were outgoing and sociable, their faces breaking into easy smiles. Voluptuous girls in tight-fitting, brightly-coloured clothes – Lycra cycling shorts, off-the-shoulder tops and flip-flops – looked at ease as they sashayed down the streets of Havana to the rhythm of the salsa that could be heard on street corners. Loud-mouthed women hung out of the upstairs windows of buildings with flaking blue, green and yellow paint and gaping cracks. *Project Fenix*, as the revival was called, was in a race against time.

Boys played baseball with makeshift bats in every open space. Soccer was what I expected, but a Cuban team had never made it past the preliminary qualifiers for the World Cup. Baseball was first played on the island in the late 19th century with equipment brought from the USA by a local student. It became so popular that the Spanish banned it, considering it to be pro-American. In spite of this, baseball had become one of the national sports, along with basketball. The Cuban men's team had won either gold or silver, in close competition with the USA, since 1992 when the sport had become recognised by the Olympic body.

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Cubans have been making cigars at Partagas, the oldest and most productive factory in the country, since 1845. The earthy smell of dried and fermented tobacco leaves, complemented by the cedar-wood boxes, permeated the factory and had soaked into the stone walls, creaky floors and woodwork on all four stories of the distinctive cream and reddish-brown building. The

whole cigar was still made by hand. Scores of workers were engrossed in all the stages of production – drying, sorting, rolling and finally adorning them with a band and boxing them. Women, with bad manicures and curlers in their hair, continued their labours in spite of the tourists' stares.

Music blared from an old radio but, we were told, in days gone by, someone would stand at the front of the factory floor and read from newspapers or books to relieve the monotony and tedium of the eight-hour shifts. Many of the names of the cigars resulted from these stories, hence *Romeo y Julieta* and *Count of Monte Cristo*. The history of Cuba from the time when peaceful Indians lived on the shores of the beautiful island, covered with virgin forest, through discovery and independence to the revolutionary heroes and martyrs, is told on a series of 19th-century lithographs used to decorate the cigar boxes. The images have been inspired by themes, such as, *The Story of a Mulatto Girl* and *The Sugar Mills*. José Martí, hero of the battle of independence, is said to have used a cigar for sending the order for the uprising against the Spanish in 1895. Later, during the Revolution, Che Guevara recommended smoking as an important complement to the lonely guerrilla life.

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We were looking forward to dinner with Marisa, a fellow Capetonian, and her family. Marisa and I had been on the executive of the South African Health Workers' Congress in the 1980s and 1990s. Together we'd marched in the city centre, dodged bullets in the townships and worked on developing health policy for a new South Africa. Marisa had met Carlos, a Cuban medical doctor, when he came to South Africa as an adviser and monitor before our first democratic elections.

She was from a middle-class family in the former “coloured” suburb of Athlone. She’d been well-groomed, fashion conscious and, for her 25th birthday, had bought a second-hand Porsche, her dream car. She’d worked two jobs and saved for years, but we all teased her about her indulgent mode of transport, even more so after she’d begun a relationship with Carlos, the communist. Like me, she’d been progressive and involved in the struggle, but not highly politicised and I was curious to see how she’d adapted to life in a country with rations, restrictions and queues.

Their double-storey house was on a quiet street on a large plot of sandy land. We ate outside in the overgrown garden, snacking on thinly-sliced plantains, fried like chips. Dinner was chicken and prawns with *Moros y Cristianos* or Moors and Christians (black beans and rice) followed by sweet guavas and cheese for dessert. Cuban cuisine still has strong ties to Spain but the revolution and embargo had impacted on the diet of the islanders by cutting them off from their source of imports. Cuban diet relies on roots and tubers, such as fleshy *malanga* (a kind of potato), *boniatos* (sweet potato), and starchy cassava or yucca. Rice was a staple and pork was still the meat of choice, but chicken and fish were popular as well. The starch-rich diet explained the many curvy women we’d seen on the streets.

When Saarah asked to use the toilet, Marisa showed her the way, cautioning her not to flush unless she wanted to flood the bathroom. Saarah was aghast that she’d have to pop the used paper into a basket next to the toilet, reminding me of a scene out of Gerald Durrell’s *My Family and Other Animals*. Marisa explained that an already erratic water and electricity supply had been further compromised by the recent hurricane.

Katrina had been the worst natural disaster in many years but, according to Marisa, Cubans had been well-prepared to deal with the situation. Every adult receives civil training, children learn about storm preparation at school and older students monitor their neighbourhoods to identify weak trees and other hazards. At the start of the hurricane season, disaster plans are revised based on the previous year's experiences. The country is widely acknowledged as delivering excellent protection to its 1,3 million citizens. Because of tight state control and a "culture of safety", it was relatively easy to mobilise large numbers of people and evacuate them in emergencies. Because of the attention to detail, minimal life has been lost in recent years despite major storms. Almost every hurricane that strikes the US passes through Cuba first. Although hundreds had lost their lives when Katrina devastated New Orleans, only two people had been killed in Cuba. She said that the meteorological agencies of the USA and Cuba collaborated on storm-forecasting in spite of the tensions between their governments.

Marisa and her family occupied the upstairs section of the house; the bottom floor belonged to Carlos' brother. I found myself instinctively looking for a switch as I struggled to see in the dim light emitted from the energy-saving bulbs, but that was all the illumination we were entitled to. The dark furniture was simple and basic. Plastic flowers stood in a vase on a sideboard. Pride of place was given to a music player. After dinner their sons, Camilo and David, introduced Saarah and Rayhaan to "Reggaeton", a fusion of salsa rhythms, hip-hop beats and reggae. Eddy K, the group who graced the cover of the glossy *Tropicana Internacional* magazine they showed Saarah and Rayhaan, was apparently the best Reggaeton group in Cuba. They didn't need to speak a common language.

A space was cleared in the middle of the living room and soon an impromptu party was under way, reminding me of house parties during the 1980s. The informal gatherings, along with

concerts, had offered an alternative means of meeting under the restrictions placed on us by states of emergency. During the day, we'd be protesting and at night we'd be letting off steam in someone's garage. Being able to dance maintained our humanity and strengthened our spirit of resistance. Marisa nudged me and inclined her head toward Camillo. In spite of the lively beat of the hip hop music, he'd risen onto his toes and had his arms over his head, executing a perfect pirouette.

"He loves ballet," she whispered, "much to the dismay of his father, the revolutionary."

"Mareesa makes me angry," said Carlos, overhearing her. "She encourages him to dance like a woman."

"Marisa, did you enjoy the magazine?" I asked, changing the subject. I'd offered her the *Fair Lady* I'd read on the plane when she'd come to greet us at the hotel. I expected that she'd appreciate the glossy, women's-interest periodical but she'd been unusually grateful.

"I haven't read it yet," she said, smiling, "and it's going to be a while before I do." She'd taken the magazine to work to share with her colleagues. Each one had been assigned a number and a roster was set up to read it. I was surprised at how effortlessly she seemed to have given up what I took to be basic luxuries. When I offered to bring anything she wanted from South Africa, she asked for stationery for the children, nothing for herself. She'd settled in her adopted country and had dedicated herself to its people, playing a role in South African-Cuban relations. With her South African passport, she was able to travel outside of Cuba on behalf of the government. She adapted to fit in where she was needed, as did Carlos. Although he was a medical doctor, he'd represented his country in various capacities and had even worked as a librarian. On their return

to Cuba from South Africa, he'd been posted to Panama as ambassador, and was now the Director of Cuba Arte.

“Do you know that you owe me?” Marisa asked, turning to Iqbal. “I saved you.” He had no idea what she was talking about.

“Remember when you were being chased by the cops and you ran into school and dropped your haversack at my feet?”

“That was you?” he asked, looking at her in amazement.

Iqbal and Marisa had both attended Livingstone High School. As a politically active student, he'd been part of the Committee of 81, a grouping of schools banned after the 1980 economic boycott. While on his way to a meeting in the school vicinity, he was spotted by the police who chased him through the suburb and onto the school grounds. As chairman of the student inter-regional congress, he'd been carrying important documents. Realising that he needed to keep his haversack safe, he dropped it at the feet of one of the students waiting for a lift on the steps. He was caught climbing over the wall, beaten and thrown into the back of a van.

“I used to have nightmares about who I gave the bag to,” he said.

“I thought you knew,” said Marisa. “I waited for you to ask me for it but you never did. It's probably still at my parents' house.”

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Carlos and Marisa collected us at the hotel in a 1955 Chevrolet Bellaire, six cylinders. The car, in green and cream with flashes of chrome, was in almost-mint condition apart from tiny bubbles of rust on the corners of the doors. Inside, the original wood-panelling gleamed, the steering wheel

was covered in tan leather and the windows still hummed up and down at the touch of a button. Chevrolets, Buicks and Plymouths, all dating back to the 1950s, have defied the march of time and survived the Caribbean elements and absence of spare parts. They've never been overhauled or updated. Even the American manufacturers of the cars, I'm sure, would be surprised at the tenacity and longevity of their machines.

We rumbled off to Club Tropicana, one of the oldest cabaret shows in the world. Marisa and Carlos manoeuvred us to seats near the front of the open-air venue. The food was mediocre, the *Cuba libre* (rum-and-coke) complimentary and the show over-priced, but we were whisked back to the glitz and glamour of the 1940s. The 90-minute extravaganza of light, colour, song and dance, features scantily clad girls with an abundance of feathers, frills, sequins and the dazzle of lamé and diamanté. I wondered how the continuous stream of girls in G-strings, suspender belts and plumed headdresses in the lavish and sensual Vegas-style cabaret fitted in with the revolution.

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I'm convinced there's an island mentality. I recognised this devil-may-care attitude to match the sunshine, blue skies and palm trees from our Mauritian visits. The islands shared a history of colonisation, slavery and a resistance reflected in the rhythm of their music. Perhaps it's something to do with living on a tiny patch of earth that may be engulfed by a hurricane, wiped out by a cyclone or invaded by a super-power. What was the use of worrying about material possessions when they could all be snatched away in an instant?

One night we split up into two black-and-yellow coco-taxis (covered three-wheeled scooters) and raced along El Malecón, spurred on by Rayhaan's cries to "go faster" and "pass

them”. The seawall has been standing guard over the city for more than a century. We could see where parts of it had recently been rebuilt after the damage wreaked by Katrina eight months before. Foamy sea-spray ricocheted off boulders and salty air swirled around us, offering a welcome respite from the tropical humidity. There were many locals out for a stroll, fishermen sat on the seawall, music blared from somewhere and couples practised their dance steps. It looked like a national holiday. Perhaps it was the joy of surviving Katrina that was so tangible and exhilarating.

A woman pushed a flyer into my hand, touting the exclusive opportunity to learn to dance the Cuban way, with a “skilled professor, a couple of dancing guides and English, French and Italian translation”. Iqbal and Saarah were keen to learn to salsa. I, with my two left feet, was content to soak up the atmosphere in the dusty hall, pulsating with music. The voices of teachers, young girls in halter-neck tops and tight jeans or shorts, called out the rhythm – *uno, dos, tres* – over and over again.

“Come on, Saarah,” I cheered from the side-lines. “You’re from Cape Town. Show them what you’ve got.”

Salsa originated here, developing from bolero, rumba, son, mambo and cha-cha-cha. Cape Town had a similar, but less sexy, jazz version. Because of the isolation brought about by apartheid, a distinctive jazz sound had developed along with a style of dancing unique to the descendants of different “races” in the Cape. I imagined that salsa, the most famous of all Latin dances, had probably emerged in Cuba along similar lines from a combination of different music styles, a mix of African, European and Latin American influences.

An instructor was trying to teach Saarah the “basic step” while admonishing her not to look down at her feet. Iqbal was being steered backwards and forwards, both his partner’s hands on his hips, as she tried to coax some movement from his wooden torso. The teachers rolled their hips and wriggled their shoulders, their feet hardly touching the floor, while the Cape Town team plodded after them. Half an hour later, both perspiring freely, Iqbal and Saarah threw in the towel.

“This was certainly not as easy as *uno, dos, tres*,” Saarah grumbled as she escaped through the door.

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Horse-drawn buggies, rickshaws and bicycles provided alternative transport in this city where fuel shortages were routine. One of the carriage-drivers, who operated in the vicinity of the hotel, quickly struck up a friendship with Rayhaan, allowing him to take the reins on short rides around the block. He was employed by the government and paid a fixed salary, but hinted he was open to a tip.

“I wonder what’s going on there,” Saarah pointed to a crowd gathered outside a church. A young girl, looking like a bride, was posing for photographs with her family. Above the clattering rhythm of hooves, our driver explained that she was celebrating her *quinceañera*, and had attended a special mass where she reaffirmed her dedication to God and received a blessing from the priest. The celebration of a 15th birthday marks the transition from childhood to adulthood for Hispanic girls and can be a lavish affair. Each child receives a cake from the government on their birthday, but a fancier version is reserved for the *quinceañera*. Marriages were similarly graced with gifts.

“She looks like a Barbie doll,” said Saarah, unimpressed by the pink confectionery. The girl was dressed in a floor-length ball gown of satin and lace, with rhinestone accents. On her head she wore a tiara, like a modern-day Cinderella dressed for the ball.

I was intrigued by the religious side of the celebrations as I thought that going to church was frowned on after the revolution. Slaves, imported from West Africa to work on the plantations, had brought ancestor worship and animism to the Caribbean. The Spanish forced them to adopt Catholicism, but they’d compromised by pairing their deities with Catholic saints, who had corresponding qualities and powers. The result was that dozens of gods were worshipped. Many of those who called themselves Catholics were also adherents of an Afro-Cuban religious tradition known as *Santeria*. Apparently, the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998 had ushered in a new era of relations between the church and state in Cuba. It was the first time that a pope had set foot on the island. It seemed that, like the dancers at Tropicana, blessings from the church could be tolerated.

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We crowded onto the plant-filled balcony of a tiny apartment and squashed up on mismatched chairs around two tables pushed together under hanging fronds of delicious monster. Cubans had recently been allowed to open their homes as informal restaurants to small groups of people as a way of making money, creating the opportunity for self-employment. Small-scale businesses were flourishing in spite of strict rules and regulations. Prices were fairly uniform and guidelines governed what could be served and how many people were allowed to be seated. Eating at one of the *paladares* was a chance to meet the locals while sampling traditional home-cooking. It was casual and comfortable. The food, though, was bland, variety restricted by rations. I should’ve

packed the Nando's sauce rather than water. Rum flowed and cigars were passed around at the end of the meal.

It wasn't easy to get ordinary Cubans to talk about the country. Generally, we got the impression there was a level of respect for what Castro had achieved during the Revolution, but it was time for change. Our driver, who Iqbal pestered daily, tried to answer as evasively as possible. "Your husband, he ees the 'why-not man'," he said to me. "Every time I tell him something, he say, why not?"

Exasperating bureaucracy was the glue that held the regime together. Number plates were colour-coded to denote cars belonging to government members (brown), ordinary government (yellow) and private (blue). Cubans had to carry their identification documents with them at all times and weren't allowed to enter tourist areas, for fear of their corrupting influence. If you didn't know what you were being deprived of, how could you miss it? There was a different currency for tourists and for locals. All payments had to be made with convertible pesos that were equivalent to the US dollar. The Cuban peso was worth a fraction of that. Euros, Canadian dollars, pound sterling and Swiss francs were accepted for exchange. US dollars were subject to a service charge of 10%, levied "to protect Cuba's economic interests". There was an obvious hierarchy based on how far up the government ladder you were and "services to Cuba" were rewarded with certain privileges like holidays in the resort town of Varadero. I was surprised that Marisa and Carlos had two maids and a driver.

Although Castro had emphasised the eradication of racial discrimination as one of the core aims of the revolution, it persisted. As we walked around town we passed through pockets of neighbourhoods that seemed racially divided. Certainly, those employed to do behind-the-

scenes and more menial jobs in the hotel were darker-skinned compared to those who worked in reception. The merging of Arab, Spanish and African “races” had produced mulattos who looked very much like people on the Cape Flats. Marisa, with her olive skin, blended into most of Cuban society, but, when Carlos’ mother heard he’d married a South African, her first question was about Marisa’s race. Carlos’ ancestry was Spanish, like Castro’s. Perhaps I was still suffering from a post-apartheid hangover, but no matter where we went in the world, gender, class and race seemed to be the main determinants of how people lived or were treated.

With the improvement of relations with Spain, Cubans, who could prove their links to the former colonial power, were entitled to passports. Spain had also started paying pensions to its “foreign citizens” over the age of 65. Spanish citizenship offered an alternative to crossing the dangerous stretch of water to the USA and Spain is now home to the largest Cuban community outside the island, after Miami. They arrived there through study exchanges, training programmes and business. Of course, this largely excluded Cubans of African descent. As far as I could see, this relationship was creating divisions along racial lines and made a mockery of the revolution’s emphasis on national pride over historical ties.

*

Apart from cigars, Cuba wasn’t exactly a shoppers’ paradise. There was a thriving T-shirt market offering the image of a bereted Che sucking on his cigar, against backgrounds of all the colours of the rainbow. Stalls sold garishly decorated maracas and pencils, sarongs, beads and baskets, that could’ve come from any island. Iqbal bought *guayaberas*, the lightweight, short-sleeved shirts with two breast and two hip pockets worn by men from all walks of life.

Carlos introduced Iqbal to the artist, Ernesto García Peña, from who we bought two paintings. Peña, in his mid-50s, had been a professor at the National Art School and was internationally known for his sensual images of the nude female body. His creations were dream-like ethereal impressions in explosions of greens and blues. One naked body dominated the space and other smaller figures, some of copulating couples or plant motifs, floated in the background. The proceeds of the sale of books, art and music went to the state, and government permission was required to acquire the paintings. Certificates attesting to this had to be shown on exit of the country.

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Cuba sparked off much conversation and debate in our family. Saarah and Rayhaan were old enough to discuss equality, justice, human rights and the policies of communism versus capitalism.

“With communism,” Iqbal explained to Saarah and Rayhaan, “100 cows belong to the government. Milk and meat are shared among the people. With socialism, people own some cows but make sure there’s enough milk and meat for everyone. With capitalism, a few people own cows and make money out of milk and meat so they can buy more cows. Eventually most people own nothing and have to work for the few people who own the cows.”

“But what if the people who own the cows share the money with poor people?” insisted Saarah. “You’re always talking about rich and poor, black and white.”

“But everybody’s poor here,” said Rayhaan. “All the houses are broken and the cars are old.”

“Everybody has a house and we haven’t seen one person begging on the streets,” observed Saarah. Marisa called it being “born into a house”. When the revolution began people were given the houses that they lived in. Cubans were also “born into a food-book”. She said everyone started out at the same place, with access to quality health-care and education, and was guaranteed a meal every day. All their basic needs were met and what they did then was up to them. I found it admirable that everyone had a roof over their head. Cuba had the highest literacy rate in South America and one in seven workers was a university graduate. Birth mortality was low and malaria and tuberculosis had virtually been eradicated. I also noticed there was a remarkable absence of violent crime.

“Do you think it’s better for everybody to be the same, or do you think that some people should be rich and some poor?” asked Iqbal.

“Why can’t everybody be rich?” asked Saarah.

“But would you be motivated to work if everyone was earning the same?” I asked. “Won’t you get angry if others aren’t doing their part?”

We live in a world where survival of the fittest is prized and people step on each other to get ahead. Self-interest and the common good are in constant conflict. Maybe we did need to be policed, to make sure we shared and played fair. Cuba was now almost the only communist state in the world. The success of their policies had been largely impacted by the US embargo and propaganda. But would they have been able to achieve the impressive statistics regarding literacy, health care and housing, while balancing growth, modernisation and contact with the rest of the world?

We were concerned about the lack of freedom of speech, limited access to outside information and media censorship. Saarah and Rayhaan were growing up in a society where everyone had their own opinion about everything and had no qualms about expressing their views whether or not they knew what they were talking about. People phoned in to radio chat shows, wrote letters to newspapers, and gave vent to their views on reality television and through social media. Iqbal and I had grown up during a time of severe censorship and oppression, when we were told what to think, where to live, eat, study and be buried when we died. I was worried that what we were seeing in Cuba was not very different.

“Every country places restrictions, in one way or another, on information passed to its citizens,” was Marisa’s opinion. “It’s not always constructive for everyone to have the freedom to say what they want.” She pointed out the contradictory nature of the USA’s “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy as an example. A Cuban setting foot on US soil was immediately granted refugee status whereas Mexicans or Puerto Ricans in similar situations were treated as illegal immigrants. “You don’t read about these discriminatory policies in the American media.”

Cubans were isolated and unable to learn about the outside world through travel, television or books. Freedom of movement was also restricted. Often the only experience young people had of foreign countries was from fathers who’d fought in the war in Angola. We’d been as isolated during apartheid, hence the concerted effort to expose Saarah and Rayhaan to different people, cultures and experiences. We wanted them to make up their own minds about what they believed. It was ironic that the Cubans were so highly educated, and yet so stifled. We’d been raised on the mantra that education was the main tool to challenge injustice. Was it possible to find the balance, to have economic and social policies that led to a world free from

capitalist exploitation, racism, barbarism and terrorism? Would we ever see beyond perceived differences based on class, race and sex? I didn't have the answers.

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We sped along the *autopista* to Varadero, passing through sleepy towns separated by agricultural land, the ocean never far off. Along the almost-deserted highway, revolutionary police flagged down drivers and questioned them about their passengers. Guevara's likeness was stencilled on walls and slogans proclaimed, "*Venceremos!*" we shall overcome, as if *la Revolución* was still in full swing. The long history of rebellion had produced many heroes. Streets, squares, schools, museums and hospitals were named after Guevara, Martí, Antonio Maceo and Maximó Gómez. Their images appeared on bank notes and statues and busts commemorated the war of Independence and the Revolution in every village and city.

Two and half hours east of Havana, we entered a parallel universe, reserved for tourists. The beaches were straight out of a travel brochure – azure waters lapped kilometres of golden sand, and the resort had a roster of activities that included salsa dancing, Spanish conversation lessons and water sports. Canadian and British families, who had flown straight to the beach, showed no desire to explore further and seemed to care only about how much rum they could drink. Rayhaan kept the balance by ordering *pina colada sin ron* (without rum) and virgin *mojitos* all day long. For a while after, he would tell anyone who asked, that the Caribbean beach was his favourite holiday destination.

Our room was made up every day, the towels folded into origami swans and hearts, placed on the beds with a personal handwritten note from "your maid, Donay". Saarah and

Rayhaan had a growing collection of email addresses from waiters, guides and hotel staff. Everyone was desperate to make a connection. Anywhere seemed an alternative mecca to Cuba.

The fancy resort reminded me of a place I'd worked at in the late 1980s. It had been a state-of-the-art school for children with cerebral palsy, with spacious classrooms, heated pools and computer rooms. A regular parade of foreign visitors passed through the show-piece of the then Department of Coloured Affairs to be appeased that the government was serving all its citizens equally.

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I'd come on this trip with a determination to embrace all it had to offer. After weeks of exercise, massage, meditation and diet before we left Cape Town, I was brimming with good health. While I lay on the beach, I could feel the sun place its seal on my efforts. As my body relaxed, I became aware of a vague feeling of impending loss. I'd been so focused on preparing for the upcoming surgery and then the trip, that I hadn't given myself time to examine these emotions. The need for a hysterectomy was like an insult, an affront to my ability to look after myself. I felt like my body had betrayed me. How could there be something wrong with me?

During my convalescence, Iqbal would be travelling with Saarah and Rayhaan. I'd never been separated from my children for any length of time. It seemed significant that they'd be going to Germany and Sweden, two places I hadn't been. Letting go was difficult, unsettling. I worried about how they'd cope without me, as if this was the death of me as a mother. I was surprised by the idea that the loss of my womb meant the cessation of femininity and creativity. Although I had no intention of having any more children, surgery was closing a door forever. I was changing into a different being, growing older. I had to accept there were things that I had

no control over. The world wasn't going into a holding pattern because I wasn't available. Coming to Cuba marked a change in direction, like crossing a threshold. I felt the possibilities of its rebirth along with my own.

CHAPTER 6: EGYPT

–wonderful things, I see wonderful things–

April 2007 (Saarah 14/Rayhaan 10)

I was unprepared for the magnitude of the monuments dominating the skyline as we made our way out of Cairo International Airport. I hadn't expected the last of the Ancient Wonders of the World to be so accessible. One should have to work a little harder for the privilege. Instead, there they stood, shimmering in the heat, soaring heavenwards out of the unlovely sprawling city.

A visit to Egypt with its 7 000 years of recorded history had seemed daunting, something to do when Saarah and Rayhaan were older. But Rayhaan's school, Bishops, offered a tour of Cairo and the Nile during the April holidays. Greg, the social-science teacher, who would be leading the group, had a keen interest in Egyptology. He'd know how to keep the boys entertained when history threatened to overwhelm them.

We were met at the airport with a jubilant, "Ah! Welcome Bee-shops," as if we were a group of clerics. "We are honoured to have you with us again," Ahmed, the slightly built guide greeted Greg, pounding him on the back. He was dressed in a long-sleeved shirt, dark trousers and trainers. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses but he flashed a smile that revealed the gap between his front teeth. "We trust that you will have a good visit, *Insha'Allah*." He shook everyone's hand in turn, each time placing his right hand over his heart in welcome. As soon as we'd checked into our hotel, we set off for a closer inspection of the pyramids at Giza that seemed to be looming over us wherever we turned.

Men offering camel rides flocked to our bus along with boys selling postcards and tacky souvenirs. The ruminating camels, bedecked with colourful, tasselled blankets, rested with their legs folded under them, while their owners haggled over prices. They'd carried men and their belongings, from place to place in this barren land, shuffling through the dun-coloured sand with steady strides. It might've been touristy, but seemed an appropriate way to view the final resting place of the pharaohs.

Getting on was easy enough but I let out a shriek as the camel lurched forward and rose up on its hind legs first, threatening to send me over its head. I could see Saarah was doubtful of the lunging animal but, not wanting to make a scene, she grimaced and held on tightly. Rayhaan, after his initial, "Whoa," was happy to be carried off by the loping beast. The camels accepted their burden with haughty sneers and took us swaying and plodding around the burial chambers.

Over the course of 900 years the Egyptians built at least 35 major pyramids or tombs to help their dead kings resurrect and gain entry to eternity. The Step Pyramid at Saqqara, the prototype, had been a series of flat-topped buildings placed on top of one another. A number of these stone structures had been built before they achieved the smooth-sided perfection of the three main ones at Giza. For 4 000 years the Pyramid of Khufu had been the tallest man-made structure in the world. It was lined up mathematically with celestial bodies, creating a link between heaven and earth. As a symbol of power, it was meant to reassure the people that the pharaoh, a living god, would intercede on their behalf in the hereafter. Engineers, architects and astrologers had orchestrated the transport of millions of blocks of stone by camel and boat, assisted by the flooding of the Nile, the eternal companion. The blocks, each weighing several tons, had been carved from the mountains, cut and polished. It must've taken almost super-

human effort, in the absence of power tools, cranes and earth-movers, to create the memorials to greatness.

“Imagine what an impressive sight they were,” said Ahmed, “covered in white limestone and capped with gold leaf, dazzling in the sunlight.” The pyramids exceeded the expectations of many hours of poring over National Geographic magazines (me) and being glued to the television (Rayhaan). We marvelled at the construction and engineering skills involved, to produce a monument of such perfection.

Contrary to the Hollywood version of thousands of slaves labouring under the whips of fierce overseers, recent discoveries indicate that labourers on the Great Pyramid were drafted during the Nile’s annual flood when most of the population was unemployed. Work on the temple could proceed without impacting the economy. Labourers were actually well-cared for by ancient standards. Records reveal regulations that covered the maximum amount of work allowed per day, wages received, the holidays each worker was entitled to, as well as provisions for food and clothing.

The Great Sphinx has been standing guard over the pyramids on the plateau of Giza for the last 4 500 years. The vigilant face of the colossal lion with the head of a king is turned toward the east to catch the first rays of morning sunlight. Time and erosion have taken its toll. Legend has it that, about 1000 years after the Sphinx was built, a young prince, Thutmose, fell asleep nearby. Most of the body was buried in sand, with only the head visible. He dreamed he would become pharaoh if he restored the sculpture. And so it came to pass.

“Awesome,” said Zandie, one of the boys who was accompanied by his grandmother. “But, what happened to its nose?”

“Don’t you know Obelix knocked it off in *Asterix and Cleopatra*?” replied Saarah with a twinkle in her eye.

The portly Gaul wasn’t responsible for the damage but no one is exactly sure how it happened. There are stories that Napoleon’s men accidentally destroyed it or that it may have been shot off by Turkish soldiers during target practice. It’s more likely the nose was chiselled off by someone who believed the Sphinx to be evil.

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I was woken up by droning. I reached for my spectacles vibrating on the bedside stand and peered at my watch. It was 05h00 and we were on the move. Visions of a quiet cruise dissipated. I gave up on sleep, hauled my body out of bed and stretched out into a yoga pose on the strip of carpet between the bed and door. After a hectic start in Cairo’s all-day rush “hour”, sailing down the Nile had sounded like a more peaceful way to explore the country. We’d boarded the boat in Aswan to spend four days on the river, stopping to explore the sights on either bank. I’d never been on a cruise ship before and unpacked my bag into the tiny closet with a sense of anticipation. The boys ran back and forth, inspecting and comparing lodgings, while the crew cautioned in vain, “No running on the boat.” Saarah, at least a year older than them, had just started high school and slotted into a big-sister role. Ned, the youngest, was nine years old. He was travelling with his mother, Melissa, and older brother, Billy. Melissa had written her cellphone number on Ned’s forearm with a permanent koki.

“I’ve told him if he gets lost, he must go to the nearest policeman, hold up his arm and say, ‘please can you phone my mum’,” she explained, clearly an experienced traveller.

Breakfast on deck the first morning was a pleasant change of pace from the bustling and hustling of Cairo. While the boys were being shown the engine room I remained on deck in the sunshine, getting to know the rest of the group. There were 24 of us, roughly half of whom were adults. Greg was accompanied by his wife, Jacqui.

Before we departed, we'd driven along the dam wall in Aswan. Lake Nasser had been created as a result of the construction of the High Dam between 1969 and 1971. The boys were impressed to hear that it was as long as the distance from Cape Town to Knysna. The British had first built a dam on this site at the end of the 19th century. The resultant increase in arable land and hydro-electricity that saved Egypt from famine, didn't come without controversy. Thousands of Nubians had been moved from their ancestral land to make way for the world's largest artificial lake. The river's bounty of rich silt is now confined to the dam and the effects on the ecology of the region are yet to be determined. Water is the most important resource in the area and the cultivated land is mainly rain-fed. With a population growth among the highest in the world, consumption of water increases at a faster rate than can be replenished naturally. It's a real possibility that the scarcity could create conflict between neighbouring countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

Ancient Egypt had been blessed by nature, protected from invasion by rocky cataracts at Aswan in the south, the Mediterranean Sea in the north and deserts to the east and west. Without the Nile, the country would've been little more than desert. Every year after its flooding, lush soil, fertile for planting, would be left behind. Around this grew an extraordinary civilisation, the greatest the world has ever known. Egypt still lies tightly packed along the life-giving river. The civilisations it once spawned have long since crumbled and been swept away by the river or absorbed into the desert. Now the river is rich in bacteria. We couldn't drink the water or even

use it to brush our teeth. I doubt any amount of appeasement with honey, milk, incense, gold or silver, as they'd done in ancient times, would help.

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The Greco-Roman Temple of Philae is set on its own island in the middle of the Nile and can only be reached by boat. It's dedicated to the cult of Isis, one of the oldest and most important goddesses in Egyptian mythology. As we approached Ahmed told us that many nations had come together to save the temple in a multi-billion-dollar project. The temple was submerged for parts of the year after the dam was built and had been moved piece by piece and re-erected on the island, landscaped to match the original site. The rescue operation sounded almost as impressive as the original construction.

I wondered if the placement had anything to do with the creation myth of the god, Atum, who arose out of the sea and created an island. After he'd divided night and day, he created Shu, god of air, and Tefnut, goddess of moisture. Together they produced Geb, god of the earth, and Nut, goddess of the sky. Their daughters Isis and Nephthys, were married to their sons, Osiris and Set. Osiris was killed by his jealous brother, who cut up his body and scattered it all over Egypt. Isis collected her husband's pieces, imbibed them with love and put them together again as the first mummy. Brought back to life, Osiris became god of the underworld and resurrection. He granted all life, including the flooding of the Nile and its abundant harvests. Horus was conceived magically by Isis after the murder of Osiris and had to be protected from his uncle, Set. Isis hid her new-born son in the rushes to keep him safe. He grew up to avenge his father's death, thus demonstrating triumph of good over evil. Together with the sun god, Ra, Osiris and Horus formed a holy trinity.

“This sounds like a Bible story,” observed Saarah.

The stories did sound familiar, but out of context. Isis had been worshipped throughout the Roman Empire as the goddess of magic and the divine mother, associated with women, sex and purity. The Coptic Church, based on the teachings of Saint Mark, had brought Christianity to Egypt during the reign of Emperor Nero in the 1st century. Two hundred years after Rome officially became Christian, emperor Justinian forbade pagan worship and the Isis temple was converted to a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It's believed Christianity's "cult of the Virgin" was nurtured as a way of attracting the Isis-worshippers. Carvings of the gods and pharaohs had been defaced and replaced with Coptic crosses, a cross against a circular background, and an altar. Ironically, the defacement of the statues appeared to have been executed carefully, perhaps with reverence to the gods.

The temples at Abu Simbel, like that at Philae, had been moved to safety by UNESCO engineers because of the rising waters of the dam. The brittle sandstone had been injected with resin, cut into blocks and then reassembled in front of an artificial mountain a short distance from its original position. We dragged the boys out of bed at the crack of dawn to avoid the hordes of tourists and the sweltering heat of midday. It also meant we could watch the sun rise on the perfectly placed temple, facing the east so that the light touched the statues each morning. On two days of the year, coinciding with Ramses' birthday and coronation, in February and October respectively, the four colossi are bathed in the longest period of sunlight. The light reaches all the way into the sanctuary where, for about five minutes, all the statues except for that of Ptah, the god of darkness, are lit up.

The monument of the seated Ramses II had been carved out of the mountain, on the southern-most border of the country, to display the might of the greatest pharaoh to all who dared approach. Now, he smiled benignly down at us, from a height of about 20 metres. Three of the four seated colossi remain. In the thousands of years since it was erected, only one has lost its torso, part of its head lying on the ground. Soon the sun was beating down on us and we tried to keep cool by darting from shadow to shadow. By 11h00 we were ready to return to the hotel.

Rows of white-washed rooms opened to the outside of the squat, single-storey building that seemed to have been placed in the middle of the desert. As far as the boys were concerned, though, the three-tiered pool was all they required. They spent the rest of the day splashing about from one level to the next or prostrating themselves on the hot concrete, pretending they couldn't hear us shout about sunblock. I found it more pleasant to retreat inside and rest. I was starting to confuse my gods. We'd seen so much in such a short space of time and there was still much more to follow. All the inscriptions and the splendour of the wall paintings in brilliant shades of black, blue, red and gold were starting to look alike. Egyptian mythology was complex and religion seemed to have permeated every part of life. There were major and minor gods, gods specific to different regions and gods who had been merged with each other or with kings. Myths had been created to explain their relationships and Greek and Egyptian gods had been syncretised to avoid conflict and create powerful liaisons. The cross-cultural sharing of different religious beliefs and customs was fascinating. Greeks, Romans and Egyptians worshipped common gods, temples and churches were built sharing the same space and stories had been borrowed or adapted from one another. Christianity, and later Islam, had grafted its teachings onto what was already there.

Drifting along in a felucca, the traditional wooden sailing boat, was an antidote to temple-fatigue. Reclining on cushions in the shade of a canopy, we floated down the river, patched sails ballooning out like giant butterflies. It was easy to imagine a time when splendid cities, fabulous palaces for the living and dead, stone sculptures, and temples growing out of rocks, reached high into the sky. A pharaoh at the head of a flotilla of feluccas surveyed all he had dominion over through almond-shaped eyes emphasised by thick black lines. The river would have been dense with hundreds of boats and the sounds of heavy oars would be heard as they slid through rowlocks, lifted in unison and plunged into dark crocodile-infested water. Along the banks grew fields green with wheat and maize. In the distance flat-roofed mud-houses huddled under palm trees.

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When we reached the Esna-Edfu lock we had to wait our turn in the queue. Only two ships could go through at a time, one from the north and one from the south. The 30 or 40 ships all seemed to be on the same schedule and there were unavoidable traffic jams. Around 02h00, Iqbal went up on the deck, to watch the opening of the gate that controlled the water levels. He was surprised to find Zandie's granny already there. The frail-looking, grey-haired woman in her mid-70s, retorted, "Of course, I'm awake. I can sleep all I want when I get home. I'm not missing out on anything."

The Luxor stop was a busy one, packed with temples, a necropolis and a market. The Valley of the Kings, the final resting place of 30 or more pharaohs, is situated on the west bank, where the sun sets. On this sacred site, there are no showy monuments but secret temples hewn out of rock. Thutmose had started this trend to hide away the burial places of the kings,

interrupting a tradition of 1 700 years. The remote valley could be easily watched over but, despite fake burial chambers and secret passages to dupe grave robbers, nearly all of the tombs had been robbed of their treasures by 1 000 BC.

Imagine, then, the delight of Howard Carter when he discovered the magnificent treasures of Tutankhamun, in 1922. The young king was a little-known pharaoh, who became probably the most famous after this discovery. His was the first royal Egyptian mummy to be found untouched since its burial 3 300 years before. The news caused a media storm and visitors flocked to the site for a glimpse of the riches. The death of Lord Carnarvon, the benefactor who had funded the excavation, fuelled rumours of the mummy's curse. It created an intrigue that spawned a number of Hollywood films and influenced clothing, jewellery and architecture at the time.

We descended the steep steps into the unremarkable tomb, through a narrow door, and down a corridor that sloped sharply and was so low that we had to stoop over. The small tomb had several annexes. Drawings depicting scenes of the king's voyage to the after-life adorn the walls in the burial chamber, still vibrant, although the paint was flaking and cracks had appeared. The remains of his body lie in a gilded coffin within a number of sarcophagi, "like Babushka dolls," said Saarah. We stood in the antechamber, behind a railing, and from a distance peered into the burial chamber, enclosed by a glass case, before we were hurried along to make way for the long lines of visitors behind us.

"Is that all?" asked Rayhaan. "I thought we were going to see treasure." He would have to wait until the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, where the contents of the tomb are the main attraction.

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At Karnak, the boys wandered open-mouthed through the massive forest of 134 towering pillars, quiet for once. It took all nine of them, with outstretched arms, to encircle one of the pillars. Not for the first time, I too felt small and insignificant. Greg told us that this was the largest religious complex ever built. It was probably the most important pharaonic site and had been expanded over a period of 1 300 years by Tuthmosis I and III, Hatshepsut, Tutankhamun and others. Besides being the residence of the gods, there'd also been workshops, libraries and administrative areas.

Thutmose wished for Hatshepsut, his beloved daughter, to succeed him. To avoid incurring the wrath of the priests, she was married to her half-brother, Thutmose II, who was weak, so she could effectively rule Egypt after her father.

“That’s so weird,” said Saarah. But this was common practice in Egypt at the time. After her husband’s death, she declared herself pharaoh and donned a false beard and male garb. To justify her right to the throne, she claimed to be the daughter of the god, Amun. To reinforce the image of her power, she had statues made of herself in the guise of the Sphinx, and erected many buildings and monuments. She then married her nephew, who took the name Thutmose III. She’d discovered new territories and encouraged trade with her neighbours, rather than war. Under her leadership Egypt had enjoyed one of its most successful and stable periods, a financially prosperous time.

“I never even heard about Hatshepsut,” said Saarah. “I only know about Cleopatra.”

We were all familiar with the romantic tales of Cleopatra, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, immortalised by Shakespeare and Hollywood, but here was probably the first-ever

powerful female leader in recorded history. She must've been a gifted and cunning woman to be able to hold onto the throne for 20 years in the face of strong male opposition. I found it interesting that her father was a general who became pharaoh because his predecessor didn't have a son and heir. Historians think he might've been the pharaoh who ordered the throats of all first-born Hebrew sons to be slit and that Hatshepsut was the one who found the baby Moses in the bulrushes. After Hatshepsut's death, Thutmose III attempted to remove her from history. Stones that her name was written on were broken, her statues were overturned, and she was denied a proper burial. Of the two 27-metre-high rose-granite obelisks erected by her at Karnak, only one stands, defaced and partially hidden by a wall. The smashed sections of the other are scattered around the temple.

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I was sitting on the upper deck, where, at intervals, a fine mist would spray from a makeshift air-conditioner system hooked onto the railings, when I heard the commotion below. Reluctant to leave the relative sanctuary, I decided to investigate anyway. Rayhaan was hanging over the railing, shouting down three or four stories. I leaned over next to him and was nearly hit in the face by a parcel. Brightly coloured, sequined clothes in plastic packets were being flung up and down the side of the ship. Men, in wooden vessels dwarfed by the cruise ships, were vying for our attention. We were in a floating market with vendors trying to sell us everything from carpets and towels to traditional galabeyas and belly dancing outfits. It was a predictable time for them to pounce. They must've been aware that the ship had an Egyptian dress-up evening, and that passengers were likely to be looking for costumes.

We spent the next hour caught up in a bargaining frenzy amid a babble of languages. The vendors would toss up a packet and name a price. Rayhaan caught another bag meant for me. I told him to throw it back because I intended to look for a costume in the market later, but down below the man cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted, “No. No. You give me price.”

Passengers and vendors haggled, deals were struck and money changed hands over the distance. Somehow, nothing landed in the water. Rayhaan must’ve inherited bargaining genes from his grandmother. He was so successful that his friends called him to negotiate on their behalf and he was more than happy to oblige. I found it amusing to watch him enter into the ritual with the vendors. Halfway through I could see it dawn on them, “hey, this is a kid we’re dealing with”. A flash of doubt would cross their faces but, not prepared to give up the chance to make a sale, they persisted.

When we docked, it was quite a logistical exercise to coordinate a joint departure on the carts that were to take us to the market. Greg took us aside to warn us that the drivers would probably ask for more money even though he’d fixed a price, or they’d take us on a detour to a cousin-uncle-brother’s shop. We were to insist on going straight to the soukh. Though the market was similar to those we’d been to in Turkey and India, wandering through the warren of stalls was still the best way to mingle with the locals and eavesdrop on fragments of their conversation. Of course, bargaining was expected. The drama unfolded with many rituals, the merchants hawking the merchandise, as colourful as their wares.

“Hallo, lady,” a stall-keeper called me over to his stall. “I make special price for you, lady.” Tea was offered, the young guys flirted and then the trading-dance began.

“How much for this?” I asked, picking up a brass ankh, the key of life, engraved with hieroglyphics.

“You like? I make good price for you.”

“What’s your best price?” I asked, not keen to dance.

“How much you want? You take two, three, I make good price for you.”

Ridiculous numbers were quoted and he pretended that my counter-offer would put him out of business, or deprive his family of food. When I feigned disinterest and made to walk away, he called me back.

“You keelling me,” he protested, clutching his heart, pretending pain. And so it continued, stepping backwards and forwards, until a compromise was reached and the deal finally closed.

“*Wallahi*,” the vendor swore to God, pointing his finger heavenwards, “this is the best price.” Once money changed hands he was still reluctant to let go, and attempted to make one more sale. “What about shirt for your brother? Scarf for your mother? Look, nice material.” The Egyptians seemed canny, able to dance rings around us bemused tourists. I often got the feeling that we could’ve driven a harder bargain.

“Cuantos camellos?” shouted another vendor inclining his head in Sarah’s direction. I knew enough Spanish to know he was asking how many camels we wanted for her dowry.

“No hablo español,” I answered, I don’t speak Spanish.

“Where you come from? England? India?” he tried to work out my accent.

“What are they saying?” asked Rayhaan, who didn’t seem averse to going home with camels instead of his sister.

“South Africa?” someone else guessed. “Bafana Bafana. Nelson Mandela,” he summed us up in a few words.

As soon as they realised we were South African, they were eager to talk about the World Cup we’d be hosting in 2010. The Egyptian soccer team, the reigning African champions at the time, had just beaten Mauritania in an African Nations Cup qualifier, securing their place in the upcoming tournament. Egypt would be hosting the U17 and U20 FIFA World Cups in 2009. They believed their presence in South Africa was guaranteed and were planning to save their pounds and travel down to the other end of the continent to support their team.

“They say South Africa is useless,” said Rayhaan, crestfallen. “They think they’ll beat us easily.”

We left the market with belly-dance scarves in jewel colours, jingling with gold and silver coins. Saarah and Rayhaan chose cartouches from a silversmith and watched as he engraved their names in hieroglyphics. They compared their symbols of birds, water and insects.

“We both have birds where the ‘A’ is supposed to be in our names,” observed Saarah.

“And look at the ‘R’ and the ‘H’,” said Rayhaan, satisfied they were correct.

He was proud of the statues of Horus, Ramses and King Tut’s throne that he’d bargained for. Ned had his eye on a statue of Amun-Min, the god of fertility.

“You’re not taking that home,” said Melissa. There was nothing “min” about the erect penis.

That night we gathered in the dining room. The men and boys wore long-sleeved galabeyas (tunics) in white cotton, with blue or red embroidery at the neck and cuffs, layered with a loose sleeveless jacket. On their heads, red-and-white checked *kafiyas* were held in place with a plaited rope. Saarah wore a pink embroidered shift, a matching scarf draped around her head and shoulders. Silver ankle-chains with tiny bells jingled as she walked. Beads around her neck and hoops in her ears completed the look. One or two women were brave enough to put on belly-dance costumes.

“You should wear scarves every day,” said Ahmed, admiring us.

We weren't sure what ideas the Egyptian men had about foreign women and often felt as if we were being leered at. We weren't comfortable going out alone and swathed ourselves in scarves every time we ventured beyond the safety of the hotel. We'd hardly seen any local women about, and those we had, had been hidden under black shapeless robes. Men were in the market, in restaurants, on street corners lounging with *shisha* pipes or bent over backgammon games.

Egyptian music wailed from the speakers and the crew attempted to teach us a few dance steps. Even the boys joined in. Jacqui and Greg were celebrating their wedding anniversary and the chef had produced a cake with “Happy Marriage” iced across the top. After they posed for photographs, the boys hitched up their galabeyas and chased each other around the deck, headgear billowing behind them. They seemed to be as comfortable in the unfamiliar clothes as they were with the history and culture they were being bombarded with.

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An air of neglect hung about the Egyptian Museum. About 150 000 pieces, mostly dusty statuary, were on display with thousands more in the storeroom. As expected, it was packed. We were sandwiched together and moved as one from glass case to glass case. In a carefully timed orchestration, we took over from the huddle of tourists ahead of us, while a new group took our places. The voices of guides intoned the history in a cacophony of different languages, creating a drone like the buzzing of bees.

“Gold. Pure gold,” exclaimed Ned, his nose pressed up against the glass case ahead of us. His eyes gleamed as he turned around, motioning his friends to come closer. Tutankhamun’s funerary mask was embedded with coloured glass paste, semi-precious stones such as turquoise and carnelian, believed to possess magical powers, and bright blue lapis lazuli, imported from Syria and Palestine, considered most precious after gold and silver because of its heavenly colour. Ahmed told us it weighed 11 kilograms.

“Tut is so cool,” said Zandie. “It’s like he’s looking back at us.”

The boys were pleased to finally see the treasures they’d expected at the tomb. The display cases held more than 3 000 objects: ornamental thrones and ceremonial chairs covered with sheets of gold, painted chests and headrests, richly gilded chariots for the king’s journey to the sky, fans and trumpets of gold and silver. Immortality was linked to these trappings of wealth. Texts of battle scenes and religious festivals, magical symbols of long life and prosperity – scarabs, cobras, wild beasts, cartouches with the king’s name inlaid with ebony and ivory, amulets, bracelets, collars and rings – were all on display. It was too much to take in before we were shunted along again.

I couldn't believe all this had come out of the simple rock chamber we'd seen in the Valley of the Kings. Tutankhamun was a minor king; imagine what must've been in the pyramids before they were looted. I had an inkling of the excitement Carter felt when, after years of searching, he peered through a tiny breach in the tomb. As his eyes adjusted to the flickering candlelight he must've been struck dumb at a prize far beyond any expectations.

"What do you see? What do you see?" Lord Carnavon had asked over his shoulder.

"Wonderful things. I see wonderful things," had been all Carter could reply.

Perfumes, board games, clothing and jewellery were evidence of an advanced civilisation. There were models of weaving and carpentry workshops, bakeries, breweries, nobility dining, scribes writing. There were tools with gilt handles, statues of granite and limestone, examples of finely woven cloth and jewellery inlaid with lapis lazuli, quartz and obsidian.

Ahmed, enthusiastic to impart his knowledge to the boys, didn't always realise the limit of their attention spans. Mostly, though, they were entertained by his tales of battles, grave-robbers and treasure. The process of mummification was also macabre enough to appeal to nine- to thirteen-year-old boys.

In the Royal Mummies Hall they listened, enthralled, to descriptions of how priests had transformed bodies of dead kings and princes into sculptures of flesh. The ritual of preserving corpses followed a standard and precise procedure, believed to be divine in origin. The mummified body provided the vessel for continued existence. It was accompanied by all that was needed to face eternity, including the Book of the Dead that detailed the rituals to be followed.

Over a period of two months the flesh was desiccated, the body was prepared with cedar oils, resin, myrrh and herbs and swathed in strips of finest linen.

“Eww! Gross,” exclaimed the boys, faces screwed up in unison as they heard about the brain being extracted through the nose and the viscera removed through a cut in the abdomen. They stared at the four alabaster canopic jars that held the king’s embalmed liver, stomach, lungs and intestines.

“Ha,” scoffed Rayhaan, “imagine they thought they could think with their hearts.” The brain was discarded but the heart, believed to be the centre of intelligence, was left in the body.

“Come, see,” Xandie beckoned, “here’s a mummy of a cat.” They were thrilled to hear that even monkeys and crocodiles had been mummified.

The impressive state of preservation of the corpses was also due to the extremely dry climate and total absence of bacteria in the sand and air. Seventy million mummies had been made in Egypt over 3000 years but many of them had been destroyed by looters who burned them for fuel or ground them into powder to make magic potions.

Saarah pointed out the ankh that we’d seen inscribed on walls in temples, tombs and statues. Pharaohs held the key of life in one hand, a staff in the other. The origin and meaning is unclear and there are many theories relating it to monotheism, the Nile, planet Venus, or representations of male and female. The explanation that appealed to me was that it represented the breath of life and was a symbol of the gods bestowing purification. The boys were more intrigued by the scarab, also commonly displayed in sculptures and friezes. The insect was most active when the sun was at its zenith and thus became a powerful symbol for those who

worshipped the sun. The young beetles that emerged from the ball of dung, that the eggs were laid in, were apt symbols of creation.

Ahmed showed us the well-preserved limestone pieces of the nobleman/priest/supervisor of works and his wife, with eyes of inlaid quartz, rock crystal and resin. The statues of Rahotep and his wife, Nofret, were almost life-like. He'd been painted reddish-brown, according to artistic tradition, to symbolise that he was active and hardworking, while she was creamy yellow, fair skin being a symbol of nobility and beauty in women. Ahmed's interpretation was that the male was the colour of clay because he'd come from the earth and woman came from man, therefore she was depicted as fairer.

Just as the boys looked as if they were about to reach saturation point and were threatening mutiny, Greg whisked them off to an amusement park, leaving the rest of us to explore in peace. They returned with stories of dare-devil rides on a "rickety version of Ratanga Junction" (a fairground in Cape Town). "And when we reached the top of the ride," said Rayhaan, "we could see the pyramids. It was so cool."

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"You have heard the echoes of my story in Greece and Rome, in Christianity and Islam." The disembodied "voice" of the Sphinx ended its narration of the history of the Giza plateau. Rows of chairs had been set out in front of the monument. We took our seats and made sure the children's headphones were tuned to English. As soon as the sun set, lasers, music and narration helped to transport us to a time when papyrus swayed in the breeze, lotus flowers bloomed and thousands of oil lamps cast their reflections on the water. In the moonlight, the temple took on a mysterious air it lacked in the heat of the day. The faithful guardian of the necropolis had

watched as tiny men built fabulous monuments of fantastic heights in order to reach heaven while the rest of the world was emerging from the Stone Age. Lasers picked out the details of the pyramids and historical scenes were displayed on the side of the Great Pyramid. Around us stood squalid apartment blocks festooned with strings of coloured lights. Giant satellite dishes searched for messages from the sky. Pizza Hut and KFC flashed their neon signs.

We heard how the Rosetta Stone was discovered by one of Napoleon's officers. Champollion's interpretation of the mysterious hieroglyphics on the stone tablet had unlocked the secrets to the great civilisation buried in dark tombs. By the time of his death, he'd completed an entire grammar and dictionary. Wind, sand and time hadn't been able to silence the voices or the glory of the pharaohs after all. Perhaps they'd achieved the immortality they'd so desperately sought, a small victory over death?

Ancient Egyptians called their written texts the "words of the gods" and believed writing had been taught to men by the god, Thoth. Writing was thought to contain sacred characteristics and held magical powers. Without writing there'd be no civilisation. It enabled the Egyptians to keep accurate records and maintain control of their empire. The order of the stars, time and the seasons, how to fight and command, everything pharaohs needed to know, had been recorded. Only writing immortalised the precepts handed down through the language of the gods. Those capable of inscribing the 300 signs were held in great esteem. Imhotep, who was worshipped as a god, had been a famous scribe who became high priest and designed the first pyramid.

"Imagine that you had to write your school work on a stone tablet," Greg said to the boys.

"What if you made a mistake?" asked Rayhaan.

“You had to scrape it off and start over again. That’s why it took years of education and practice,” said Greg, “so that you didn’t make mistakes. Learning to write in hieroglyphics was a long and complicated process. It involved thousands of symbols that could be written in any direction and there was no punctuation and no vowels.” I could see from their puzzled looks they were finding that information difficult to digest.

Only the children of the wealthy were trained as scribes. This had been a hereditary profession, handed down from father to son. It seemed education was still a right afforded by the wealthy. The illiteracy rate in modern-day Egypt is 60%. In the markets, at carpet and perfume factories we’d seen many young “disadvantaged” boys working or running errands. We’d naively assumed that “carpet schools” combined education and learning a trade but were starting to suspect otherwise.

Al-Ahram, a major national weekly, reported on a referendum that had been held recently. President Hosni Mubarak had proposed amendments to 34 constitutional articles. While the government lauded the success of the voter turnout, the opposition and civil society organisations were questioning irregularities in the vote. Older voters gave the referendum a purple thumbs-up, while students wearing black armbands protested against the infringement of political liberties and democratic rights.

According to the Egyptian Organisation of Human Rights, the majority of Egyptians had refrained from voting not only because they believed the results were a foregone conclusion, but because of apathy or ignorance about the impact of the amendments. A surprising number of people interviewed said they’d voted “yes” in the hope their situations would improve, although

they didn't understand the debate. Even more surprising were the comments that the government knew best and so, if it said the changes were good, they were satisfied.

The pharaohs had also been autocratic rulers. The king was all-powerful and no one questioned his authority as a living god, but he'd taken care of his people who in turn obeyed him without question. He'd served Ma'at, the goddess of justice, who held the world together. If her law was followed, order would reign, the sun would shine, the river would flood, and the wheat would grow. If not, chaos would ensue. I'd been troubled by the incongruity between the rich history and the state of the nation now, but I was concerned about the psyche of people who seemed still to accept the power of the government without question.

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We waved goodbye to the Bishops group who were flying home while we headed for Sharm-el-Sheik for a few days by ourselves. Ahmed had urged us to take time to go to Alexandria, "the most important city for a thousand years", but I looked forward to immersing myself in "Moses' Red Sea", as Rayhaan called it. I imagined myself in the clear, warm, water, washing the dust of the city out of every pore. Egypt seemed to be covered by a layer of grime, reinforced by the dun-coloured monuments, palaces and temples, as if the colour had been sucked out of the country. Iqbal reminded me we were in the middle of a desert, what had I expected?

At night when it was slightly cooler, everyone came out to socialise and there was an air of festivity in the square where locals congregated to watch a belly-dancing show on an outdoor stage. The dancers moved their bodies with a slow and languid grace, drawing attention to hips draped with shiny coins, framed by elegant arm movements. We drifted closer attracted by one of the dancers, clad in white from top to toe, except for a long sash emphasising the hips, who

moved to centre-stage. The crowd stamped and clapped. A high-pitched ululation could be heard from somewhere in the audience. The dancer's hips seemed to move independently of the rest of the body in figures of eight, backwards and forwards, sinuous and graceful. The movement increased in speed until it overflowed into upper and lower limbs, the body shimmying in sensuous patterns. This time the snake hips belonged to a man.

When Rayhaan heard that it was possible to quad-bike in the desert, he begged to go on the dusty, noisy excursion. Checked scarves were folded and wrapped around our heads so that our mouths and noses were closed. The ends were looped, tied and tucked and we wore sunglasses to protect our eyes. Well-prepared for any blinding sandstorms that might descend without warning, we each got on our own bike and posed for a photograph. I had a moment of mild panic when I realised we'd have to cross the highway that stretched into the distance in both directions, in order to enter the expanse of desert ahead. It had the opposite effect on Rayhaan who seemed to grow a few centimetres taller at the idea of riding across a "real road". The edges of the tarmac had blurred with fine blown sand, as if the desert was trying to reclaim the road. There was no traffic and, in single file, we made it to the other side to follow the criss-crossing tracks of bikes, horses and camels before us, each accompanied by our own cloud of dust.

By the time we stopped, the sun had dropped through the clouds in a blaze, competing with the golden colours of the desert. Darkness descended along with silence, turning the landscape into a cardboard cut-out of undulating dunes. Our resting place was a makeshift awning hung over a framework of wooden poles, from which oil lamps hung. A nest of cushions and carpets invited us to sit down. A hookah pipe was prepared with glowing coals and we were offered drinks. It was so remote we could've been on the moon. The landscape was featureless, not even a bush broke the limitless expanse. The stars hadn't come out yet and the sky above us

was inky, without any interference from street lights. We found ourselves whispering to each other so as not to disturb the silence. The sand stretched out in all directions. Like the air, it retained its heat for a while, before letting go like a reluctant lover.

We slipped off our sandals and burrowed our feet into the fine, yielding desert sand. I watched as Saarah, fascinated by the powdery, silky texture, let it trickle through her fingers. Rayhaan also seemed unable to resist touching and holding the grains like table salt. The action seemed meditative and soothing. I remembered how they played with sand at the beach for hours when they were small, filling buckets, building castles, adding water and then waiting for a wave to come and wash it away as if nothing had stood there, a symbol of our impermanence, the brevity of our lives. And yet, the same sand had preserved the mummies and the monuments.

A Bedouin squatted next to a low flat rock and displayed a few necklaces in the flickering light. He looked slightly unkempt, his grey galabeya lived-in. His headdress was askew as if he'd hurriedly knotted it when he saw us approach. He appeared to have come out of nowhere, like his nomadic ancestors who'd roamed the land, carrying all they possessed on the back of a camel. When they moved on, their temporary dwellings melted back into the sand, the desert colluding to cover up their footprints. I wondered how many other sandalled feet it had yielded to, only to be smoothed as if no one had ever walked that way.

“It's hard to believe we're still in Egypt,” said Iqbal, as he sucked on the mouthpiece of a hookah pipe, causing the water in the base to bubble as the smoke was drawn through it. He was reclining on the divan with a leg crossed under him, committed to spending the evening in obligatory relaxation.

“I like it here but I miss my friends,” said Rayhaan, mesmerised by the glow of the smouldering coals in the dark.

“It was nice to have company,” said Saarah, “but I wish there'd been another girl.”

Before we left Cairo for Cape Town, Iqbal returned to the Egyptian Museum. He came back laden with books, postcards, DVDs and a set of black-and-white photographs from a nearby bookshop. The pictures, taken in the early 1920s, were of traditional North Africans, a boy learning his craft at a silver smith, a gnarled old man reading in a doorway, books stacked in piles behind him and a young veiled girl, her heavily kholled eyes staring directly at the camera.

The photographs that attracted me though, were a trio of desert scenes, the Nile River lapping almost up to the edge of the pyramids and Sphinx. Images of two women wading in the water, baskets on their heads, holding their long tunics up with one hand, a turbaned man perched atop a camel and two figures in a small boat surrounded by date palms growing straight out of the water, captured the essence of the desert, the richness of the oasis and the serenity of a way of life now long gone.

CHAPTER 7: USA

–the opportunity to become whatever you dream–

September 2007 (Saarah 14/Rayhaan 10)

“Where’s Dad going?” whispered Rayhaan, tugging on my sleeve. He was fidgety after 20 hours of travelling. Iqbal was led somewhere behind the glass partition.

“They just want to ask him something,” I whispered back, but I was worrying that Iqbal was being interrogated, going to be detained, that we’d miss our connecting flight or be sent back home. This was his third visit to America since becoming a member of the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) in 2005 and he’d been pulled aside by immigration officers each time. On a previous visit, he’d mentioned he was there at the invitation of President Clinton, hoping it might smooth his passage, but he’d been firmly reminded that it was *ex-President* Clinton. The US Customs and Immigrations officer with the Spanish-sounding name assured us it wouldn’t take longer than a few minutes. I hadn’t expected him to be kind, almost friendly.

“This is just stupid,” said Saarah. “How come I don’t see anyone else being taken aside?”

“Sh,” I cautioned, “Dad won’t be long.” Saarah was intolerant of bureaucracy and didn’t yet understand that sometimes there was no choice but to comply. I was tempted, though, to shout that I didn’t want to come and live in America or interfere with their dream. I found the assumption that their lives were better than others being lived elsewhere, arrogant and egocentric. I’d been worried about whether flying to Hartford, Connecticut, a smaller port of entry, would mean more or less hassle than if we arrived at JFK in New York. I’d

hyperventilated at the thought of being pulled aside or detained to verify our “non-terrorist credentials”.

Preparing for the trip had been stressful. I’d phoned the US embassy in Pretoria to book visa application interviews to be held at the consulate in Cape Town. I downloaded and printed reams of paper. Questionnaires were accompanied by pages of instructions. Besides general information, birth and marriage certificates and letters of affidavit, details of all previous trips to the US were also requested. Other intrusive and irrelevant questions about my history of mental illness, who my mother was, and maybe my prison record (I’m no longer sure) were asked. I’d heard about strict security checks at the consulate and the bureaucracy (someone behind bulletproof glass had turned away a friend for not using the correct pen). The process of applying for a visa was gruelling and the interview was difficult, as if they were trying to trip you up.

I’d pored over our passports, current and expired, squinting at entry and exit stamps, and searched through document files. It was odd that I could only find proof in Saarah’s old passport that she’d visited in 1998. Her ten-year visa was still valid but there was nothing for Rayhaan or me. I had images of the FBI-CIA tracking me down for giving false information or not declaring previous visits. My behaviour may sound pathetic, but in the aftermath of 9/11, it had become a security nightmare to travel to the US. We knew of many people who’d been harassed simply because they looked “Muslim” or had Muslim-sounding names. Yet again, because of what we looked like, what our names were, we were presumed to have certain qualities, desires and intentions. Hadn’t we had enough of this, growing up in South Africa?

“I think I hate America,” I ranted. “It’s supposed to be a shining example of democracy, free speech and all that jazz but it’s a big bully, interfering with everybody else’s business and

manipulating them for its own needs.” I’d come a long way from my first starry-eyed view of the United Nations and posters of it’s-a-small-world-after-all ideals.

“I love America,” said Iqbal. “I could live in New York.” He reminded me that the main reason I wanted to come along was to see Caroline. “Don’t confuse the American people with their government,” he continued. “I love that anyone can get ahead if they work hard. Americans are enterprising: anyone can become a success. The opportunities to become whatever you dream are there, whether you are black or white, rich or poor.”

“Is it necessary to give us such a hard time when we want to visit? Any Tom, Dick or Harry can win a green card by playing the lottery.” Iqbal had borne the brunt of my frustration while I obsessively checked and rechecked files. “Stupid ... fat ... narrow-minded,” I continued muttering as I slammed cabinet drawers shut.

“How can you say they’re stupid? America has the best research facilities, the finest universities, and more Nobel Prize winners than the rest of the world put together. You’ll see another side of America when we get there. You haven’t been since 1998.”

“Yeah, right,” I mumbled under my breath. “George Bush went to Yale and Harvard...”

I eventually found what I needed in a long-forgotten file, but not before a tight knot had formed in my stomach. I’d overlooked temporary passports issued to Rayhaan and me before our last visit. They’d expired, but the visas were still valid.

As we waited for Iqbal, it occurred to me it didn’t help that both he and Rayhaan had the first name Mohammed, as family tradition dictated. It riled, though, that we could be stereotyped because of what we were called. I was just resolving to change the name on Rayhaan’s passport

on our return home, when Iqbal returned and we were allowed to proceed to catch our connecting flight to New York.

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As soon as we stepped out of the taxi-cab in Times Square, we were assailed by neon lights and sky-high billboards screaming for attention from the sides of buildings. Electronic adverts for *Foot Locker*, *Swatch*, *Virgin Mobile* and *Lucky Brand* jeans flickered in competition with announcements for *Dancing with the Stars*, *Ultimate Fighting Championships* and *Stomp*.

Towers of glass and concrete intersected at multi-lane crossroads of streaming yellow taxis, thick crowds of people, blinding lights and the noise of a city on the go. I did like how cosmopolitan the people of New York were. They appeared to have come from all over the world, each with a different dream. They were quirky with wild hairstyles, coiffed and business-like, strange, daring, downright weird, designer-heeled, sneaker-wearing, grey and colourful. No wonder people were prompted to do anything to be noticed, like don cowboy boots and a hat to play guitar naked in the traffic. Once, we'd been on our way down Fifth Ave when we noticed a crowd gathering on the sidewalk at the traffic lights opposite Van Cleef and Arpels. The strapping woman's loud yellow shirt and gaudy floral tights were enough to cause a stir, but it took me a few moments to realise that it was the python she had draped around her shoulders that was garnering attention.

New Yorkers, with mobiles glued to the sides of their faces, briefcases in hand, strode purposefully along sidewalks or streamed across the road, in obeisance to the flashing "Walk-Don't Walk" signals. I recalled how curious a similar sight of businessmen accessorised with mobile phones had been on our visit in 1994. Two cellphone network providers, Vodacom and

MTN, had only just been granted licences to operate in South Africa. We were a long way off from embracing cellphone technology and it seemed strange to me then that it could be such an indispensable part of American lives.

“This is just like in the movies,” Saarah said to Rayhaan, as she slowly turned around on the sidewalk to take in the familiar sights. America was in our living room every day. This was where movies were made. She knew what they looked like, how they talked, hailed taxis, ate, ordered coffee and fell in love. She thought all telephone calls started with “area code 555” and recognised the sound of police sirens. I’d fought to limit their exposure to television and find the balance with reading and outdoor activities, and yet she could rattle off names and intimate details of a string of actors.

Later they were both rendered speechless when we took the elevator down to the hotel reception with two blonde boys who looked vaguely familiar. They hung back, whispering and nudging each other as the doors opened.

“What’s wrong with you two?” Iqbal asked.

“It’s Zack and Cody,” whispered Saarah, referring to the characters in a Disney television series *The Suite Life*. Iqbal had never heard of the brothers who play the troublesome twins.

“It’s a TV show,” said Rayhaan, standing on tiptoe to whisper into Iqbal’s other ear.

“So why don’t you ask if you can take a photo?” said Iqbal. Saarah and Rayhaan were overwhelmed by the idea that we could simply meet the boys in the lift like “normal” people. It was left to Iqbal to ask if they minded having a photograph taken. And then the twins’ mother

shouted to them to hurry up because she'd checked out already and hoped they hadn't forgotten anything in the room.

We were on the way to the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, when my star-struck children recognised the Trump Tower from another show, *The Apprentice*.

"No, no, I'm not going in there," I protested, averse to gawking at the building that was probably as ostentatious as the Trump Taj Mahal Hotel and Casino we'd seen on a previous visit. I remembered driving down to Atlantic City, Donald Trump's gambling seaside paradise. We were told that we "simply had to visit for the experience" even if we didn't gamble. The football-field-sized casinos and hundreds of rooms with ornate chandeliers, plush carpets, pretentious statues and fountains all reflected in floor-to-ceiling mirrors had been too flashy and kitsch for me.

I reminded Saarah that she'd been keen to go to the museum on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. A friend in her art class had urged her to see the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed building with the "twirling" ramp leading up to a window in the roof. He'd described Wright as one of America's greatest architects.

"Didn't we go to this museum in Italy?" asked Rayhaan.

"That was Peggy Guggenheim," answered Saarah. "This is her uncle's museum."

The white rotunda, completed in 1959, is an architectural landmark of the city, like a sculpture compared to the rest of the buildings in the area.

"It looks like a tornado," said Rayhaan, referring to the layers of concrete circles, placed one on top of the other.

As we walked in, our eyes were immediately drawn upwards to the spider's web skylight flooding the building with natural light that Wright thought was essential to view art.

A continuous ramp links all the floors of the museum. Rather than going through a series of interconnected rooms as in most museums, Wright had cleverly designed the building so that an elevator took us up to the top of the building and we spiralled our way down. The design resulted in an open middle section that made it possible to have glimpses of the art on every floor and I wasn't surprised to hear that jazz concerts were held there on weekends. The acoustics and art must result in a great atmosphere for listening to music. The building competes for attention with the modern and impressionist paintings and sculptures on display.

"I found Degas' ballerinas again," said Saarah.

"All I can find are pictures of squares and triangles," said Rayhaan. "They look like someone just coloured them in. But I wish I had my skateboard to go down this ramp."

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"Aargh, Rayhaan is sooo irritating," complained Saarah. "He thinks he's a dinosaur from *A Night in the Museum*." Rayhaan was on his toes, breathing down her neck. He'd drawn his arms into his chest, craned his neck forward and bared his teeth.

He'd been impatient to come to the Museum of Natural History where the movie had been shot. Now he seemed to be re-enacting scenes from the film about a night watchman at the museum when the exhibits came to life. The building, which spread over four blocks, was bursting with millions of objects, covering almost every single creature in creation, including

dinosaurs and whales. There were meteorites and minerals, fossils and gemstones and displays of people from every corner of the world. The dinosaur exhibit took up an entire floor.

Caroline met us outside Central Park afterwards. While we walked along its miles of footpaths, roads and riding trails with joggers, cyclists, in-line skaters, New Yorkers and visitors alike, we caught up...

“Can you believe it’s been nine years since our last visit...?”

“How are the children?”

“My mother hasn’t been well, I’ve just been to visit her in Wales ... Remember Gail? I saw her while I was in the UK...”

“You’re starting to sound like an American,” I said, noticing her accent.

“Funny you should say that. I think I sound different too,” she said, “but after all these years, everyone still thinks I’m English. I have to make a conscious effort to pronounce my words the way they do here. If I don’t, I have to repeat myself all the time.”

Saarah and Rayhaan were happy to meander through green meadows, around lakes and over hills, throwing themselves down on the grass like so many other sunbathers and picnickers. There was so much to see. People operated remote-controlled sail boats; there were playgrounds, a zoo and a skating rink. From time to time, the skyline of towering glass and steel reminded us we were in one of the busiest cities in the world and that the oasis we found ourselves in was man-made. A sense of *déjà vu* accompanied us around the city. Saarah was 15 months old when we first visited. America had been a most convenient place to travel with a young child. Restaurants offered baby seats as soon as you walked in, all the public bathrooms had baby-

changing stations and most places were accessible for pushchairs. Even the abundance of pasta and pizza seemed designed for children.

Iqbal had been one of the first doctors to graduate from UCT with a degree in sports medicine. The USA was at the forefront of this field and his decision to study toward a fellowship from the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) had involved a number of trips to deliver papers at conferences. When the ACSM conference was held in Orlando we visited Disney World. We stayed at a resort that had an “all-you-can-eat” buffet and a beverage station from where we could collect endless refills of soda in an indestructible plastic mug.

In many other places outside we could eat “all you want for 99c”, accompanied by buckets of Coke or coffee and urged by waitresses to “have a nice day”. Restaurants competed to offer us as much as possible, as cheaply as possible, whether it was Creole, Cajun, Tex-Mex, soul food, prime-rib steak and potatoes, fried chicken, Twinkies or Marshmallow Fluff. The abundant portions were liberally laced with sauce (thousand-island, ranch, blue-cheese, Italian, French, steak, chilli, gravy, mayonnaise, mustard, salsa). No wonder half of all American adults were obese.

Everything was bigger and larger than life – the gas-guzzling cars, highways with two, or even three times as many lanes as back home, gargantuan malls and acres of car parks to get lost in. Americans owned 200 million cars, 40% of the world’s total, for 5% of its population and consumed 20% of its resources. The developed nations had resolved to reduce greenhouse emissions at the 1992 Earth Summit, but it continued to rise in the US.

Caroline knew of a no-frills hamburger joint in a run-down building up a dimly lit, narrow flight of stairs. The place, the kind only locals would frequent, served good burgers with the best giant pickled cucumbers Iqbal and Rayhaan “had ever eaten”.

“Paul said I had to press down with two hands, open my mouth wide and stuff it in,” said Saarah. Paul had “educated” my children on the correct way to make and eat a hamburger, stacking the bun high with a thick homemade patty from the barbecue, tomato, lettuce and pickles, topped off with lashings of sauce. I was surprised his jaw didn’t disengage.

“Yes, and didn’t he also drink Coke for breakfast?” I asked.

Caroline rolled her eyes. “Yes, he still says, ‘Ah, Coca Cola, breakfast of champions,’ to irritate me, I suspect.”

She reminded me of the first time we’d gone to a deli and taken so long to order that a queue had formed behind us and the “Hallo-howyahdointoday?” smile on the man behind the counter had started to wear thin. In this land of extroverts we were forced to shout for what we wanted, barking out every detail of our choice, including the kind of bread and whether we wanted it spread with butter, margarine or a blend of the two, “and hold the lettuce.”

“If you don’t ask for it, you won’t get it,” Paul had warned.

It was probably supposed to make things move faster but it took us twice as long to get the hang of it. America was a place of endless variety. The first time I went to a supermarket with Caroline I retreated in the face of entire aisles of breakfast cereals, condiments, even milk. When I was growing up, buying a loaf of bread was a quick decision, either brown or white. We hadn’t been indulged with so many choices or rights. Here shopping seemed a national pastime.

There were strip malls, outlet shops, telemarketing and catalogues. Advertisements promoted everything, including prescription drugs. I'd left the choices to Caroline while I pushed the trolley. It was my birthday and she'd wanted to bake a cake. I'd been sceptical of the box with ready-mixed ingredients, but she assured me it would be much better than what I'd be able to get in the shops in Cape Town. Afterwards, I had to admit, rather reluctantly, that it was *almost* as good as the homemade version. Although I was surprised by the immediacy of cake-out-of-a-box, I was astounded to note that she could find all the spices for a good Durban curry.

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As usual, we'd left Cape Town in a rush and hadn't had time to book a Broadway show. *Grease*, which was the most family-friendly show we could get tickets for, was playing at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre. Saarah and Rayhaan were more interested in taking pictures of themselves and sending emails to friends from a machine in the foyer. John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John had been in the main roles in the hit musical from my school days and I hoped I wouldn't embarrass myself by singing along. Built in 1926, the theatre reminded me of the old movie houses in District Six, with red velvet drapes and bucket seats. The leading roles in the production were played by two young actors chosen through a reality show. That should've been a warning. The acting was mediocre and Rayhaan wasn't the only one yawning halfway through.

When the CGI meeting started, we moved to the hotel where the delegates were staying. The mission of the initiative is to bring together global leaders from private, public and civic sectors to brainstorm solutions to issues like poverty, health care, education and the environment. Every year, heads of state, Nobel laureates, philanthropists, CEOs, directors of NGOs and members of the media come together to commit to improving the lives of millions of people

around the world. A network of like-minded people cooperates to fund and implement these ideas. The gathering coincides with the annual United Nations meetings and security was strict.

Saarah accompanied Iqbal to the opening function held at the Museum of Modern Art (where Picasso's *Guernica* had hung before it was returned to Spain). She couldn't wait to take us back there later, to see Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*.

"Imagine," she said, "he just took 32 pictures of cans of soup."

I partnered Iqbal to the Global Citizens Awards in the Carnegie Hall. CGI members nominate award-recipients based on their innovative and effective approaches to making positive global change. Nobel laureates, Toni Morrison and Wangari Maathai, were among the presenters of the awards. The first recipient was Andre Agassi, professional tennis player and former Wimbledon champion. All I'd known about him was that he played tennis well and had married Brooke Shields. However, when he was just 24, he founded the Andre Agassi Charitable Foundation for at-risk children in Las Vegas, his home town. His organisation was providing recreational and educational opportunities for hundreds of children. In the world-famous hall, where Tchaikovsky himself had played at the inaugural concert, we were treated to a special music performance by 81-year-old Tony Bennett and the African Children's Choir.

A City-Pass allowed us access to the museums of Natural History, Modern Art, and Sea-Air-Space, the Empire State Building, and a Circle Line cruise, with the bonus of avoiding the queues. While Iqbal was networking on how to save the world, we cruised through the middle of the city, down the Hudson River, passing some of the most recognisable monuments and landmarks in the world: the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges

and the United Nations Buildings. I was amazed by how much Saarah and Rayhaan recognised. It couldn't have been from our last visit, since they'd been so young then.

We traipsed down the long avenues and streets of Manhattan, fortified by Hershey's chocolate, Starbucks coffee and piping hot margarita pizza sold by the slice at a pizzeria on a corner near to the hotel. It was hard to miss the new Apple store with its huge glass cube entrance on Fifth Avenue. The main part of the store is actually underground. Saarah and Rayhaan loved the futuristic technology on offer and had fun trying out different gadgets. I took them to FAO Schwarz that had been the world's largest toy department store at one time. It was a smaller version of itself, having closed down due to bankruptcy and reopened three years previously. Now it only sold very expensive toys (Vespa scooters, mini Hummers and karaoke machines) for older children and adults and designer baby goods. Rayhaan had his eye on a flight simulator but had to make do with lunch at the old-time soda fountain and candy store.

Ali and Shaheen had welcomed us into their home and plied us with food reminiscent of home the first time we'd visited the US. After many weeks of backpacking through Europe, the comfort and familiarity had been a special treat. They were originally from the same village in India as Iqbal's father, although not related. We weren't sure what to expect when they invited us to dinner. Caroline and I had draped scarves around our heads, not wanting to offend them if they were conservative. They turned out to be quite secular, although the older generation dressed traditionally and didn't speak much English. They'd grown in number through weddings and arrivals from India since we last saw them. The children had married outside of religion and culture and I was warmed by how accepting the family was. We were there during Ramadan and one of the teenagers had chosen to fast, a decision supported by the rest of the family even though they refrained.

Saarah immediately hit it off with two girls her age, over hairstyles and GHD straightening irons and how far along they were in the latest series of *Gossip Girl*. I was struck by how much they had in common through the influence of media. The girls knew the same brands, music, actors and shows. Even Halloween parties and costumes were a hot topic, even though it was still a month away. This was something that had recently taken over our neighbourhood but that I hadn't known as a child.

Shaheen, a real bargain-hunter, was keen to take us shopping but lost us when she introduced us to Borders, the book and music store. A family of bibliophiles, we indulged our weakness on overseas trips. I stocked up with books on yoga for children and teens, that weren't easily available at home. Iqbal bought *Essential Rumi, No god but God* by Reza Aslan and Gregory Roberts' *Shantaram*. Rayhaan was in his Bernard Cornwell phase and grabbed *The Last Kingdom*, an epic adventure of English kings and Viking invaders, and R.A. Salvatore's collectors' edition of "heroic quests, dragons and curses" that was more than 1 000 pages long. Saarah chose three boxed sets of *Grey's Anatomy* so that she could be ahead of her friends in the medical series.

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Linda Hill, the first "black" woman professor at the Harvard Business School, had invited Iqbal to attend a class where she'd be teaching a case study about his journey from activist and doctor to businessman. Unfortunately we weren't allowed to sit in, but Saarah could accompany him for a conducted tour of the campus. While they were off on academic pursuits, Rayhaan and I had a leisurely breakfast in the restaurant at the hotel. We sat at a table at the window so we could watch Boston walk by. This is one of the oldest cities in America and has some of its most

famous colleges and universities. We were surrounded by art galleries, restaurants and designer boutiques.

After a stroll around the block, we decided we'd rather fetch our books and a camera and explore the Boston Public Gardens, across the road. There was a lake for boating in the summer and skating in the winter, a vast collection of trees, both indigenous and introduced, and many bronze statues including one of George Washington on a horse, and the mother duck and her eight ducklings from the classic, *Make Way for Ducklings* by Robert McCloskey. Linda had sent us the book that has been in continuous print since its publication in 1941. The story of a family of mallard ducks who search the city for a home and land up in the Boston Public Gardens is the official children's book of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. We'd just found an unoccupied bench, and settled down when Saarah came to meet us, clutching a prospectus and a copy of the Harvard University Gazette. She was bursting to tell me a story she'd heard.

"There's a statue of John Harvard in front of the university, but it's lies, all lies," she said. "It's made of bronze and a plaque says: 'John Harvard, Founder, 1638'. Do you know what's wrong?" I had no clue. "I'll tell you: the lies are that first, it isn't actually John Harvard but a random student who was asked to be the model. Second, Harvard was not the founder but he gave a lot of money. And third, the university was founded in 1636, not 1638. They should just change the plaque."

Another reason for our visit to Boston was to visit the Sagers. We'd first met Bobby, his wife, Elaine, and children, Tess and Shane, when they visited Cape Town to meet Nelson Mandela seven years earlier. That was the year Bobby decided he'd made enough money and took his children out of school to start the "Sager Family Travelling Foundation and Roadshow".

Bobby is a large man with a halo of almost-white hair. He dresses in colourful and eccentric clothes from across the globe and has devoted himself to full-time philanthropy. Elaine's quiet presence is the perfect foil to Bobby's flamboyance.

Bobby believes that we can make a difference by getting involved "hands-on". He won't give money to people he hasn't met "eyeball to eyeball" and rather than charity, invests money that he expects a return on. The foundation has set up projects in countries in conflict and their travels have taken them into dangerous places, like Kabul where he admits he pretended to be Canadian, rather than American. They've brought together Hutu and Tutsi women in Rwanda, and business people in India and Pakistan, China and Tibet, and Palestine and Israel, so "they may know each other and change their circumstances". Those he has assisted are encouraged to become involved in the projects in whatever way they can, giving time or physical labour. Tess and Shane have had an education no school could give them.

As the elevator doors opened, we were met by a collection of black-and-white photographs displayed on the walls in the passage outside their apartment. The pictures, taken by Bobby on their travels, have appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *Men's Journal* and philanthropic publications. My favourite is a picture of two young Afghan girls, standing with arms linked, laughing at something off-camera. In the midst of war and devastation, while adults around them battle over religion and land, they have the wisdom to celebrate the joy of being alive.

The apartment sprawls over three floors, knocked into one big complex, connected by tunnels. Inside, it was as colourful and eccentric as its owner. The guest toilet once serviced a Boeing 747, the Harley Davidson motorbike standing in one corner of the living room was given to him by his "friend Sting" and a submarine hatch leads down to his office. While Tess and

Shane led Rayhaan and Saarah on an exploration of their home, Iqbal and I sat in two barber chairs, in front of a wall of windows overlooking the city, while Bobby entertained us with stories of their recent travels. Saarah and Rayhaan had to be dragged away from a giant black meteorite from Ghana to go to dinner.

“You have to go on the Boston Duck tour,” Bobby urged in his lazy New England drawl. But to make sure that we did, he’d already booked tickets to the 80-minute adventure around the city in a renovated WWII amphibious landing-vehicle. The six-wheel-drive military truck, with the addition of a watertight hull and a propeller, had been designed in 1942 and used by the US military. The clumsy vehicle sloped up at the back and front, looking like a cross between a tank and a boat. Ours had been given a makeover with a coat of pink paint, the addition of a white canopy, and blinds that were rolled up so we could see out.

Our pigtailed guide, PJ Keen, was dressed in pink and red paisley-patterned pyjamas and wore sunglasses, a headset and microphone into which she joked her way around the city. We drove by all the places that make Boston the “birthplace of freedom” and a “city of firsts” – the golden-domed State House, Bunker Hill, the Fleet Centre, Boston Common, Copley Square, Government Centre, fashionable Newbury Street and Quincy Market. One minute PJ Keen was pointing out the Prudential Tower and next she drove straight into the Charles River.

“We’re going to sink, boy,” Iqbal clowned around as we rushed toward the water.

“Don’t be silly, Dad. That was so cool,” said Rayhaan, having probably experienced the highlight of his trip. “I wish we could do it again. How did she do that?” The DUKW, to give it its proper acronym, was the first vehicle to allow the driver to vary the tyre pressure from inside the cab. The tyres could be fully inflated for hard surfaces such as roads and less inflated for

softer surfaces, especially beach sand. We cruised along taking in the view of the Boston and Cambridge skylines, while I hoped that the wheels were properly tucked in and that we wouldn't sink like the Titanic. Unlike Rayhaan, I found the idea of a waterborne steel-plated car unnerving and was relieved when we got back to dry land.

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Iqbal's next meeting was in Washington and we decided we'd rather take the train to Pawling than wait for him in New York. Caroline and Paul had recently moved to the small town on the border of Connecticut and New York states. Iqbal thought we were crazy to choose Pawling over New York, but a place with lakes, acres of parklands, hiking trails and nature conservation areas sounded ideal after all the city living we'd been doing. Besides, I was afraid Saarah and Rayhaan would think that America was all bright lights, designer clothes and child stars.

We hiked through deep green fields and breathed in the fresh air. We dabbled our feet in the lake and draped ourselves over curved tree sculptures, while Paul and the boys looked for bugs crawling under piles of decaying leaves. It was fall and the trees put on a spectacular show for us as they started their annual metamorphosis. An explosion of reds, yellows and browns glowed against the vivid blue sky, the effect magnified by the reflection in the still lake.

"I'm so glad you're here to see the changing of the leaves," Caroline repeated over and over again as we crunched through the colourful carpet that released a sweet fragrance. She'd spoken about the display that heralded the imminent onset of winter, many times in the past. In a sense, it was a compensation for the months of bare trees, short days and sub-zero temperatures that she'd found so hard to get used to after coming from Cape Town, where there was also far

less contrast between seasons. “I remind myself that the trees have gone to sleep and spring lies just beneath the snow.”

We took long walks around the outskirts of town. Rayhaan went ahead on Ian’s bicycle, stopping to lean over fences to greet grazing horses, or to run through hard-to-resist piles of crackling leaves. He covered twice the distance we did, doubling back to make sure we were following, giving a commentary on what was coming up – red barns, white fences, views from the top of the hill. Back at the house he followed tall, broad-shouldered Ian, aged 13, around the garden that sloped down to a large pond. He was happy to have a big “brother” to show him how to putt golf balls from the wooden jetty. Together they paddled in the canoe and launched themselves into the water with a rope-swing hung from a generous branch, or relaxed in a hammock. He was keen to try out Ian’s bagpipes and I was glad that the big garden shielded us from the screeching. At least he wasn’t flopped out on a couch, remote in hand, trawling endlessly through the channels. Meanwhile Saarah and Charlotte bonded over braiding their hair, painting their nails and hockey.

“You have to remember to say *field*,” stressed Charlotte, “otherwise they’ll think you’re talking about ice hockey.” She wanted Saarah to go to school with her and Caroline phoned the principal for permission. Late into the night they discussed what they’d wear, how they’d do their hair and who Charlotte wanted her to meet. Saarah was delighted to be going to school in “civvies”. The girls found it hard to believe that Caroline and I had worn uniforms with matching knickers when we were at primary school and wanted more stories of the “olden days”. They couldn’t relate to reading Archie comics and staring at the test pattern when television first came to South Africa in 1975 or the fact that Caroline and I weren’t able to go to a Spur or Wimpy together. I recalled the time Paul’s nieces had taken me to school for “show and tell”. Caroline

had found photographs from their South African holidays and urged me to take their illustrated book of Johannesburg “so they can see you have big cities.”

“Don’t be surprised if they ask if you have lions and elephants in the road,” said Paul. “Wear jeans and sneakers, they might be expecting a grass skirt.” I hope I debunked a few myths about darkest Africa.

In the morning the headmaster phoned to say that Saarah shouldn’t come because he needed discuss with the school board whether the insurance would cover Saarah while on school property. Crestfallen, she waved Charlotte goodbye at the end of the driveway. It sounded bizarre, but I’d read that America has more lawyers than the rest of the world put together, and that over 90 million lawsuits are filed each year. What happens to the “have-a-nice-day” friendliness when anyone can sue at the drop of a hat, and potential lawsuits have to be anticipated before they arise? How exhausting.

They did go off next morning, Saarah once again feeling like she was living in a movie when they waited on the road for a yellow school bus. When we picked them up in the afternoon, Charlotte claimed her friends thought Saarah was a princess as, apparently, she looked “foreign” and “exotic”. They’d played along and, by lunch time, the rumour had spread across the middle school. Charlotte had also let it drop casually that her friend had met Zack and Cody.

While all four children played ball, Caroline and I sat on the back porch in the dappled sunshine, catching up over numerous cups of tea, or practising yoga lying with our feet up the wall, still talking. I first met Caroline in 1982, when we were both second year occupational therapy students at UCT. In our clinical year we had a number of hospital placements together. Caroline would catch a lift with me in my old orange Ford Escort and doze in the passenger seat

while I nervously negotiated my way from one end of Cape Town to the other. She'd come to South Africa from England with her mother and sisters in the 1970s. Their house was open to all kinds of strays, both animal and human. Dogs, that needed walking, wandered in and cats draped themselves on prime spots around the house. It was warm and wonderfully chaotic to me, coming from a stricter household, where everything had its place.

I accompanied them to midnight mass on Christmas Eve and slept over on the floor in their lounge. In the morning, her sisters were there with their families. John or Derek, the brothers-in-law, would read out the names on the presents and we'd open them while drinking copious amounts of tea. Lunch would follow, with plates balanced on knees because table big enough for all the guests couldn't fit into the dining room.

When we graduated, posts for occupational therapists were being frozen in government institutions. I took up a job offer at Red Cross Hospital while Caroline went to Durban and wrote me postcards about "monkeys on the roof" and Indian weddings. A year later she came to Red Cross and, soon after, met Paul, a marine geologist, when his ship passed through Cape Town. When she came back in 1988 to get married, I was one of her bridesmaids. Over the years our friendship had been strengthened through shared experiences of relationships, parenting, hysterectomies and cancer. The children couldn't understand how we had so much to talk about. I confess there were times that I felt as if I had Attention Deficit Disorder as we flitted from one subject to another and back again.

There was much that was appealing about the American way of life in the quiet countryside. We spent time in the village, eating at the diner for Charlotte's birthday and visiting Caroline's workplace. By the time we met Iqbal again in New York, I felt we'd connected with

the natural friendliness of people and the ease and convenience of life. We personally knew Americans who cared about how others lived and were committed to improving their lives. I think ordinary Americans are held captive by a media that shows off the rich and famous, the obsession with youth and beauty, the relentless pursuit to be the biggest and best, the pathological attention-seeking and the arrogant belief that everyone in the world wants what they have.

Caroline had just started a new job and had to attend a course in Milwaukee but we spent the last night together in the city. Paul, Ian and Charlotte came to wave us off the next day. Ian was brandishing the ugliest cap I'd ever seen. It was peak and was emblazoned with a "bling" diamanté dollar sign on a background of red and blue dollar signs. Saarah and Rayhaan were delighted and photographed each other wearing it, oversized peak pulled to the side, their lips pouted, one arm bent with thumb, index and little fingers extended in "cool hip-hop poses".

CHAPTER 8: SWEDEN

–with great privilege comes great responsibility–

April 2008 (Saarah 15/Rayhaan 11)

“There’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes,” the pragmatic Swedes say, while wrapped up in several layers. Woolly hats and scarves, stout sheepskin-lined boots and jackets zipped up to their chins, is standard gear from October to April. We’ve experienced the country’s many moods, a reflection of the changes in weather. The seasons are defined, decisive and distinct, unlike the weather in Cape Town that like a teenager with too much choice, swings wildly from one season to the next, often in the same day.

I’ve inhaled the crisp fresh air in spring, heralded by wild yellow daffodils bravely pushing their way up out of half-frozen soil. The country, emerging from months of enforced hibernation, seems to have a bounce in its step as it re-discovers itself. There’s anticipation in the new green leaves and a not-quite-warm-enough sun that nonetheless shines brightly in a clear blue sky. I’ve been tricked into shedding my scarf and jacket only to quickly regret having exposed myself to what masquerades as warmer weather.

Summer is a time to celebrate. As the school year comes to an end, Swedes prepare to enjoy a five-week, nationwide paid siesta to worship the sun’s rays. We’ve joined the mass exodus to the archipelago and summer houses, emptying the streets of Stockholm. The ancient pagan tradition of Midsummer marks the end of the spring work season and the beginning of the interlude before hay-making. At the local village green the celebration of light and fertility commences with reeling ring dances to the strains of accordions and fiddles, around a giant leaf-clad maypole. Thankfully, there are no longer virgin sacrifices although maidens in flowing

dresses with flowers in their hair abound. Floral wreaths adorn front doors, gardens drip with heavy scents and bright flowers bloom on the side of the roads and tumble out of pots.

Leisurely lunches of pickled herring, new potatoes and sour cream on rye or crisp bread are accompanied by bottles of schnapps and silly drinking songs. The days stretch into balmy evenings at crayfish feasts set out on trestle tables draped in white cloths, on balconies and in gardens all over Sweden. The wistful glow of light at midnight bestows a sense of magic on the summer.

In the damp chill of autumn, when gentle rains fall from gloomy skies, the changing leaves float reluctantly down to the ground and quiet wisps of mist swirl through the trees. After an indulgent summer it's time to get serious before the October snow falls. As the light starts to dwindle the locals scurry around like squirrels preparing to hibernate.

We haven't been to Sweden in winter when darkness falls as early as 15h00 and friends say the drop in temperature causes a personality-change. Drinks on the wooden deck become a distant memory replaced by furtive dashes in and out of the garage. On St Lucia's Day in December, processions of children led by a girl with a crown of candles, sing songs to bring light into the darkest month.

Mediaeval traditions, to keep witches and evil spirits away, mark the end of the season. On 30 April a bonfire bids the cold farewell and welcomes the beginning of spring. The accumulated debris and leaves that have been vigorously swept up are piled high and set alight. Neighbours, who've been insulated against each other and the elements for months, emerge to party into the night, illuminated by blazes and filled with the crackling sounds of leaves devoured by flames.

The rituals between the seasons create a distinct rhythm to life in the country and it seems that you always know exactly where you stand and what to expect.

“The Swedish way is to gather information so that plans can be made,” a friend told me once.

“In South Africa we tend to wait and see what happens,” I countered, “and then plan accordingly.”

The Swedish are aghast that I can arrive without having every day planned, accommodation booked and my timetable organised. The strict schedule we had to adhere to when we met HRH Queen Silvia before the awards ceremony of The World’s Children’s Prize for the Rights of the Child (WCPRC) looked thus:

- 13h00–13h15 meet board member and international ambassador, Björn Larsson, in the reception of Gripsholm’s Vardshus
- 13h25 latest departure (300 metres on foot) to the Gripsholm Castle
- 13h45 meet in Nedre Rondellen (to the left of the reception at the castle) and wait for the Queen
- 13h58 HRM Queen Silvia will arrive at Nedre Rondellen
- 14h01 HRM Queen Silvia will leave Nedre Rondellen
- Make your way quickly to Rikssalen, the throne room, and take your seats so that the ceremony can begin promptly at 14h10

After a whirlwind of prior preparation, I was happy to have someone else take control. The invitation had come at short notice. Usually our passports were ready, but I'd just applied to have mine renewed. The Home Affairs official, who I'd been harassing, kept reminding me that he'd said eight weeks, and "eight weeks is two months".

I was initially reluctant to take Saarah and Rayhaan out of school to attend the ceremony since we'd just come back from our Easter break. Magnus Bergmar, the founder and executive director of the WCPRC, had responded with a strong motivating letter, describing it as "the world's largest annual education process on the rights of the child, democracy and global friendship ... consisting of the unique awards for outstanding contributions to the rights of the child." He continued to say that 16 million children under the age of 18, in 87 countries supported the WCPRC. Around six million, including those from South Africa, had participated in the 2008 global vote. Patrons of the awards included the Queen of Sweden and Nobel Prize laureates José Ramos Horta, Joseph Stieglitz and Nelson Mandela. I'd simply copied and pasted all of this information in emails to the principals at Saarah and Rayhaan's schools and they had promptly been given permission for leaves of absence.

Iqbal was already in the UK and the backup plan was to send Saarah and Rayhaan to meet him in London and to attend the ceremony without me. However, I went ahead with flight arrangements, confident that Home Affairs and the Swedish embassy couldn't refuse when I'd attached an invitation from the Queen of Sweden to my application. My passport with visa arrived on the morning of our departure.

*

We were welcomed at the Victory Hotel, named after Lord Nelson's flagship, as if to an old relative's house. The owner's private collection of marine antiques and memorabilia were lovingly displayed on the walls and in glass cabinets of the small family-run hotel, in Gamla Stan, the oldest part of Stockholm. In pride of place was a letter written by the admiral to his wife, Lady Hamilton, in 1801. The shiny brass elevator with glass doors took us up to our cabin-like rooms each named after a prominent 18th-century sea captain. On the walls hung a portrait of the captain, his wife, and a painting of his ship. Figureheads and artwork made by sailors decorated the walls in the stairwell. A studded leather armchair stood under the glow of a floor lamp and the well-worn rug spread on the exposed teak floors, lent a comfortable and lived-in air.

Outside, narrow cobble-stoned roads and alleys invited us to explore hundreds of years of history tucked away in a spider's web of narrow alleys, behind broad, busy main roads. The Royal Palace, church and other mediaeval buildings rubbed shoulders with skyscrapers and malls. Benches stood in green spaces and waterside paths meandered through the fourteen islands that make up the heart of the city. It's possible to kayak your way around Stockholm and I spotted more than one angler fishing off a bridge into the clear water of Lake Mälaren. The clean air, woodlands and open spaces conferred on the city the feel of a rather large village and I understood how a recent survey could find Stockholm to be among the ten most liveable cities in the world.

This was my first visit but the rest of the family had attended a conference to discuss "how on earth we can live together" in Tällberg, north of Stockholm, two years previously.

“Everyone’s blonde here,” Saarah said when she called home, where I was convalescing post-hysterectomy. “I’ve lost track of time. It’s midnight or two or three in the morning and the sun is still shining brightly.”

She and Rayhaan were bursting to tell me tales of dancing around the maypole “in awful weather”, wrapping up warmly to visit the Ice Bar and watching re-enactments of Viking battles. They commented that the Swedes were “pretty big on keeping the environment safe”.

“Everything’s green,” said Rayhaan. “And not one piece of litter anywhere.”

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Björn Larsson hosted us for dinner that first evening at Den Gyldene Freden, or The Golden Peace, Stockholm’s oldest restaurant, a few minutes’ walk from our hotel. The tavern had been established in 1722, a year after the Treaty of Nystad that marked the end of the 21-year-long war with Russia, was signed. According to the terms, Sweden handed over the Baltic States to Russia, giving them control over the Baltic Sea and marking the shift in power in Northern Europe. The restaurant is set in surroundings that have probably changed little since then. An inviting fire beckoned in the main area and we relinquished our coats at the door. On the menu was pan-fried herring, poached cod, reindeer sausage and Swedish meatballs served with gravy, boiled potatoes and tart lingonberry jam. For dessert there was a choice between wild strawberries and rhubarb pie, both served with vanilla ice-cream.

The Swedish Academy, which awards the Nobel Prize for Literature, has convened upstairs on the Bellman floor in this restaurant every week since the early 1900s. The winner of the annual prize is announced from here. Alfred Nobel had left strict instructions about how his money should be spent. He decreed that eighteen people would make up the Academy and that

they should meet every Thursday evening for dinner to discuss the Prize nominees. During our meal, a procession of stooped white-haired men wearing dark suits and white shirts, trooped down the stairs in single file and out into the cold night.

“That’s the committee,” whispered Björn, with an inclination of his head. They all looked as if they’d been around for almost as long as the establishment.

“Oh, please,” begged Saarah, “can’t we have a look?” We dashed upstairs. A centuries-old fireplace, surrounded by blue-and-white painted ceramic tiles dominated the pale wood-panelled room. The scrubbed pine floor was so uneven it had to be original. On the long narrow table that had just been vacated stood empty Schnapps glasses, numbered 1 to 18.

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While Iqbal attended to business and Rayhaan spent the afternoon at Björn’s house, Saarah and I set off to explore the bohemian Södermalm district. It was a little early for the shops that only opened at 10h30 or 11h00, so we had a good excuse to investigate the spicy aroma coming out of Frantzen’s coffee shop. The irresistible cinnamon buns, sprinkled with sesame seeds, in frilly white paper cups were displayed in a woven basket on the counter. I savoured the spices bursting from the whorls of spiral pastry, soft on the inside and slightly crisp around the edges.

Fortified with strong filter coffee, we wandered in and out of trendy boutiques, contemporary art galleries, interior décor and clothing shops in the former working-class neighbourhood.

“Have you noticed how many dads are pushing babies in prams?” Saarah asked me.

“I read that the Swedish have parental leave of up to 18 months. And extra days if you have twins. The leave can be shared between the parents. Usually mothers take the first year and then go back to work. And then it’s the dad’s turn. All the babies we’ve seen look about a year or so.”

“Everything’s so equal and fair here,” she said before guiding me in the direction of the grandly named “Tea Centre of Stockholm”.

Inside, shelves were stacked almost to ceiling height with row upon row of decorative tea canisters, obligingly opened so that we could breathe in the exotic aromas of loose-leaf tea from Morocco, Sri Lanka, India and other far off places. Fragrances of cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, tropical fruits, flowers, and smoky Earl Grey enriched with bergamot from Sicily, wafted into the air. Electric light glimmered on polished mahogany and burnished copper urns. Blue and white ceramics were displayed next to glass teapots holding bubbling golden liquid, inviting us to taste before we made our choice.

The proprietor appeared from a back room looking exactly as I'd imagined: slicked-back middle-parted hair, wearing round, wire-rimmed spectacles, dark trousers, a waistcoat and tie over a white shirt. His skin was almost as dark as the woodwork. He was from Sri Lanka and passionate about his wares. He took time to emphasise the correct methods of preparation and serving and offered advice on which teas should accompany specific foods. My choice was ladled into the silver bowl of a measuring scale from a bygone era, wrapped in brown paper and secured with string, the sale rung up on an old-fashioned cash register. We stepped back out into the sunshine and the 21st century. Saarah pointed across the road to where a young tree, decked

out with delicate white blossoms, stood in the graveyard in front of a stone chapel. It seemed to be making a statement against the more robust but bare trees that dwarfed it.

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From Stockholm Björn drove us west to Mariefred where we checked into Sweden's oldest working inn, Gripsholms Vardhus, built in 1609 to accommodate royal visitors to the nearby castle. The ceiling in the bar behind the reception desk was made from logs that had been felled in 1507. We were informed that the date, proudly displayed over the front door, was the code for the lock in case we returned after hours.

The suite the four of us was sharing had a massive wood-burning fireplace taking up almost one entire wall of the sitting room. A stove, surrounded by hand-painted tiles and a ready supply of wood, stood in a corner of the bathroom. The spa bath was surrounded by heavy curtains, our bed was hung with drapes and faded rugs were spread on the floor under the antique furniture. Through the casement windows we had a view of the lake and Gripsholm Castle where the 9th Annual Awards of the WCPRC were to be held. Most people come to Mariefred to see the renaissance period castle that dominates the skyline of the small town of 4 000 inhabitants.

After we unpacked I found a spot in the sun on the wide windowsill, to read the magazine Björn had handed me on arrival. Inside was the story of Iqbal Masih, a young Pakistani debt slave. When Masih was five or six years old, his father borrowed money, for an operation his mother needed, from the owner of a carpet factory. When the family couldn't repay the debt, the owner demanded that they give Masih to him to make restitution. Bonded slaves like Masih worked in terrible conditions for long hours each day and were sometimes chained to their looms. They usually didn't go to school and weren't allowed to play. Children were sought after

as carpet-makers because of the fine knots their little hands could make. Masih's uneducated family had no way of knowing when the debt of US\$ 100 had been settled and he continued to work at the factory for years. When it suited the owner, he used Masih in lieu of money. As I continued to read, I was astonished by the synchronicity at work. A few months previously, I'd been attracted by the name, *Iqbal*, written in calligraphy, on the spine of a slim book on the shelf of a Cape Town bookshop. That story was the same one unfolding on the pages in front of me.

When Masih was liberated from bondage, he started campaigning against slavery and was presented with the Reebok Youth Award in 1994 for his work. On his return from the United States, where he'd received the prize and addressed audiences about the conditions of bonded slaves, he was threatened and eventually murdered for his outspokenness. Masih's killer was never caught and the murder was declared an accident, despite the fact that he'd been shot in the back with 120 pellets. He was 14 years old when he died.

Magnus had been inspired by Iqbal Masih to start the WCPRC, also known as the "Iqbal Masih Award". Along with Anne Frank from Holland and Hector Pieterse from South Africa, he was honoured posthumously at the first ceremony in 2000. It was with a sense of despair and helplessness that I joined the rest of the guests in the hotel reception for a cup of tea before we walked across to the castle.

"It's a good day for a funeral," remarked James Kidner, CEO of the Coexist Foundation, who we'd met at dinner the evening before, as we stepped out into the sunshine.

"Crazy Englishman," I thought to myself as I took in a deep breath of crisp air and tugged at my coat.

Outside the inn a wooden deck was under construction in preparation for the imminent warmer weather although the temperature hovered around 2°C. The low wooden houses, boatmen's cottages and shops in brick-red, yellow and green, that lined the narrow streets of the small town, were being fixed, painted and renovated.

“They know that spring is here when they have five consecutive days with temperatures above zero,” James enlightened me.

We crossed the road and our footsteps crunched in unison on the gravel through the pine forest toward the pink castle with its turrets, flags and battlements reflected in the mirror of the pristine lake. People with their faces tilted to the sky to welcome the returning sun, sat on benches, or picnicked on the grass next to clumps of bright yellow daffodils.

Under our thick winter coats we were wearing what I hoped were suitable clothes to be presented to a queen. I needn't have worried. Although it was a formal occasion, the Swedish aren't fixated on pomp and ceremony and, because it involved children, there was a relaxed air to the formalities. Queen Silvia wore a red jacket and short pencil skirt, a cheerful white scarf with motifs of children in primary colours, was tied around her neck. She was warm and gracious, stopping to say a few words to each one of us as we were presented to her.

The interior of the castle spans four centuries of furnishings, including the more ornate French period that suggested that the renowned Swedish minimalism hasn't always been quite as effortless as it may seem. Thick iron railings ran along the walls to help negotiate the narrow stone steps, cracked and worn smooth in places where feet had trodden for centuries. The many rooms and great halls were connected by winding corridors. The roof was so low in places that I was forced to duck to avoid hitting my head.

Built in 1537, the castle is now used for royal functions and operates as a museum during the summer. The metre-thick stone walls of the throne room where the ceremony was being held were covered with 17th-century oil paintings, part of the Swedish state collection of portraits housed in the castle. Works depict political and cultural figures, as well as nobility and royalty from the time of Gustav Vasa, who commissioned the building of the castle, up to the present day. One portrait in the vast collection is of Benny Andersson from the Swedish pop group, ABBA, who performed there and used the castle as the cover shot for their 1974 *Waterloo* album.

The familiar vibrant sounds of a marimba band preceded the procession into the room as Umbono, from Khayelitsha in the Cape, barefoot and adorned with traditional beads and feathered headdresses, ushered the queen and jury to their places. To the accompaniment of singing, drumming and horn-blowing, jury members in national costumes arranged themselves on the stage while the queen took her seat to their right. The music changed to the reedy sounds of Vietnamese bamboo and string instruments as the girls of the Hanoi College of Arts followed. They resembled little dolls in yellow and red silk dresses with multi-coloured ribbons streaming from their shoulders. Their long black hair was tied up in ponytails with glittering bands around their foreheads.

A combination of stories interwoven with musical performances, guided us on a rollercoaster journey through the state of global children's rights. The music programme, which included a Vietnamese Lion Dance and a piece called "Schindler's List" by the Swedish Lilla Akademien, balanced the deeply emotional content of the proceedings. We were shown video clips of children voting around the world – reading the magazine, making posters and ballot boxes, travelling by camel or boat to stand patiently in queues, waiting their turn to vote in

playgrounds of red dust, on rooftops or in snow, marking their thumbnails with ink, proud to have a say.

The two honorary prizes were awarded to Josefina Condori and Agnes Stevens. Josefina, from Peru, had been fighting for the rights of girls taken from their rural mountainous villages to work as housemaids in the city of Cusco. Josefina, barely five feet tall, was seven years old when she became a servant, without any hope of being educated. She'd founded an organization that runs a home, a farm and a school. Accompanied by two girls rescued by her organisation, she accepted the award from the queen on behalf of the "thousands of young girls who work in Peru and the world".

"Moments like this allow us to dream and to have more responsibilities and we are certain that our vision of a just and more equal world will come true. This award gives us strength to continue the fight," she said via an interpreter.

The Umbono boys and girls wiggled their hips, stamped their feet and tossed their braided hair as they launched into Miriam Makeba's "Click Song". Happy African drumbeats had the audience dancing in their seats.

Agnes, from the USA, runs School on Wheels for homeless children in America. The wrinkled old woman with closely cropped grey hair had promised herself that on her retirement, she would tutor a homeless child. With the help of hundreds of volunteers she now assists them to get an education by providing them with books, computers and a place to study. She thanked the world's children for "embracing the 1,3 million children in the US", part of increasing numbers of families being found on the streets. I'd no idea of the extent of the problem that she said had exacerbated in recent years.

The international child jury, consisting of experts on the rights of the child as a result of their own experiences, had decided on who would receive the awards. Omar from Palestine, wearing the characteristic black-and-white-checked *kafiyah* draped on his shoulders, was the chairperson of the jury. He introduced his fellow jurors, girls and boys, all under the age of 18, from India, South Africa, Nepal, Mozambique, Colombia, Senegal, the UK, Bangladesh and Vietnam. They represented all the continents and major religions of the world. Among them were former slaves, an AIDS orphan, and children who'd been trafficked, sexually abused, affected by environmental degradation and chemical warfare or whose parents were imprisoned.

Bwami, a former child soldier from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, told his story through an interpreter:

“When I was nine years old I was looking after our goats. Three went missing. My father was very angry with me. As punishment, he sent me to stay with my elder brother.” Keeping his eyes on the floor, he recalled how his brother’s village had been attacked by an armed group in the early hours of the morning. He’d fled into the forest along with more than 100 children.

“There were also adults there. They forced us to take drugs. I think that the drugs made us think about killing and destroying. They also cut our bodies using razor blades. Then they said we had to go and fight as soldiers.” His eyes flickered up to the ceiling momentarily before he dropped his gaze again.

“In that war we killed many people. We killed women, children and men, civilians and soldiers.” Bwami shook his head from side to side. Tears welled up in his eyes. “In that war, they ordered us to rape little girls who were not yet grown up women, even though this was against our will.” A grimace of pain flitted across his face.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, I couldn't conceive of what this young man, not yet 18 years, had been forced to do. Next to me Saarah slipped her hand into mine. I put my arm protectively around Rayhaan. Around us people murmured in disbelief, dabbing at tears and shaking their heads. How could adults teach children to kill?

“While fighting I was injured by a grenade. It injured my face,” he said indicating the deep scars that ran from just below his eye to the corner of his mouth. He pressed on his right cheek in an endearing child-like gesture with four fingers causing the lower eyelid to droop. Bwami escaped three years after his capture, and had been reunited with his mother and returned to school. “I realise that education is the key. I want to speak about children's rights in Congo and the world.”

A lump had formed in my throat, I felt as if it was choking me. My emotions were in turmoil. I had a maternal urge to jump up and throw my arms around him. Instead I allowed the haunting strains of violin music to soothe away the horror and pain. The young Swedish musicians in formal suits reminded us of the beauty that children could produce if allowed the opportunity.

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The 2008 Global Friends Award went to Somaly Mam who has fought a long and dangerous struggle to save young girls sold as slaves to brothels in Cambodia. Her organisation has built three safe houses. There those they've rescued are provided with food, shelter, healthcare and an opportunity to attend school.

“I know their life, because I have the same life as them,” Somaly started her acceptance speech. “They need love, I can give them love.”

Well-groomed, in her long pale green silk dress and shawl, it was hard to believe that she'd also been sold to a brothel in Phnom Penh as a child. Somaly had grown up in the remote hills of the forest of northeastern Cambodia during the four years of the Khmer Rouge rule when one in five people were killed by execution, forced labour or starvation. Being an orphan in Cambodia was "almost normal". No one knew where her parents were or what they'd named her. Like others in Cambodia she's had many names. Somaly, "the necklace of flowers lost in the virgin forest", is the name she chose for herself.

The Khmer Rouge declared the mountain folk "core people" and they were protected from the suffering of the rest of Cambodia. They hadn't had any contact with westerners and were therefore examples for others to follow. But three decades of bombing, genocide and starvation had fostered a broken society and a culture of chaos where people couldn't trust their neighbours, family or their own children.

When a man came to the village to buy sandalwood to sell in the lowlands, he told Somaly that he'd take her to her relatives. The man, who she'd started to call grandpa, became abusive once they left the village. She was forced to become his slave, and worked in the paddy fields to earn money for his alcohol. It wasn't long before he was allowing men to rape her in exchange for payment and then sold her to a brothel. Most of the girls there were repaying debts. The Cambodian word for prostitute is "broken woman", broken by being raped, beaten, falling pregnant and having forced abortions.

"In my life we lost all of our childhood," she said. "Our fight is so difficult. Thousands of childrens in the world are slaves. People think I'm strong, but I'm not ... sometimes I feel like all the childrens will die and most of all I feel sad, so sad when I see the childrens we save. So

young, six years old, or 12 years old,” she said, pausing to look around the room, letting her words sink in.

The way she said “childrens”, made her seem more vulnerable. Next to me Saarah was tearing a tissue in half. She handed half to me. We were both puffy-eyed and red-nosed, but I didn’t care.

Somaly lives under constant threat of danger. Her own daughter, the same age as Saarah, was kidnapped, raped and sold to a brothel to punish her for her stance on girls’ rights. My heart went out to her as a mother. The idea of my daughter being raped was a violation too horrible to contemplate. Somaly had wanted to abandon the campaign that was endangering the lives of her family but her daughter had implored her to be courageous, asking, “What would happen to the other girls if you give up?”

“The only thing really makes me happy when I see the girl smile and play and they become children again,” Somaly continued. “Today I’m so happy. I feel strong because I know that millions of children around the world they think about our children in Cambodia.” She smiled. “And this give me strength to continue to fight to protect women and childrens who are most vulnerable.”

The loud applause released some of the tension in the room. The music that followed was rendered more beautiful, more joyful, by the tragedies we’d witnessed. It gave us an opportunity to gather ourselves before the onslaught of the next round of stories.

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Omar called Ofek, from Israel, to join him on the podium, introducing him as the grandson of holocaust survivors. The two dark-haired teenagers looked like brothers. They stood side by side and pleaded to be allowed to be “children”, to go to school and to play without the constant threat of violence. The two, who represented children living in conflict zones, said they didn’t want to be part of a war that neither of them had started.

Laura Hannant, the first chairperson of the children’s jury, delivered the closing speech. “There’s no doubt that our world needs more global citizens and more respect for the rights of the child, democracy and other humanitarian values,” she said. “The example being offered to coming generations is one of many words and little action. Nonetheless, children long for a better example, to come together in the spirit of global friendship and to learn about each other and the rights they should all enjoy. The WCPRC offers them a platform from which to voice their opinions and to celebrate those who fight for well-being. While the passion of the children moves me, I feel fear for the passivity of the adults. Let this movement not become another unfulfilled pledge to our children. Let us instead nurture their enthusiasm and their good will and allow their idealism to be contagious.”

One by one the jury children stood up, took the mike and challenged us in their mother tongue, to join them in demanding respect for the rights of the child. All the performers converged on the stage to lead us in the WCPRC song, “A World of Friends”, in Swedish and English – *I want to see a new world begin, where walls will crumble and peace will win.*

“I too demand rights for the child be respected,” the queen echoed, before thanking everyone for their contribution to the ceremony. “It’s strange that children have to remind us adults that they have rights and that we have to treat them with respect. You can’t help being

moved every time you see what children are capable of.” She described the awards as “a kind of Nobel Prize for children”.

As we filed out of the room, we shook hands, smiled and chatted with guests who an hour and a half earlier had been strangers. The intimacy of the proceedings and the opportunity to come together to share experiences, both wretched and joyful, had created a bond. Being witness to the suffering of others and the cruelty that humans have inflicted on each other put our own differences in perspective.

We walked back to the inn, where a light celebratory meal had been prepared for all the guests. This was followed later by dinner with the laureates and WCPRC board members, that Iqbal and I were invited to. Saarah and Rayhaan attended a Global Friends Party with the rest of the ceremony participants. In spite of language differences and adversity, the children left chatting and laughing.

It was a privilege to share a meal with women who’d made such an impact on the lives of thousands of vulnerable children around the world. I was frustrated that my rudimentary Spanish didn’t allow me to convey my respect to Josefina, who seemed so young sitting on a chair with her feet hardly touching the floor. Underneath Agnes’ ordinary exterior, was a steely passion for what she did. I felt connected to Somaly, both as a woman and a mother. I was filled with admiration for their strength and determination but also anxious about the situations they would face when returning home. The patronage of the queen conferred some protection upon them, but was it enough?

“During the apartheid years it was a great comfort to know that the international community was supporting the anti-apartheid struggle,” said Iqbal, who Magnus had asked to

say a few words after dinner. “The knowledge that we weren’t alone gave us strength to carry on the fight. It’s this same support that the WCPRC is now giving to these children and their champions. The children and laureates will all be returning to the various corners of the world to continue the fight. At the very least, they know their struggles have been acknowledged and recognised.”

Magnus had started the WCPRC from his home in Mariefred with his family and a group of volunteers. It had developed into a global movement. He’d spent time as a journalist and a filmmaker in South Africa during the 1980s and his documentaries on apartheid and child slavery had been broadcast around the world. He’d received numerous awards, including the Mahatma Gandhi Award, for his work.

The distinctive South African flavour of the proceedings had made us not only proud, but also welcome. Besides the marimba band, and Gabatshwane, who represented AIDS orphans on the jury, there was a video message from Nelson Mandela pledging to support the WCPRC whether he was “alive or in the grave”. The Queen Mother of the Royal Bafokeng, one of the patrons, was also attending the ceremony.

Saarah and Rayhaan returned from their party with former child soldiers, slaves and street children flushed and out of breath.

“They were just like us, Mommy,” said Saarah. “I couldn’t believe that so much happened to them and they were still dancing and playing games with me and Rayhaan. Even Bwami is still positive and happy.”

We sat around chatting till late into the night in front of the fire in the informal lounge. Though my eyes were heavy as much from crying as fatigue, I was reluctant to end the day.

People aren't that different when we cross borders and yet, it's a challenge to learn to live together in a global community. Many of the wise sages and prophets from the time of Confucius had spoken about the Golden Rule – to treat others as you would like them to treat you, and to have compassion to feel the pain of others and want to alleviate it. This was a universal ideal that I wanted Saarah and Rayhaan to strive for.

At breakfast the next morning, Saarah and Rayhaan were bubbling over with stories, including having walked back from the party in the dark, unafraid.

“I feel like I was meant to come to Sweden,” I said to them. “There was so much synchronicity at work to get me here. I can't believe that I nearly missed it all. This isn't an overseas trip to be forgotten about in six months' time. We have so much in material wealth and comfort and opportunity, we have to speak up for those who can't. With great privilege comes great responsibility.”

“Mom thinks she's Spiderman,” Rayhaan said, smiling at Saarah.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“That's what Spiderman says in the movie. ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’”

“Well, you've been privileged to come all this way to hear these stories. What are you going to do with the knowledge?” I challenged them. They were growing up with opportunities that Iqbal and I had never dared to dream of when we were their age, attending the best schools, living in a good neighbourhood and travelling freely.

“You nearly didn't let us come,” Saarah reminded me.

“It’s a lesson to not let school get in the way of your education. People like Somaly, Agnes and Josefina are great examples of how one person can make a difference. There’s so much pain and suffering out there. Every day on TV or in the newspapers we hear about environmental catastrophes, war and terrorism. We can’t tell ourselves there’s nothing we can do.”

“I can speak at assembly,” said Saarah. “Maybe Mr Brown will let you also speak, Ray,” she said. “You’re old enough. Some of the children here are the same age as you. It doesn’t matter how small or young you are, or how weak you are, you can still speak up.” Something had changed in the way they viewed the children, no longer as helpless victims but as survivors who could stand up for themselves. They were motivated by the example of the proceedings run by under 18s.

“And I’ll speak to the girls who do yoga with me. What about writing an article for the school magazine, Saarah? You can get your schools to register so you can vote next year. This is a great way to learn about democracy and voting. I’ll never forget how it felt when I voted for the first time in 1994. I felt that I mattered and had a say.”

By the time Iqbal and Magnus, who’d been having a separate meeting, joined us, we’d made plans to get involved.

“I’ll put you in touch with the coordinator of the WCPRC in South Africa,” Magnus offered. “It’s one of the largest WCPRC countries and has the most laureates. I’m sure Marlene will be happy to hear from you.”

“Magnus says he’s looking forward to going for a long cycle with the sun on his face and the wind in his hair once everyone leaves,” said Saarah, “but he’s bald.”

“Must be all the troubles of the world,” said Rayhaan.

CHAPTER 9: GREENLAND

–to predict the future, we first need to understand the past–

September 2008 (Saarah 15/Rayhaan 11)

We are bobbing about in a wooden fishing boat, dwarfed by massive sculptures of floating ice. The icebergs rearing 60 to 100 metres above us are remnants of the last Ice Age. As we approach, the ancient hulks of frozen rock creak and groan, shedding chunks of themselves into the deep, dark waters of the North Atlantic. Frosty fountains spray up into the air, threatening to drench us if we venture closer. I'm full of admiration for the local fishermen who ply these forbidding territories day after day and risk shattering their vulnerable vessels on mountains of ice.

A weak sun shines out of the hazy September sky. Each time I inhale I can track the path of chilly arctic air flowing through my nostrils, down the back of my throat into my lungs. The thermometer mounted outside the cabin reads -5°C. The wind blowing off the glacier renders it a few degrees colder than on land. I'm performing a clumsy dance from one foot to the other, clapping my gloved hands together and patting my body in an effort to keep my circulation going. I can feel the damp air seeping through the layers of my clothing, my thermal socks and hiking boots, right into my bones. In spite of the "tea bags", that Felicitas, one of our hosts, had presented to us when we climbed aboard, I've lost all sensation in my fingers and toes.

"I thought of you guys coming from Africa and wondered if you'd be warm enough," she said, showing us how to activate the bags by crushing them like those glow-in-the-dark straws you can buy at a rock concert. We inserted them into our gloves and shoes but my brain refuses to accept that these ineffectual-looking sachets can make any difference.

Niclas, a fellow passenger from Sweden, who is wearing far less than we are, is explaining the secret of keeping warm to Saarah.

“It’s all in the layers,” he says, fingering his slim-fitting top and jacket. “The fabric and filling are what’s important.”

With both her hands cupped around an enamel mug of black coffee, Saarah regards him, her eyebrows arched in disbelief, as she lowers her head to drink the steaming liquid. She’s bulked up with thermal underwear, a fleece, ski pants, gloves and a buff, under a heavy hooded jacket.

“I have an extra jacket back at the hotel. You’re welcome to borrow it,” he offers. We discovered this morning that Niclas’ father was a South African who’d been in exile in the north of Sweden in the 1960s. His grandfather had been one of the founding members of the African National Congress.

Rayhaan, presumably impervious to the cold, is hanging over the side of the boat watching Jacqueline, the director of the European Environment Agency, fish ice blocks out of the ocean with a net attached to a long pole. She hauls in her catch and holds up two chunks, roughly the size of cricket balls.

“You can learn a lot from the appearance of the ice,” she explains, indicating the specimens, one clear and the other opaque with bubbles. “The colour and number of air bubbles a block contains provide information about its age. Some of these blocks could be anything from 100 to 10 000 years old. How about we take these back for our pre-dinner drinks?”

“Isn’t it salty?” Rayhaan asks her.

“Good question, Rayhaan, but actually, no,” she responds. “When the water freezes it pushes out the salt. If you licked the ice block soon after it was formed, it would be salty but the older it gets, the fresher it becomes.”

We’re on a Climate Change Learning Journey to find out “How to Stop the Ice Melting”. The Tällberg Foundation and The Forum for Active Philanthropy have invited family businesses and small enterprises from around the world to experience first-hand the effects of global warming on the people of Greenland. Scientists will lead sessions with the latest information, giving us the opportunity to participate in discussions for collective solutions. This will be combined with excursions to the most productive glacier in the Northern Hemisphere.

My education started prior to leaving Cape Town. While organising flight arrangements and visa applications, I discovered our only option to travel to Ilulissat on the west coast of Greenland was to take a four-hour chartered flight from Copenhagen. I hadn’t realised that the island, which hugs the north of Canada, belongs to the Kingdom of Denmark. I was also disconcerted to encounter more than one climate-change denier, like the medical doctor I was seated next to at a dinner at Saarah’s school.

“I don’t understand what all the hue and cry is about,” he protested, after I mentioned our upcoming trip. “Global warming is a natural process,” he scoffed. “We’ve had the Ice Age. This is the next cycle.” Turning to his wife seated opposite him, he continued, “Man isn’t that influential in changing the climate. There just isn’t enough scientific proof to support these theories.” I didn’t possess enough knowledge or evidence to challenge him and resolved to pay close attention on our forthcoming adventure.

We met the workshop participants – from China, the USA and a number of European countries – at the Niels-Bohr Institute of the University of Copenhagen. There we were briefed by Dorthe Dahl-Jensen, leader of the Greenland Ice-Core Project. According to her, most of what is known about our climate comes from research conducted in Greenland. In order for scientists to predict the future, they first need to understand the past.

Part of Dahl-Jensen's job is to analyse ice-core samples drilled out of the glacier in the far north of Greenland. Each layer contains water and air bubbles trapped in the snow over time. When examined, the ice reveals in great detail the temperature, amount of greenhouse gases, and the origins of volcanic dust present in the atmosphere over the last 150 000 years. From the levels of sea air in the samples, they can deduce the distance the glacier was from the sea. She had our attention when she offered to show us the first Christmas snow that fell between 1BC and 1AD, as well as air samples that contained sulphuric traces from the Mount Vesuvius eruption that buried Pompeii in AD79.

“The ice is, in effect, a library of its time,” she explained. “The deeper we drill, the better the picture of climate in previous eras we get and the more we can understand climate change. It's like tree rings, but for climate change.”

When someone raised the question of climate change being a natural phenomenon, she said it wasn't that simple. “Yes, the climate is always changing, sometimes very abruptly, but this is exactly why we shouldn't be adding to its forcing actions, like pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. You never know what will tip the delicate balance. The fact is,” she continued, indicating slides with graphs and tables, “that the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are higher than they've ever been. In addition, global temperatures have been rising

since the 1950s and we are losing ice from land masses around the world.” Scientists are 90% confident that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from industry and agriculture are the main culprits. The heat that is being trapped in the atmosphere will result in the flooding of many coastal cities, like Maine and New Orleans in the USA, and the entire coast of Bangladesh.

“Remember we met a girl from Bangladesh in Sweden?” said Saarah. “She said something is happening to nature. The floods were worse than ever and her whole village was under water, and some children even drowned. I think her name was Rebeka.”

“Even the kitchen was flooded,” said Rayhaan. “And they had to make a raft from banana leaves and cook their food on there. And the school was closed for three months.”

“She said she was afraid that next time the whole village would be washed away,” said Saarah.

“And, remember, she said the snakes came out,” added Rayhaan, “and people were bitten.”

Even in the face of evidence, we have difficulty accepting that, if the climate changes, all of nature changes and we will be faced with unimaginable human suffering, environmental destruction and the disruption of human development and natural evolution. Such a catastrophic future is too terrible for us to contemplate. It’s far easier to ignore the implications.

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There’s probably no better place on earth to experience the intensity of nature than the west coast of Greenland. As we flew over the island, I craned my neck to look through the window. My first

glimpse was of Disko Bay, dominated by icebergs the size of skyscrapers. The sun bounced off pristine white ice.

The town of Ilulissat (which means iceberg) lies among the rocks, at the mouth of the 40-kilometre ice fjord the glacier is slowly oozing into. Uniformly designed houses displayed their individuality in brilliant reds and greens, sunshine yellows, royal blues and purples, in stark contrast to the white landscape. The Arctic Hotel, situated half an hour's walk outside the town, was a red double-storey resembling a barn rather than a four-star establishment. It's the most environmentally-friendly hotel I've ever stayed at. Every time we stepped out of the room into the hallway, motion-detection sensors triggered lights on or off. The toilets had a dual flushing system; the hotel used biodegradable cleaning materials and recycled its refuse. The design was simple and sleek, with blonde wood and natural tones. The rooms were clean and bright. The hotel was undergoing renovations to cope with the increasing numbers of international visitors since the ice sheet was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Saarah and Rayhaan didn't need a second invitation to stay in one of the igloos perched on the edge of the fjord. We accompanied them over the rocky terrain to their room before the sun set, because by nightfall, the path would be too treacherous. They had an uninterrupted view of icebergs floating majestically in Disko Bay. Inspired by the classic Eskimo igloo in shape and design, the futuristic aluminium cabin was lined with wood instead of ice. Inside it was modern and compact with electric heating, a small television and a sliver of a bathroom with a shower. Two single beds stood close together, taking up most of the floor space.

“Look, if I stretch out my arms I can almost touch both sides of the room,” said Rayhaan.

Our formal programme started after breakfast the following morning. Twenty of us sat in a circle, with Saarah, Rayhaan and a Swiss teenager taking their places alongside eminent scientists, policy-makers, business people and philanthropists. Two Greenlanders, Hans and Malik, were there to ensure our discussions remained relevant.

Hans, a hunter in his forties, had a ready smile that deepened the crow's feet around his eyes, possibly the result of years of staring into the glare of sun-on-snow. He had spent 190 days in the uninhabited hinterland the previous year, hunting seals. It was on one of those expeditions that he had noticed the changes in the climate and realised that their ancient traditions were under threat.

"My dogs and me, we race across middle of Greenland," he began in halting English. "Suddenly the dogs stop. They pull to the right. I can't understand what is wrong with them. I get off. I see deep, deep hole in the snow. If we fall down there, we die. My dogs, they save us. They know this place like backyard. I think they feel danger is coming and turn away just in time," he said with an involuntary shiver as if he still couldn't believe he'd escaped what would've been a fatal plummet. "I feel my hairs raising up if I begin to think about it," he said rubbing his forearms. "No one will know what happened to us for maybe two month when I don't come back from the hunt."

There are almost as many dogs as people in Ilulissat. Even in this modern town, they're still as important for transport as they've been for thousands of years. The dogs are invaluable during hunting and assist by surrounding and distracting the prey, giving the hunter enough time to take aim with his harpoon or rifle. In a snowstorm, when visibility is low, he relies on canine instincts to guide him.

Before he'd left on his last expedition, Hans had gone to visit the elders as was his custom. From them he'd learned to make and use the traditional tools of hunting but early hunters had, in all probability, learned their skills from watching polar bears. These beasts depend on seals for their livelihood as much as the people did. When, as a young boy, Hans had caught his first seal, the whole village had joined in the celebration. Hunting was a way of life, a matter of survival. It was considered a sacred activity to assuage the guilt that they felt about killing the creatures they had a close kinship with. It was conducted with deep respect and every part of the animal was utilised, making it sustainable.

Although Greenland is no longer a major hunting society, the traditions are still maintained. Greenlanders live close to nature, acknowledging that their lives are interrelated with the cycles and rhythm of the land. They depend on the sun, the moon and the seasons for their survival. Their culture and existence is intertwined with the ice and they are walking barometers of climate change. The warming that is easy to dismiss in other parts of the world, is undeniable here. They watch anxiously as more and more of Greenland disappears each year.

“Before, I could ride all the way across Greenland,” Hans said with a sweep of his right arm. “Now it's not safe. Everything is changing. The past two year the ice is melting and moving. We are very concerning about that. It's too dangerous for me but what can I do? Hunting and fishing is what my father teach me.”

What the elders had to pass on to the youth was becoming irrelevant, their insights trivial. In fact, their knowledge could soon be redundant. Not only were the winters shorter and warmer, but there was less ice and unstable weather patterns made it difficult to find animals. Usually the hunter would wait for a seal to break the surface of the water to breathe and kill it when it was

most vulnerable. Now, because of the pockets of air trapped between the water and ice, the animals had no need to emerge from below the glacier.

Over a dinner of halibut (caught with a long-line through a hole in the ice) I wondered about the strength and resources required to survive in such a harsh environment. I'm sure none of us had the resilience to last more than a few days. Our modern lives had removed us from the source of our food, cut us off from our hunting ancestors and our connection to nature. I had difficulty conceiving the sense of isolation that Hans, camouflaged in a polar bear suit and sealskin boots must experience when he trekked across the barren interior to face the perils of the hunt. With only the howling of his dogs for company, he traversed hostile landscapes, risking his life in order to provide for his family and community. What a relief it must be to return home safely.

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Every day a soft, dripping rain fell, the kind of drizzle that seeps into your pores.

“I call it the ‘weeping of the Arctic’,” said Bob, an American oceanographer, now in his seventies, who'd been coming to Greenland since the 1960s. By our second day we had made up a new word, “flans”, short for “flexible plans”. We didn't know whether the wind would come up, the mist would roll in or if the sun would shine through the clouds. The weather determined our schedule for the day and we spent a major part of the morning planning and then revising our proposals for excursions. The unpredictability of the climate was a reminder of how insignificant we are. The input from Hans and Malik emphasised how little there was we could do to exert control over nature.

Climate change has been an issue since the 1970s, but hardly anyone's listening. When Iqbal and I had been at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, more than 20 000 delegates from all over the world had discussed and agreed on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Never before, had so many come together in concern for the earth's survival. High on the hope and possibility of a new democracy at home, we joined in protests and discussions under signs of "Bush go home", in front of dark and menacing banners of a sick earth. On lawns and under trees, people practised capoeira and meditated to music. The message had been clear: we needed to change our attitude and behaviour so that our children and grandchildren could continue to enjoy life on this planet. Saarah was born after our return from Rio and here we were 15 years later with two children, still talking about the unstable and insecure environment we were raising them in. Climate variations had occurred over and over again in our history, but were we in denial about having disturbed the balance more than earlier civilisations? Was it possible that a technologically advanced society such as ours could destroy itself?

"Everything is changing so much faster than we thought," Bob said. "When I first started coming here we were just starting to ask questions about climate change. Then there was no substantial evidence of melting apart from some mushiness here and there. We've underestimated the rate of industrialisation and the effect of burning fossil fuels."

I was curious about what he knew that still kept him optimistic and motivated to persevere with his campaign to save the ice cap. The answer was simple: "We have no other place to live. We have to make this work for the sake of our children and grandchildren."

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Sparse vegetation hugged the ground: low-growing dwarf-shrubs and heath grasses with little colour variation stretched across the rugged terrain. The permanently frozen soil and limited sunlight created a hostile environment for trees that need to anchor their roots deep in nurturing earth. The yellow of the pine boardwalk erected over the waterlogged marshy areas blended into the ochre and raw sienna of the surrounding territory. I breathed in the rich, loamy vegetable smell of the wet tundra. Malik was guiding us on a four-hour hike through a peat bog to the edge of the glacier. He pointed out the easily overlooked greens, reds and yellows of the lichen creeping over the rocks.

In his early 20s, he reminded Saarah of Tigger from *Winnie the Pooh*, “all happy and bouncy”. His work as a tour guide was an example of how the locals were adapting. He was combining his modern education with the knowledge of his ancestors.

Halting next to the remains of an old settlement, he described how tents had been made with animal skins stretched over whale bone. A ring of heavy stones had anchored the skin dwellings against the bitter arctic wind. The floor would’ve been excavated and probably layered with furs and hides for warmth. Inside, the extended family would huddle together, gathered around the oil lamps in their sealskin parkas and fur trousers, while a storm raged outside. This was when the elders, who played a crucial role in preserving language, hunting skills and links with the past, would relate the stories that had been passed down from generation to generation. The oral history bound the people to the land, told them how to live a decent life and how to behave properly. Inuits believed every living thing had a soul and that they had a duty to maintain harmony between all beings. Their lives depended on natural resources and appeasing the goddess of the animals.

“When the Mother of the Sea was angered by the evil deeds of the people,” began Malik, having set the stage, “she would gather up all the fish and animals they used to hunt, entangle them in her wild, flowing hair and drag them down to the bottom of the sea.” He wiggled his fingers on either side of his head to indicate the long tresses. “The hunters would come back empty-handed. The Evil One would have to confess and repent to placate the Mother or she would exact sacrifice. He would have to comb her long fiery hair until the fish, seals, bears, foxes and all kinds of birds were released. Mother was satisfied only once order was restored.”

This is one of the most well-known Greenlandic myths. Valuable lessons about how society should behave were transferred in this manner.

“We always knew when the rains would come,” Malik told us. “It never rained in December and January, now it does. The rivers that were once there have dried up and the glacier that capped the mountain has disappeared. When we saw the first reindeer appear on the horizon we knew that the hunting season had arrived. Now we’re not so sure.”

The youth were losing the connection to the past. Greenland was starting to experience a social meltdown. Alcoholism and suicide rates were on the increase, as the society struggled to adapt to the fast pace of change.

When we reached the edge of the glacier, we were encouraged to find a spot by ourselves to sit in stillness and experience the landscape. It isn’t often that we’re given permission to reflect, to remind ourselves of our connection to nature and our place in the intrinsic order. Taking a moment to appreciate the beauty and be part of it nourishes the soul and lifts us beyond ourselves.

The Ilulissat fjord is a stream of churning ice thudding like the pounding of drums at the start of a symphony. Plumes of mist fill the air as chunks of ice implode and slide down the glacier like a frozen waterfall. The volume drops and rises until it climaxes into a crescendo of tumbling blocks in a hurry to push through the narrow mouth of the fjord, to be released into the ocean. Calving they call it, as if the glacier were giving birth, not dying slowly. The combination of rock, sea and ice make for a wild and dramatic scene. I'm reminded of the Old Spice advert that played at the bioscope when I was a young child. I can almost hear the theme, "O Fortuna".

It was a contemplative group that gathered on the sun deck that evening. The sunset streaked across the sky in vivid layers of oranges, yellows and reds, bursts of saffron, explosions of green and blue, the effect magnified by its reflection in the ocean. The colours lingered, deepening to aubergines and indigo, the jagged icebergs silhouetted against the backdrop. If the monochrome landscape had us yearning for colour during the day, we were being satisfied tenfold with this psychedelic display that saturated the heavens and endured far longer than any sunset I'd previously witnessed. When the brilliant orange sphere finally sank into the horizon, night arranged itself around us like a cloak. The world was at peace, the only sounds the tinkle of ancient ice in our drinks.

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After our hike, Malik invited Saarah and Rayhaan to visit the community centre to meet some of the local teenagers.

"Can they speak English?" Rayhaan asked.

"Sure. Greenlandic and Danish are our official languages, but we also learn English at school," Malik said. "Don't worry, I'll be with you if you don't understand anything." This is

part of the change the country is undergoing. English is the language of power, information and technology, Greenlandic the language spoken at home.

“They’re just like teenagers anywhere in the world, dressed in jeans and T-shirts,” said Saarah on their return, showing us photographs of boys and girls with piercings in their eyebrows and noses. “We were just hanging out like we would at home.”

“Except they were playing some really weird card games,” said Rayhaan.

“Actually there were two differences,” Saarah interrupted. “Everyone seemed to know everyone else and no one was on their cellphone.”

“We also met Malik’s girlfriend, Emily,” said Rayhaan. “She’s from Sweden. She’s visiting him for a month.”

“I learned some names for icebergs,” said Saarah, consulting a list. “They have different words for when it’s upside down, black, right way up, still intact, in the sea and attached to the land. There’s even a word for ice that’s good for drinking: *nilak*.”

“I can say hello, how are you, in Greenlandic,” said Rayhaan, not wanting to be outdone. “*Aluu. Qanoq ippit?* Hans taught me.” He had bonded with Hans almost immediately in spite of differences in language, culture and age. During the workshops their heads were often close together as they whispered to each other and Rayhaan scribbled notes on a pad.

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Greenland is the world’s biggest island after Australia. With a population of 56 000 and no industry or agriculture, it doesn’t impact on global warming directly. The country is undergoing rapid change as a result of external forces. The condition of the ice sheet, the temperature,

precipitation and winds are influenced by the global atmosphere and ocean currents that converge here. Whatever happens in China, Brazil or Australia has an effect on the daily life of the Greenlanders.

We examined the global impact in “The Copenhagen Climate Game”. Andrew, from the US-based Sustainability Institute, facilitated the simulation. We were instructed to choose a country we could identify with, but were then randomly assigned to represent different countries and grouped according to development and economic criteria. I was not pleased to be nominated to act for China because, as far as I knew, the country had an atrocious track record regarding environmental awareness. I’d seen images of people in Shanghai wearing masks when venturing out because of the incredibly high levels of pollution. China’s drive toward development and growth seemed relentless to me.

We were positioned around the room and assigned resources and privileges according to our status. Developed countries, like the USA, were seated at a table, with a tablecloth and fancy stationery. We, in the developing countries camp, had chairs to sit on, and were much better off than “The-Rest-of-the-World” (including Bangladesh) that was seated on the floor next to a measuring stick indicating how far below sea level they already were. They weren’t given any resources. Our brief was to discuss strategies to reduce carbon emissions over the next decade, in order to halt the predicted catastrophes. The aim was to try to reach a global accord for reducing carbon dioxide levels. Experts advised us on how to argue our country’s policies and standpoints.

Niclas, representing the USA, wasted no time getting into character. Smug and self-important, he attempted to buy us off with promises of trillions of dollars for development, if we agreed to allow his country to continue as it was. I came close to punching him in frustration. My

attitude to China's determination for growth was being modified through exposure. The West had accumulated the trimmings of affluence unchecked. The USA and Australia were not signatories to the Kyoto Protocol. Why should China bear the cost of controlling emissions when America refused to do so? However, according to Jacqueline, China was open to technology-transfer and was funding the establishment of an environment agency. China was aware it couldn't follow the same economic pathway that Europe and America had indulged in, without the risk of running out of water and resources. During our ruminations, our progress, in terms of the reduction of carbon emissions, was being plotted on a graph.

Before the simulation started, the children had left with Bob. They marched through our meeting at regular intervals, chanting and carrying placards, to remind us they would have to bear the consequences of our decisions. More than half the allotted time had elapsed when Andrew interrupted our deliberations to point out that none of us had made an attempt to seek a collective solution. We were appalled to discover our self-centredness that had resulted in the negligible progress. The-Rest-of-the-World, most vulnerable to rising sea-levels and flooding, had been completely disregarded. This apparently mirrored closely what transpired in actual UN meetings. There was a sudden flurry of activity and rearrangement of chairs as we consulted with each other to reach a compromise around issues such as deforestation and energy sources. By the end of the session, we hadn't come close to a viable solution to reduce our carbon footprint. A hush descended on the group. We'd failed the planet. It was imperative that we rethink our lifestyles, technologies and politics. It was time to place the needs of the planet above our own, to stop exploiting the earth for material wealth.

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We bore this burden on our shoulders when conditions finally cleared sufficiently for the helicopter excursion. There was limited time before our return flight to Copenhagen, but it would've been a pity to miss the opportunity of landing right on the glacier, as we were permitted to do. The old Soviet-era machine ferried us in two groups.

The glacier, which appeared so solid from the plane when we flew in, looks less permanent as we approach in the helicopter. We detect cracks and crevices. Rifts appear between the folds of ice and streams of aquamarine and turquoise "melt water" gush down in rivulets through wide holes in the ice. Bob tells us the glacier is slowly oozing off the land toward the ocean at a rate of 15 kilometres per year. "It's like a giant tube of toothpaste being squeezed out into the sea," he explains. "As it nears the coast, it breaks off into the Ilulissat fjord. Every time a chunk of ice separates, it creates a wave that pushes the other chunks along. It's like throwing ice into a glass of liquid, eventually the glass will overflow and liquid will spill everywhere. And then where will the water go?"

The amount of "melt water" that occurs over one day is enough to supply the needs of a city like New York or London for an entire year. Scientists are talking about an ice-free Arctic summer within a decade or two.

Throughout the trip we've been urged to experience the climate with all our senses. Now we're simply encouraged to listen to the roar of the icebergs, the dull thud of ice falling ... splashing ... crashing. We each find a solitary spot for our meditation. As I walk toward a flat rock I am reassured by the crunch of my boots on the snow, although I feel I may break it, like glass, into shards. I'm aware that it's riddled with holes. For now, the ground is still firm beneath

our feet, but behind me cameras, placed by Danish researchers, record the progress of the steady slide of the ice cap off terra firma.

It's a clear day without a breath of wind. The light is brilliant, the rays of the sun blinding as they ricochet off vast swathes of snow, an unending blanket of white. There's not a sound of animal or human, only the reverberation of ice cascading off the land. It takes time for my ear to detect the subtler sounds – the drip-drip of melting ice and the trickling of water, like a distant refrain. There's a sense of instability and vulnerability amid the real possibility that the ground might give way beneath us. I feel humbled to be here, to feel the order and rhythm of the land. We've created artificial borders between ourselves and others and forgotten that we're all connected through our humanity and our connection to this earth is what is common to all of us. The world we were born into no longer exists and we need to create a new human mentality to save the planet, to find some indication of the way forward. All I can think about, is how angry our children and grandchildren will be with us. I remember how we challenged my parents about “allowing” apartheid to continue for so long. This is a human rights violation that we'll have to answer for.

I thought about how the children in the yoga classes I taught in Cape Town enjoyed the animal postures I asked them to adopt. Perhaps if we all saluted the sun or stretched like dogs, we would have to start connecting with nature again. At risk of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation and sinking into paralysis, I tried to focus on something constructive that I could do to make a difference. I recalled an old saying: “When you educate a man you educate one person, but if you educate a woman, you educate a family”. At the very least, I could make sure that Saarah and Rayhaan lived their lives more consciously.

We returned to pack up while the second group flew to the glacier. Unfortunately the helicopter broke down. If we missed our flight to Denmark, we'd have to wait days for another so we scrambled to gather the luggage from all the rooms and headed to the airport. There was nothing to do apart from buy snacks at a hole-in-the-wall kiosk and pace restlessly on the tarmac outside. It gave Saarah and Rayhaan a chance to chat to Bob.

“How much did you know before you came to Greenland?” he asked Saarah.

“We get drilled on climate change at school all the time,” she said, “but I don't see the effects on my life, so I didn't feel the need to really do anything. Coming to Greenland helped me to understand what's happening. To actually see the effects made it real for me. I can see that it's going to be up to us to do something because we are the ones who'll be left with the problem.”

“And how about you, Rayhaan?” asked Bob. “What were the highlights for you?”

“I liked Hans because he was funny and kind. He used his eyebrows to express himself. Hans eats dried fish, whale, reindeer and seal. I never ate those things before. When Hans goes out hunting his dogs are his best friends. He doesn't navigate with a compass. He just knows where he's going. Also, his dogs know the area. He uses sounds to communicate with his dogs.”

“Anything else?”

“I also enjoyed staying in an igloo and going on the boat and the helicopter ride. We need to do something about the ice melting because the animals that live in the Arctic have nowhere else to go.”

“Do you know that it takes six bottles of gas to produce one bottle of water?” Bob asked when he saw me drinking a bottle of mineral water. Feeling guilty, I realised that we were going to have to make a more conscious effort to change our lives and attitudes.

“I thought I was doing my bit, taking our waste to a recycling centre and buying organic vegetables from a township project. Saarah and Rayhaan collect newspaper for recycling at school. We even walk to school most days. Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to make any difference.”

‘You can’t stop doing those things,’ Bob replied.

“But we have so many other problems at home,” I said, feeling overwhelmed by all I’d learned in the last week. “People are still dying from a preventable disease like tuberculosis. There’s so much poverty. Most South Africans need to survive from day to day before they can think about sustainability.”

“We’re just hoping that by showing small groups of people what’s happening here that they’ll go back to their homes and through their businesses and their connections to influential people our message will get across,” Bob explained. “I like the analogy of building a cathedral. The masons who laid the foundations had no idea what the gargoyles or buttresses would look like. The character of the cathedral developed as the construction proceeded, but you had to have the foundation. We need to lay the foundation for building a climate cathedral.”

With minutes to spare, the rest of the group arrived. We grabbed our bags and scrambled aboard the plane, Saarah and Rayhaan clutching slips of paper with Hans and Malik’s Face Book and email details. They were oblivious to the incongruity of staying in touch, through technology with someone who spends more than half the year completely isolated in the Arctic Circle.

My spirits were lifted by spending a few days in Copenhagen. Walking around the city, Saarah and Rayhaan pointed out that about half of the traffic was bicycles, as the Danish went to and from work and school in dedicated cycle lanes. When Denmark was threatened by the oil embargo in the 1970s, they were determined to break their dependence on oil. Driving on Sundays was banned and the price of petrol increased, encouraging Danes to find alternative energy sources. Twenty percent of electricity in Denmark is wind-generated. They have virtually no landfill because waste is recycled to provide heat. One third of all wind turbines in the world, come from Denmark, creating jobs and improving the economy. Denmark has zero reliance on the Middle East for oil. They're a concrete example that change is possible.

CHAPTER 10: MAURITIUS

–a certain level of freedom–

January 2012 (Saaarah 18/Rayhaan 14)

When Saarah was nine months old we took what we supposed would be an easy trip to Durban followed by a week in Mauritius. It had been a while since we'd been to Durban. Besides the many friends we wanted to catch up with, Iqbal's father gave us a list of people we "had to" visit. I don't know what we were thinking, charging around with appointments for breakfast, lunch and supper, without any regard for Saarah's routine. Normally easy-going and contented, she was irritable and fractious. Perhaps the doomsayers had been right – it wasn't easy to travel with small children.

We changed our approach in Mauritius and allowed her to dictate the pace. Our idyllic surroundings were designed to soothe away parental anxiety and tension. The protective coral reef encircling the island provided calm, translucent lagoons of tepid Indian Ocean. Saarah was happy to spend hours suspended either in the sea or in the pool, buoyed up by a royal blue PolyOtter. Her eyes sparkled, toes curled in excitement and hands darted in all directions as she pointed to the abundance of sea creatures she could see through the glass-bottomed boat – fish, turtle and coral in fluorescent colours with psychedelic patterns. She napped on the beach, naked, in the shade of an umbrella. In the evenings she bounced in our laps to the rhythm of *séga* music around a bonfire.

When we could pull ourselves away from the beach, we ventured into Port Louis, its colonial buildings interspersed with cathedrals, temples and mosques, a testimony to the diversity of the islanders. At the market, merchants fell over themselves to invite us into their "shops". The tiny stalls that could barely fit the owner offered handicrafts, Indian clothing, spices, embroidered tablecloths, vanilla pods from Madagascar and far too many shorts, T-shirts and sarongs. We stopped for *dhal puri* and ice-cold *falooda* or chilled green coconuts that the

vendor slashed open with a dangerous-looking panga, sticking in a straw before handing it to us so we could drink the refreshing water straight from the fruit.

When we were ready we called on family friends in Quatre Bornes. Saarah charmed their two young sons, Iftikhar and Akhtar, who visited in the evenings. On New Year's Eve 1993, she slept on a pool-lounger while fireworks lit up the sky and we partied around her. Mauritius was a place we returned to often.

As Saarah and Rayhaan grew older they wanted to socialise with other children and we opted for resorts with kiddies' clubs where they learned to dance and participated in shows and dress-up evenings. They were equally happy to hang out with us under thatched gazebos, in rope hammocks slung between two palms, or to head for the beckoning blue-green water. The beach, with its slow decline and roped-off bathing area, was perfect for children, deep enough to swim with feet off the sand but still protected in the gentle bay. The full-board option allowed them to order drinks and food whenever they wanted, from buffet tables groaning with Indian, Chinese, Créole or French food. The flexibility gave us all a certain level of freedom. Sometimes they'd convince Iqbal to get up from his lounger to ride on pedal-boats or tubes dragged behind a motor boat. This involved much screaming as they were whipped around the bay, the skipper intent on dislodging his passengers.

A woman in a red-and-gold sari placed her straw basket of pineapples down on the sand every morning. Her skin was like dark worn leather, a dirty-grey plait hung down the back stooped with age and crooked, yellow teeth flashed as she shouted to us to try her wares. With a few deft twists of her knife she peeled the fruit leaving the prickly stalk to hold onto. She sprinkled the lolly with dried chilli flakes before handing it over.

In later years, our visits presented an opportunity for Saarah to practise French in the former colony. The Portuguese and Dutch first laid claim to the island in the 16th century on their way to the east. They left after driving the dodo to extinction and introducing slaves, deer, wild boar, tobacco and sugar cane, as well as rats. The French settled there for the next 100 years or so before handing Mauritius over to Britain at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. In 1968, the island was granted independence and became a republic in 1992. The British seem to have left little mark on the island after 150 years, except for driving on the left-hand side of the road. French and English are the official languages but it's difficult to find an English newspaper or magazine.

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Since we usually visited in December or April during school holidays, when conditions are perfect for cyclones, it was inevitable that we'd experience a major storm. It had been hotter and more humid than usual that day. Intermittent flashes of lightning lit up the dark oppressive clouds that hung over the island. The crash of waves against the reef competed with rolling thunder. The wind scattered frangipani flowers on the pool's surface and caused the muslin curtains framing the gazebo in the garden to billow like sails but brought no relief from the humidity. The heaviness of the thick air was almost unbearable until slowly, fat drop by fat drop, the rain hit the ground only to instantly dissipate into steam.

We returned from breakfast, puzzled to find we'd been barred from entering our rooms. All the windows were marked with white crosses running diagonally from corner to corner. At reception, we learned a cyclone was approaching and the windows had been taped as a precaution to prevent shattering in the event of a direct hit on the island. We were reassured by

the matter-of-fact way the staff were going about their preparations and, free to return to our rooms, we didn't give it any further thought.

Later, after dinner at the home of Mukhtar, a Mauritian friend, we relaxed in the lounge while Rayhaan played a game of chess with his brother-in-law.

"I feel like going to see a movie," said Iqbal. "I suppose they're probably in French or Hindi."

"Yes, with subtitles," responded Mukhtar. "But I think you might be a bit surprised. It's not like going to Cavendish Square or the Waterfront in Cape Town." He entertained us with stories of noisy family outings to the local theatre. Patrons often phoned the manager to delay the start of a screening if they were running late and arrived with flasks of tea and snacks. Loud greetings were exchanged and samoosas offered around before everyone settled down. We were chuckling about this when Iqbal's cellphone rang. He motioned to Mukhtar to switch on the television. A tsunami-warning was being broadcasted on CNN: the reporter was saying that Mauritius lay in its direct path. It was April 2005, four months after the tsunami in south-east Asia. We decided it was best to return to the hotel, about an hour's drive away, although the driver didn't think there was anything to worry about. In fact, none of the Mauritians seemed concerned.

In the reception a group of Italians, their bags at their feet, were causing quite a rumpus. Hypnotised by CNN's melodramatic style of repeating news ad nauseum, they demanded to be taken to a safe place. The harassed young man on night duty tried to pacify them with assurances that management had buses on standby to evacuate residents. I took Saarah and Rayhaan to the room and noticed the wind had picked up, sending ripples across the surface of the pool. The

outdoor furniture must've been moved to safety and it looked deserted. We tried to sleep, albeit a little uneasily. At about 02h00, there was a frantic knocking at our door.

“Hotel is being evacuated,” shouted a male voice, above the pounding surf. “Please to take only your passports and come to reception. Leave everything else behind.” We could hear him move off to the next door to repeat his grim message.

We woke Saarah and pulled on clothes. Iqbal grabbed our passports while I picked up a sleeping Rayhaan who stirred only to wrap his arms and legs around me. I covered him with a sheet and we hurried to join other half-awake, passport-clutching guests, to queue in the car park. Buses waited in line to transport us to a garden on higher ground, where we'd be “safe” in the event a tsunami struck the island. The bus negotiated the narrow twisting roads at such speed that we were flung from side to side in our seats with every turn. It seemed more likely we'd be killed on the road before getting to safety.

Residents from other hotels in the chain had also been evacuated and assembled in the garden. Torches and hurricane lamps illuminated a scene from a refugee camp. Long tables were set out in rows with hot drinks and sandwiches. Dishevelled guests, some barefoot, wandered around wrapped in blankets, looking dazed. I stayed on the bus with Rayhaan who'd managed to sleep through the ride. Iqbal went to see if he could be of any assistance.

“Who can I phone?” asked Saarah, wide awake, presumably high on adrenaline.

“Why?” I asked.

“To tell them about this adventure, of course.” She was like a reporter on assignment.

“It’s about two in the morning in Cape Town. Everyone’s asleep.”

“Can’t I at least send an SMS to somebody?” Our next-door neighbours happened to be staying at one of the hotels and I suggested she phoned Beth instead to check how they were. They’d just met Iqbal and were wondering, like us, whether the evacuation was really necessary.

Two hours later it was deemed safe to return to our hotels. We collapsed into bed, luckier than some who had to pack and leave for the airport. The next day, in spite of the menacing, steely-grey sea and palm trees being whipped into a frenzy, Iqbal and Rayhaan went for a swim. They were quite safe because of the protective reef surrounding the island, but Rayhaan was thrilled by the “danger” of braving the ocean in the midst of a storm. He took advantage of the deserted beach to streak between our bungalow and the water’s edge.

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We were speeding along winding roads and over mountains. Three toots on the horn seemed to mean either “Get out of my way” or “I’m passing now”, irrespective of road signs or the solid line. The coastal road cut north through green forests, fields of sugarcane and hibiscus and frangipani in full bloom. Coconut palms and banana trees grew out of a tangle of plumbago and tumbling crimson bougainvillea. I was surprised by the rugged beauty and lush vegetation that flashed by in a semi-blur. In spite of it being our seventh visit to Mauritius, it was our first time in the south. (The best beaches for swimming and water sports are to be found in the north.)

During the 19th century dense forests, which covered the island, were converted to tea and sugar plantations. The little that remains today is in the south. Battered by trade winds, it’s less populated and the coastline less developed because of strong currents that make bathing treacherous. This wasn’t the typical postcard illustration of long ribbons of palm-fringed white

beaches – the sand was grainier, the sea rougher and the waves broke right on the shore or pounded against jagged cliffs. The “wildness” appealed to me. I was also enjoying the cooler weather. The humidity was lower and the wind kept mosquitoes at bay.

Without realising it, two years had passed since our last family holiday in Thailand. Then, Saarah and Rayhaan pointed out they hadn’t met anyone their own age and “perhaps it would be nice to spend more time in Cape Town during the school holidays”. However, we’d all been off in different directions. Saarah had been on a school exchange to Canada and spent a month in the remote hills of Thailand building water storage-tanks. She and I attended the 10th anniversary celebrations of the World’s Children’s Prize in Stockholm. Iqbal, who’d been threatening to go skiing, “with or without” me, for more than ten years, did so with Rayhaan in Bulgaria. The previous year I’d travelled overseas by myself (for the very first time) and Rayhaan, that reluctant traveller, had recently spent two weeks in Sweden visiting friends. It was 18 years since our first Mauritian trip with Saarah. She’d just written her final school exams and it felt like a coming-of-age. We decided this holiday was about reconnecting as a family and recovering from a hectic year. We agreed to have dinner together every evening and had a short to-do list. We were armed with laptops, iPads and piles of books.

“Just throw it all in,” Iqbal said, while packing. “We’ll be in one place for two weeks.” He was indulging us. We were staying in a villa with enough space to not get in each other’s hair. In front of us was only sea and volcanic rock; dense vegetation shielded us from nearby bungalows. A small shallow area in front of the resort had been demarcated for swimming and we’d been warned to wear “jelly” shoes to avoid getting stung by sea urchins.

For the last two weeks, I'd been paddling furiously to keep up with end-of-year goings-on. I intended to write, read, swim, attend yoga classes and indulge in Ayurvedic treatments. Iqbal had brought along a small suitcase with all the magazines he'd been trying to read for months, plus the wrist-straining Steve Jobs biography. Some of the magazines dated back to when Jobs was still alive. Saarah was finally going to read Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* that had been gathering dust on her night stand and Rayhaan had the new Christopher Paolini book, *Inheritance*.

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I'd been experiencing the end of my own era. For some time there'd been vague indications that "the change" was on its way. I went out and bought the books but never read them. Perhaps that would mean accepting that I was getting "old". Surely it was too early? But it was three years since the hysterectomy and I couldn't ignore the uncomfortable heat creeping up from my chest and spreading into my neck and head. Some days I wanted to strip naked and hang out of my bedroom window. Nights were infinitely worse. I kicked off the bed clothes while Iqbal shivered next to me. I drank copious glasses of water followed by nocturnal bathroom visits. I rung out wet facecloths in the dark and applied them to the back of my neck and brow. Wide awake, I tiptoed back to bed to try to sleep. And then, as if a hormone fairy waved her wand, my body temperature returned to normal while I scrambled to salvage my modesty.

Women I knew had names for it – private summers, power surges – and advice aplenty.

"Shoulder stands," said my yogi friend.

"Agnus castis, black cohosh," recommended my nature-loving friend.

“Have you tried reflexology, shiatsu, acupuncture?” suggested other well-meaning acquaintances. Soya, evening primrose oil and omegas, were all on the list. The omegas were supposed to help with the memory lapses and I amassed a collection in the medicine cabinet as I kept forgetting that I’d already bought a bottle. It was disconcerting to forget the names of old friends or to wander from room to room trying to recall what I’d come there for. The last time I’d experienced this porridge-brain syndrome, I was post-partum.

I wasn’t averse to mainstream drugs (well, maybe a little) but I wanted to give the natural route a bash. You can beat this, I told myself. After all, I practised yoga three times a week, walked regularly and ate healthily. I diligently worked my way through the list, “giving it at least three months,” as the drug package inserts prescribed. There was temporary relief from some remedies but before long I’d be back with my head in the fridge.

Coupled with these symptoms was an overwhelming desire to set things straight in the house. I swept through each room and de-cluttered. I made separate piles for recycling, the homeless shelter and “Help the Rural Child”. We scrubbed and fixed and painted.

“Oh-oh, no one’s safe,” said Saarah, scrambling to save a pile of old magazines and a box of Barbie dolls, she’d long outgrown.

“Don’t touch my bionicles,” said Rayhaan, protecting his Lego action figures.

“Seems to me like you’re breaking up the nest,” remarked a friend. It made sense. Rayhaan was about to start high school and was dealing with his own hormone surges, sprouting limbs and hair and playing sport every afternoon. Saarah was in her final year, a boyfriend hovered in the background. My life had revolved around motherhood. Now I felt redundant. It

seemed an ironic twist of timing, letting go of my children at the same time as letting go of my younger self.

I sprained my ankle while taking a stroll around the neighbourhood. I was infuriated by the “enforced rest” and ranted from the couch where I sat with my leg up. Resigned, I paged through *The Secret Pleasures of Menopause* by Christiane Northrup. She spoke about a midlife rebirth. This felt more like an ending. I consulted my gynaecologist prior to our departure to Thailand. She thought rest and relaxation might help. It didn't.

“Mom's humid all the time,” said Saarah while I prickled with hot flushes. Sweat poured off me in a most unglamorous way: I had to keep tissues handy to mop my brow. I couldn't bear to wear half the clothes I'd packed and bought loose cotton tops and dresses. I looked like a tie-dyed elephant in all the photos and had a vague lament about my changing body to anyone who'd listen.

“Bring on the drugs,” I implored the gynaecologist on our return. In spite of the obsessive tidying and sleepless nights, I've trekked through the jungle on an elephant, have an open-water diving licence and made my television debut ... and the house is spotless.

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Despite our best intentions, we hadn't been diving since the PADI course in Thailand. This was where we were racing off to now, to brave the sea at Trou aux Biches. I wasn't sure if the refresher session in the pool the day before with the instructor, Neysen, had made me more or less confident. I was convinced that I'd forget everything, especially how to breathe. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to equalise the pressure in my ears, a problem I'd experienced in Thailand. I consoled myself with the thought that we wouldn't be performing any tricks, like

removing our masks or practicing buddy-breathing on the floor of the ocean, which is what was expected to qualify for the licence.

Jes, the taxi-driver, was quite burly, with a closely-shaved head, a fat gold ring in one ear and heavy silver chains around his wrists. He said we were going to be very late, or that's what he told us to justify speeding.

"It takes more than an hour to get from one end of the island to the other," he mumbled. It was Sunday and the traffic wasn't bad, but there were crowds of campers on the public beaches along the way. Local school holidays had come to an end, and everyone was out for the last day at the beach. Some of them looked like they'd been there for weeks, relaxing with drinks in their hands, on deck chairs and in makeshift hammocks. Blankets hung from lines for shade, fires smoked and children played ball.

The obligatory statue of Ganesh, the remover of obstacles, stood on the dashboard of the car. A stuffed red heart, a wooden fish, some red and black ribbons and a "Do Not Smoke" sign hung from the rear view mirror. Iqbal was in the front seat, trying his best to engage Jes in conversation about "real" life, politics and economics in Mauritius.

"Life is very hard for ordinary Mauritians," said Jes. "I live in a house with only one bedroom for me and my wife and son." He told us he earned a pittance driving the taxi that he didn't own and he could hardly afford milk or meat.

The national road, which ran from one end of the island to the other, was surprisingly narrow, with many twists and turns. As we approached Port Louis, it finally opened up, becoming more like a highway. We passed major corporates and recognised many South African

companies – Steers, Pick n Pay, Game and Nando’s. Billboards promoted Weetabix and long-life milk from New Zealand. I wondered why they didn’t have cows in Mauritius.

And then almost too soon we were at the Dive Place. We had brought our own masks and snorkels but needed to be fitted with wetsuits and flippers. There were forms to fill in, accepting the “dangers of diving” and “exonerating the company from blame”. Saarah wasn’t sure she wanted to sign them. Neither was I.

I was already at high school when I learned to swim at the Wynberg Public Swimming Baths, reserved for “coloureds”. No one we knew had a pool and the beaches weren’t safe, but my parents decided we should learn. Mr Mathews gave lessons at the baths before 07h00 when the local swimming club came for training. Even in summer the water was less than welcoming at that time. I remember the panic in the pit of my stomach when I had to let go of the wall and move away from the shallow end. It took a while before I could trust myself to put my head under without gulping down mouthfuls of heavily chlorinated water. I recognised that same gnawing feeling of dread that I was trying to control by repeating to myself that I’d done this before and even had a certificate.

A jovial party came back from their dive signalling our turn. A short drive, on the back of a bakkie, took us to the beach where the boat was waiting. It was a perfect day: the sun glinted on turquoise water. Neysen briefed us about the dive and assured me that we’d take our time and I’d be fine. We’d requested an extra diver so there’d be adequate supervision for Saarah and Rayhaan. Before I knew it, I was sitting on the edge of the boat with my mask, regulator and BCD (buoyancy control device) in place, preparing to do a back flip into the water.

The entry went better than I expected. At the last minute Saarah got cold feet. Neysen yanked her backwards into the water with him. Iqbal and Rayhaan floated off with the other diver while Neysen led Saarah and me to a faded red buoy. We clutched the rope that extended some metres down from it while he explained that we'd descend slowly and showed me how to pinch my nose and rock my head from side to side to equalise the pressure in my ears. He ran through the signals before we sank below the surface. The rope was slimy with algae.

A corkscrew of alarm twisted in my abdomen. What if my mask filled up with water? What if I swallowed water? What if I forgot how to breathe? I bobbed back up and considered returning to the boat but it seemed to have drifted a long way off. I felt silly as Neysen reassured me that my mask fit perfectly and that, of course, I knew how to breathe. I was aware that he was casting concerned glances in Saarah's direction, where she hovered below the surface of the water.

"Don't think. Enjoy. Relax. Breathe." He sounded like a yoga guru.

"Okay," I decided, "let's do this." He encouraged me, signalling with his thumb and index finger forming a circle, to check all was well. Eventually we descended far enough and it was time to release my grip on the rope. He took my hand and tucked it under his arm. It was comforting to be steered for a while. I reminded myself not to think too much, just to focus on breathing. Inhale. Hold 1-2-3. Exhale all the way. If I allowed my monkey brain to take over I started to panic about how much water is above me. I promised myself that I just had to get through one dive.

Soon we were surrounded by gaily-patterned fish in improbable colour combinations – black and yellow stripes formed a background to flashes of incandescent blues and brilliant

greens. Schools of fish darted around us. Silent and weightless, we floated along. There was little reference to time and space and the water distorted our senses. I recognised this surreal meditative feeling from Thailand. I felt privileged to enter this world, to witness a beauty hidden from most people. Neysen pointed out fish we'd ordinarily miss: they were so well-camouflaged in the delicate coral. Before we knew it he crossed his arms over his chest to indicate the dive was over and we slowly ascended. Forty five minutes had passed, at 18 metres – so much water above my head. Back in the boat, I couldn't stop shivering, from relief, rather than cold, I guessed. Rayhaan was bubbling over with "how cool" his dive was.

"See, you can do it," Neysen said to me. "You didn't need me. Now the second dive will secure your confidence."

Saarah didn't want to do another dive. I was surprised. In Thailand she'd been like a fish, even removing her regulator underwater to smile for photos. She complained that it hadn't been much fun because her mask kept steaming up. Neysen reminded her to spit on the glass and rinse it with sea water. We convinced her to try again and in so doing, I was forced to set a good example.

The second dive we did together. It was less stressful but I forgot to empty my lungs completely and took off like a balloon, totally out of control. Helplessly, I drifted off until my ears threatened to burst. When Neysen realised I'd gone AWOL he came to fetch me by the hand to re-join the group. All those hours of watching Jacques Cousteau dubbed into Afrikaans on SABC TV had failed to ignite my underwater adventurous spirit. I had no intention to go poking around in some shipwreck on the next dive, which was what Neysen was proposing.

*

We celebrated Saarah's results and Rayhaan's 15th birthday at the *Fish and Rhum Shack* on the beach, our feet buried in the sand. A buffet was set out on old wooden boats draped with nets and other fishing paraphernalia; rustic furniture was arranged in a haphazard fashion. We feasted on seafood while séga dancers swished their voluminous circular skirts around a bonfire shooting sparks into the dark sky. The women hypnotically swayed their hips and arms to a rhythm that bare-chested men beat out on drums, echoed in the pounding surf. The Créole dance, with its roots in slavery, has elements of Latin American salsa combined with the beat of African drums. Iqbal had organised a birthday cake and the dancers sang "Happy Birthday" to Rayhaan before they drifted off down the beach.

In the glow of the fire I noticed how pale and exhausted Saarah looked. I couldn't believe how much the year had taken out of her. Exam situations sent her stress levels rocketing and we'd tackled the finals like a military operation, signing her up for boot camp, yoga and shiatsu. Her results were released two hours before our departure. We left home in two cars – Iqbal and Rayhaan straight to the airport, while she and I went to school.

"Imagine if I don't do well," she'd worried on the way. "I won't be able to enjoy the holiday. I won't be able to go to university." Her results were excellent. That morning Iqbal's assistant had forwarded an acceptance letter from the university. Saarah had only applied to the University of Cape Town "because you and Dad went there". Iqbal and I had bitter-sweet memories of attending UCT during the 1980s. I had to apply to the Department of Coloured Affairs for a permit to attend a "white" university. It was granted because occupational therapy wasn't offered at the "coloured" university.

“I was the first person in my family to go to university,” I told them. “My parents were so proud. My grandfather saved enough to pay for the first year. It was such a culture shock, almost like going abroad. My entire school could’ve fitted into Jameson Hall. There were different campuses, lecture halls and sports centres, buses shuttling back and forth, and more ‘white’ people than I’d ever seen in my life, *and* I was able to sit next to them in class, the library and on the bus.”

Iqbal reminded me that when we did clinical practice, we couldn’t treat “white” patients. He’d been one of ten “black” medical students in a class of 120. Saarah and Rayhaan still had difficulty identifying with this in spite of how often we discussed it. They were almost as sceptical to hear that I wrote my assignments by hand after conducting research in books in the library. Sometimes it didn’t seem possible that so much had changed in our lifetime.

It was also hard to believe the blossoming young woman, in front of me, who wanted to “save the world”, was bobbing up and down in her Poly-Otter not so long ago. She’d be starting her tertiary career without any baggage, not part of any quota, not carrying the weight of family expectations.

*

The days started to take on a pattern: yoga, then breakfast, read, maybe doze, lunch and, later, more yoga, perhaps followed by an hour and a half of massage and steam. I finally felt myself unwinding. When I got on the yoga mat I closed my eyes and allowed the sing-song voice of the yogi to guide me through the postures my body knew so well. With each breath my protesting muscles yielded to the repetition of deep stretches, recognising familiar sequences. The pure Hatha yoga class took me back to the ashram where I studied. A salty breeze blew in from the

ocean, setting the bamboo chimes in motion. That, and the sound of birds singing and frogs croaking were all the accompaniment we needed. As we chanted “*Om Shanti*” to end the class, I left 2011 behind.

After a week in the hotel, we were ready to explore outside the resort and had an appetite for Chinese cuisine. At breakfast Iqbal asked one of the waiters to recommend a good restaurant.

“Oh, it’s too far, maybe one half hour away,” he said and went to confer with Kavi, the butler who came with the villa.

“Why do you want to leave the hotel?” asked Kavi rushing over. “It’s not necessary. We can make good Chinese right here.” We told him we didn’t mind going “far”. We presumed he’d gone to make reservations but he returned with a little man wearing blue-and-white checked pants and a chef’s straitjacket.

“This is Willibald,” said Kavi. “He’s the chef, from Austria. He can make anything you want and you don’t even have to leave the hotel.” We ordered all our favourite dishes, hoping that Willibald might suggest we’d be better off going out. But no, he assured us he could prepare all that and more.

Later, Kavi showed us to our table and hovered, eager to please. Piping hot dishes of spicy prawns, fish steamed with ginger and chillies, and crispy chicken with stir-fried rice, were brought out one after the other.

“How was it?” Kavi asked as we sat back, more than satisfied. “See, you don’t need to leave here.”

Saarah was convinced she heard evil laughter and that he rubbed his hands together as he turned away. She wondered if we'd ever be able to leave.

*

The hotel concierge tried to sell us a swimming-with-dolphins package including a catamaran trip, barbecue, helicopter flip and a celebrity day with police escort, but we chose to take the hotel car and driver on our own excursion.

Jessen was ready at 05h30 to drive us to Black River where we'd take a speedboat to Tamarin Bay, where the dolphins came to feed twice a day. With flippers, mask and snorkel in place, we sat ready at the back of the boat, our legs hanging over the edge. It required careful timing and we were satisfied with our choice of a smaller boat that could manoeuvre faster and approach closer than a catamaran. Before long Rayhaan spotted a pod and we slipped into the water, swimming as fast as we could to catch up.

Dolphins frolicked all over the bay, boats in pursuit. They seemed to be teasing us by coming close, diving deep and reappearing a distance away. They slapped their tails on the surface of the water, calling to each other in a secret language as they conspired to evade us.

"One more time," Rayhaan implored the skipper. I worried that we might be hounding the creatures but when I entered the water I got the distinct impression they were allowing us into their world ... if only we could keep up. Actually, Rayhaan wasn't having any trouble. When had he become such a strong swimmer?

He popped his head up, giving the thumbs up sign as he took the snorkel out of his mouth. "One of them brushed right past me, I could see into his eye," he shouted. The dolphins

left the bay long before we were ready to and, squinting into the distance for a last glimpse, we headed back to shore where Jessen was waiting.

We'd hardly explored the island on previous visits when lethargy-inducing summers made siestas mandatory. Now we took the opportunity of a round trip, starting with Chamarel. We were looking at the natural wonder of sand dunes in seven different colours, produced by minerals in the soil, when the sky grew dark and we were drenched by a sudden downpour. Jagged flashes of lightning streaked across the iron sky followed by rumblings of thunder. We dashed back to the car and tumbled onto the back seat, huddling into piles of still-wet towels. The rain drummed on the roof and the wipers swished back and forth at high speed in vain.

At the *rhumerie* we were shown how sugar cane was grown, picked and processed. The juice was fermented with yeast and distilled in tall burnished copper pots, to produce numerous varieties of rum. Bottles of white and gold liquid, infused with the flavour and scents of exotic fruit and spices, gleamed on the shelves.

In contrast, the tea factory was unattractive and dull. The filling and packing of tea bags, day after day had be as monotonous as cigar-making. The guide was proud of the production, telling us most of it was for local consumption. Although Mauritians are more French, especially in their bread-and-pastry breakfasts, they prefer tea to coffee. After sampling an array of black and green teas, we ended our trip with lunch at a thatch-roofed restaurant that served Mauritian cuisine. The gushing brown river churned up mud, threatening to burst its banks and sweep us and the raised platform we were on, along with it. By the time we returned to the hotel we were ready for showers, pyjamas and pizza.

*

Iqbal and Rayhaan came back almost two hours later from a consultation with the Ayurvedic practitioner, Dr Varma. He'd entertained them with conversation about health, yoga and reincarnation. It sounded far more philosophical than medical. Iqbal had a list of books to read, including the *Sutras of Patanjali*, and Brian Weiss's *Many Lives Many Masters*. Rayhaan hadn't thought he really liked "being massaged that much", but was already onto his third Ayurvedic treatment.

The doctor had invited us to dinner at his house in Curepipe to meet his wife and two sons. From their apartment window we could see the extinct volcano crater. Dr Varma was disillusioned with his work at the hotel that he said was attracting a different clientele, only interested in being pampered. Previously guests would check in, put on their *kurta* pyjamas and for the duration of their stay would follow strict Ayurvedic procedures encompassing diet, yoga, meditation and breathing. The two boys had verbal diarrhoea and kept Saarah and Rayhaan entertained. When I asked the older one where he was born, he replied, "You mean in this life? In this life I was born in Muscat. I don't know about the other lives." They insisted Saarah and Rayhaan should put them to bed.

"I see why they know so much about everything," Saarah said, coming out of the room holding a book, *Questions Children Ask*. "I found this under the older one's pillow."

*

The hotel had started a concept called "Grandma's kitchen" where guests were invited to dinner at the home of one of the staff members in order to get to know the "other" side of Mauritius. We were taken by mini bus to a plain, flat-roofed house where we were welcomed with glasses of pineapple juice. There was a family with a baby from Reunion Island, a travel-agent-and-

hairdresser couple from Paris who seemed to be having a fight and, seated at the far end of the table, another French couple, who I didn't get to speak to. A very glamorous young Russian pair, who looked out of place in their designer clothes and gold jewellery, told us they were visiting for a month to escape the bad winter at home.

There were too many guests and we were forced to squash into the kitchen around two tables pushed together end-to-end. Grandma didn't speak any English so sat silently at the head of the family while her son gave us a lecture about Mauritian culture and history – interesting though not really a dinner conversation. Unfortunately, there wasn't any place for the extended family to sit with us. We'd been looking forward to home-cooked Indian food, but the dishes were bland, perhaps to cater for European tastes. At the end of the evening we crowded together for a photograph and each family received a book of recipes.

On the way back to the hotel Iqbal mentioned he had business to attend to in Port Louis. He was contemplating whether he should fly back to Mauritius at a later stage or just get it done this trip. He decided to go with Jessen and, when he returned, we'd been invited to lunch the next day.

We were welcomed into the tiny flat by Jessen's parents and new young wife. "We thought you would refuse us," she said, leading us straight to the kitchen where a small table had been set with a vase of plastic flowers, mismatched crockery and paper serviettes. They'd prepared chicken biryani, the celebratory rice-based dish of kings, usually served at weddings. The food was delicious and we felt like royalty. Conversation about family, our respective homes and the upcoming local elections, flowed.

“If you wish to contest the election,” Jessen said, “you should check where most people of your caste live, and you’ll be guaranteed to win there.” We stared at him in disbelief as he casually spoke about voting according to caste systems.

Jessen’s father was retired but worked as a night watchman. After lunch he showed off his vegetable garden that produced enough to supplement his small income. Jessen’s wife offered to decorate Saarah’s hands with henna and they moved outside to sit on a bench on the stoep. We gathered on the steps, chatting over masala tea while she traced the intricate patterns. As we left, having spent far longer than intended, they gave us jars of pickled chillies and vegetable atchar. This was more of what I’d expected from Grandma’s Kitchen.

And then it was our last day. We’d soaked up the sun, been pummelled and stretched into shape and were ready for the New Year. Rayhaan had probably played too many computer games but at least he’d read a book. His hair was longer and the beginnings of a moustache seemed to have appeared overnight. Saarah tanned and more relaxed, was excited about starting university. I wondered if this was the end of our travels. I hadn’t been sure about celebrating my 50th birthday but perhaps it was a good excuse for a party to mark the beginning of a new phase.

*

Kavi and Jessen, both looking forlorn, shook hands with each one of us in the hotel parking lot and bade us a safe trip home.

“I’m sad,” said Rayhaan getting into the airport shuttle. “They were so nice. I wish they could’ve taken us to the airport.”

“Don’t worry,” replied Saarah, “they said they were coming to visit us in Cape Town.”

“They’re following us,” squealed Rayhaan, turning around in his seat, waving through the back window.

“Probably just until the gate,” said Iqbal.

“No, they’re still coming.”

Kavi and Jessen, reluctant to sever the connection, drove behind us all the way to SSR Airport, dashed out to get trolleys and said goodbye all over again. Saarah hugged them while Rayhaan, all grown up, exchanged handshakes and shoulder bumps.

POSTSCRIPT

December 2014

Embarking on a master’s writing programme has been a journey in itself and, like our best adventures, has taken unexpected turns. My initial plan for the thesis was to explore my personal family history, but then I found myself dusting off the scrapbooks and travel notes and heading

off down this path. However, as my supervisor pushed constantly to make it more personal (“don’t write what I can find on Wikipedia”) I found myself digging deeper into my own history while examining our motivation and comparing our experiences against the background of growing up in apartheid South Africa.

Saarah graduated last week, with a bachelor’s degree in Social Science with Political Studies and International Relations as her majors. She’s decided to take a “gap year” and plans to travel, do community service, polish her French and Spanish and perhaps learn Mandarin before spending a month in China.

“Imagine,” Rayhaan said, “if you can also speak Mandarin, you’ll be able to communicate with half the people in the world.” It reminded me of what Madiba often said about being able to communicate with someone in their own language giving you the opportunity to engage with their heart, not their head.

She was planning a small celebration at home.

“Can Riaan sleep over?” she asked. “He says he doesn’t mind crashing on a couch.”

“Of course,” I said. “He’s welcome to stay in the guest room.” I laughed, adding, “I’ll have an Afrikaner in my guest room, sounds like the title for a book.”

“Oh, Mom,” she rolled her eyes, “then what will you say about my Xhosa or German or Portuguese friends who’ll also be here?” Nothing extraordinary to her, I gather, but my grandmother would’ve been intrigued.

Rayhaan’s determined to study in the USA in 2016 and wrote the college admission exams in October. I tried to promote the UK – one flight, similar time zone ... but no, the States

it is. I'll have to apply for that visa after all. "Just don't marry an American," I implored. "You might never come back." Ironic that the one who needed schedules and deadlines is so determined to head off into the unknown now. I recalled a conversation with Jessie's mother, Elizabeth, when our two 15-year-olds started their exchange programmes.

"Don't you find," she asked, "that being a mother is a conscious balancing act between nurturing them and knowing when to boot them out the nest?" I suppose you hope they land up facing in the right direction.

(74 069 words)

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to Saarah and Rayhaan for allowing me to use their scrapbooks and pick their memories;

and to all who made us feel welcome and equal along the way.

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Underpinning the actual travel experiences are readings by a number of authors such as:

Mistry, R. 1996. *A Fine Balance*. London: Faber and Faber

Pamuk, O. 2005. *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. London: Faber and Faber

Smith, S. 2005. *Cuba: Land of Miracles*. London: Little, Brown and Company

Ghosh, A. 1992. *In an Antique Land*. London: Granta

Mam, S. 2008. *The Road of Lost Innocence*. London: Virago Press

Kolbert, E. 2007. *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: A Frontline Report on Climate Change*.
London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

Lopez, B. 2001. *Arctic Dreams*. New York: Vintage Books

Dicey, W. 2004. *Borderline*. Cape Town: Kwela

Karen Armstrong's books and philosophies have long been an inspiration, but especially:

Armstrong, K. 2011. *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. London: The Bodley Head

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Author's note: all references to colour/race have been placed in inverted commas since it has been proven that race as a scientific concept doesn't exist. However, it has been necessary to make reference to it as it is still an everyday reality in SA. I live with hope for a future where it will no longer matter.