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## **THE WORSHIP OF LOVE – ABSTRACT**

Rania, a young introverted woman, lives in a traditional Muslim family. It is a working class family, of Indian and Cape Malay heritage. Her parents married each other against her paternal grandmother's plans for her son, and because of their disapproval of Rania's mother, it caused a rift isolating both Rania and her mother from them. Rania feels stuck in an environment where she doesn't fit in and feels that she doesn't belong. Feeling like this, she escapes into a dream world of books and art to survive her overbearing mother, Shazia, who is both emotionally repressed and verbally abusive toward her. Her father, Ismail (Miley) Ahmed, fuels the drama with his obsessive control which Rania questions, yet obeys. Shazia, heartbroken from a previous love lost, pretends not to be interested in the silliness of love, and feigns disinterest in her husband's suspected extramarital affairs, yet does everything she can to hold onto him. Until he humiliates her beyond her capacity to forgive and she throws him out, but still secretly holds onto a hope that he will want to come back to her. Amara is Shazia's daughter from her previous husband, Rania's stepsister, and Shazia's favourite. Shazia has great plans for her, but she is a strong and free spirited young woman, and rebels against her doting mother by following her own bliss. She chooses happiness over security, even if it means defying her mother's wishes and breaking her mother's heart. Rania, obedient and lonely, yearns to meet someone she can connect to, someone who can save her from the world she believes her parents are keeping her trapped in, but she may be the one blocking herself. It is a coming of age story where three women struggle to find happiness amid difficult circumstances. The events which unfold, change their lives forever.

*For my part I know nothing  
with any certainty, but the  
sight of the stars makes me  
dream.*

-Vincent Van Gogh

For mummy, for loving me so well.

## Chapter 1

### Broken Things

We lived in a semi-detached house my father rented from Mr Palekar. It was a sad, lonely place - to me anyway. It had two modest bedrooms for sleep, cornered in by cramped walls and windows like mournful eyes. In the front there was a little garden that was pretty, redeeming it somewhat. In the middle of the lawn's grassy yellow sun dried patch, was a sweet loquat tree. My mother wouldn't use pesticides on it, so we competed with the worms to get the fruit first. At the edge of the garden was a pink bougainvillea creeping against the wall dividing us from our neighbour, Aunty Sadia.

We had what we needed - a kitchen, a lounge, a bathroom, two bedrooms, and all in good condition. It was small but comfortable, tidy, and neatly furnished. My mother was the kind of woman who believed you had to take pride in what you had, so she always made sure everything was as nice as we could afford.

In the yard, my father, with Mr Palekar's permission, built a Wendy house. My father kept his *kitab*s there. We jokingly called it Noah's ark behind his back, because he built it with his own two hands to serve his worship. He was an amateur theologian of sorts, very

passionate about studying religion. The room was filled with books he bought at Islamic bookstores, books published in Pakistan. The books on Christianity he picked up from Christian missionaries. He used them for his debates on comparative religion.

My mother also kept some old things in that Wendy house. She stashed away any stuff that she didn't use anymore. There was a broken vacuum, a broken washing machine, anything beyond repair. My mother was like that. The more unfixable it was, the more she held on to it. I'd give her old shoes to throw out because the soles were worn, and three months later she'd pull it out from some closet and tell me, "I knew you'd want it again."

My mother, in her own words, did not have any friends. She only had people she talked to, and the people she talked to were few. At home she had Aunt Sadia, our next door neighbour.

"Sadia is good for *skindering* with," my mother used to say.

"If I need a lift or a person to borrow money from or maybe confide in, maybe, then I have Aunt Hasiena. You can't confide in a *skinderbek* like Sadia."

At work for company, she had her colleague, a single friend she was always trying to set up on dates, Aunt Fawzi. Outside of my father and my stepsister Amara and I, that was her world as far as I knew it.

Today was Friday. It was late afternoon. On Fridays my mother kicked off work early. She got home before my father, and this gave her time to pop over at Aunt Sadia's for a chat.

They drank tea and talked about the other neighbours. Mostly they identified the women who had dirty houses, and marvelled at how those women's husbands didn't leave them

because of it. The worst crime a woman could commit was to be all dolled up while having unpolished doorknobs. My mother and Aunty Sadia bonded over floors which had to be polished and kitchen sinks which had to be dried to an immaculate gleam.

My mother was a career woman. She worked as a salaries clerk at the head office of a small stationery company, *Pen and Ink*. She had an office job. According to her, office jobs, were the epitome of respectability.

Aunty Sadia on the other hand was a housewife. This gave her the opportunity to make sure she knew people's business. She talked to everyone and had a reputation for being in the know.

While my mother was next door visiting, Amara was at work. She worked as a receptionist at a dentist's office in Town.

I was home alone. I had been out that day, and being out was unusual for me, as I hardly had reason to leave the house.

I had been at registration all morning, registering for my third year of Library Science, at the University of South Africa (UNISA). I studied through correspondence, but I didn't work and study, not like most correspondence students.

I studied and took care of the house while my parents and Amara were at work. I was 21 years old, but I had never had a job. I cooked for us. I cleaned. I did chores. My father paid for my studies, a gracious courtesy I was keenly aware of, considering that we were not rich. I was the first one in our family to get a tertiary education. He was proud of that.

I was standing in the kitchen now, making a cup of tea. In my hand I held a typed page. "Provisional reading list," it said. I requested it from the course co-ordinator and she



gave me the previous year's one because the latest one wasn't compiled yet. She said she expected no changes on it, so it was fine for me to go ahead and buy the books, although, the final list would be sent in the mail with the course manuals.

I was going to have to ask my father for money to buy me these. My father was a stern man, authoritative. He usually only addressed me when he was laying down rules. There was no softness between us, only thick silences that felt like a bruise. I felt shaky just thinking of asking him. The page I held trembled a little under my fingers. It seemed like a lot to ask.

I normally asked my mother to ask him stuff on my behalf. She was my intermediary. But asking her made me tense too. I felt shy asking for money. It made me feel needy. But what choice did I have? I really wanted a degree, and I had no way of doing it without their help.

I could not even get myself to registration alone. The driver from my father's work, Cheslyn, drove me there because my father didn't want me taking public transport. I couldn't drive a car, and I didn't have a car.

Cheslyn waited for me until I was done and then brought me back home again. Cheslyn and my father were work friends. My father was his supervisor at the belt buckle factory, *Buckle Down*, in Ndabeni, where they both worked. At my father's request, Cheslyn was always carting me up and down like my personal driver, whenever I had to be anywhere for class. He never told the boss that he did that during work hours. If he did, my father and he would probably both get fired.

He was a nice guy. Came from upcountry and settled in Bellville. He always got lost trying to find places, despite that he was a driver. He always had something interesting to say, loved talking about Robert Mugabe or whatever politics was happening in Africa. Maybe he was just trying to show that he was smart too.

The kettle boiled and as I poured my cup, my mother came in at the front door. The door banged. I stuck my head out, wanting to ask about my books. I didn't have a chance to. My mother's expression was serious and she headed straight for the phone. I retreated back into the kitchen and sat down to drink my tea. I had my list, folded it neat into little squares, and put it under the ceramic rooster we kept in the kitchen. We filled that rooster with butter biscuits that my mother bought from Aunty Fawzi. Selling biscuits and *koesisters* was her spare time job.

"This Hasiena never answers her phone when you want to get hold of her," my mother said out loud. She threw a *salaah* top over her work clothes. She was barefoot, her high heels kicked off. She walked past me, into the yard.

"Did Cheslyn get you there? Did you get your stuff done?"

"On time," I said, fiddling with the edge of my folded paper, sticking out from under the rooster.

"Chauffeur driven," she said sarcastically. It irritated her the way my father molly-coddled me.

Alongside the Wendy house was a clothes line, and some buckets for washing. Mr Palekar had thrown cement over the ground, which was painted red. There was only a small grass patch at the side, planted with flowers and herbs.

My mother used the buckets for washing. She did the laundry and the ironing herself. Other household chores I did. She hated washing machines. Said they wasted electricity and water. She started to do some washing by hand. I knew her. She cleaned when she was tense.

I stood in the kitchen doorway, right opposite the Wendy house. My mother had heavy, wet, clothes between her hands, and was rubbing hard, making a creamy, soapy surface. She dipped the shirt down into the bucket filled with soapy water then lifted it out again, clamped it in place between her svelte hands and scrubbed even harder. She did this a few times and I stood there watching her, mesmerised. My mother was a beautiful woman by any description, and stylish.

“You always have to look your best,” she’d always say.

That was how she was. People said she was glamorous.

But she was scrubbing the washing aggressively. She was agitated. She rummaged through the linen peg bag we kept on the yard sink. She took a handful of them and clipped them onto her blouse, just over her breasts. She fixed them in a neat row one by one, until it looked like a dinosaur’s tail, then she walked over to the line with her pail of washing and lifted the items of clothing up one by one, each time taking a peg from where it was stacked on her blouse, and clipping it onto the line to secure the wet clothes in place. She moved so elegantly, it was like watching a classic film.

A very light breeze wafted through the summer air and it made wisps of hair falling out of my mother’s loose bun, fall around her face and caress her cheeks softly. The clothes barely moved.

When she was finished she lifted the pail still filled with water from her clothes washing and emptied the pail over the yard. Soapy water ran over the cement floor like soft waves. It wet her feet all the way through. She wriggled her toes, waded through the water barefoot. The cool sensation looked luxurious on this hot day. She always used the washing water to scrub the yard afterwards. The water made little puddles in places where the floor was uneven. She picked up the broom and started sweeping the water across the distance of the small yard, until the entire yard floor was soapy and wet.

“Your father is a man, he’s supposed to clean the yard, doesn’t do anything around here. If I don’t do it no one does it.” It was true. I never cleaned the yard either. I only did chores inside the house.

She picked up a flat scrubbing brush and bent down on her hands and knees and started scrubbing the yard floor. She left no spot untouched.

“What you looking at Mary Anne? Haven’t you got something to do with yourself? You don’t want to help me, but you want to stand and watch me work.”

My name is not Mary Anne. I was not given that name at a *doopmal*. My name is Rania Ahmed. But whenever my mother was irritated, she’d call me these random names.

“I’m dressed,” I said, “I don’t want to spoil my jeans. It’s my only nice one.” I wasn’t wearing my house clothes, and I couldn’t work if I had an outfit on. My mother gave me a dirty look.

“*Lui*,” she said.

“I need all of these,” I pulled the page out from under the rooster, “books for this year.”

“You and your never-ending books,” she said. I swallowed hard when she said that. “I can’t be bothered with that now. Do you know what this woman next door just told me?”

“Aunty Sadia?”

“Yes, that busybody, she just told me that some other thing who also can’t mind her own business, saw your father giving another,” and then she stopped and started again, “the new nursery school teacher at the crèche in Crawford, a lift.”

As my mother said it, she scrubbed the floor hard, like she was punishing it.

“Sadia says more than once they saw him. I need to talk to Hasiena. I want to tell her, but she’s not answering her phone.”

So this is why my mother was agitated.

“It could be nothing, you shouldn’t just worry.”

“Worry? You think I’m worried about what your mad father does. He can do what he likes, I don’t care. He just musn’t put me in the eyes that’s all.”

Aunty Hasiena wasn’t there to talk to and so she vented to me. She told me how she didn’t care that he had been seen, more than once, picking up this woman at the same time that she took the train home from work, and walked home in her high heels, almost 5 km home from Crawford train station. She always exaggerated when she felt sorry for herself. Truth is, she carried flats in her bag and swapped them for walking. But she said she was just angry that he was making her look bad in front of people.

“Embarrassing me,” she said. “*n mens is mos skaam.*”

I picked up my list and folded it into my pocket. This was the wrong time. My mother was upset. I had enough experience with her to know that most of her emotions were expressed through anger. I think anger is pain in disguise. But she denied pain. Maybe because pain

meant vulnerability, and vulnerability felt powerless. That was not my mother's strong suit. Instead, I watched her scrub holes into Mr Palekar's cement floor. And as I did, I heard bombs dropping around 20 Jane Avenue, Rylands. This was going to be war.

## Chapter 2

### The Silent War

My mother paced into the house, looking for dirt to clean. She dried her feet on the mat in the kitchen. Then she lit a cigarette, went into the lounge and started plumping up the cushions on the couch, straightening them like it was a serious job to do.

She stood with her hand on her hip, the cigarette clutched between her lips, slanted her head slightly sideways, gauging with her eyes if the cushions were all straight now. She saw one was still skew and ducked in to adjust it, stood with her hand on her hip again, and squinted her eye at it like she was aiming to shoot a man in a Western with John Wayne. Ash fell to the floor and she gripped the cigarette from her mouth.

“That Sadia is another one,” she said. “She minds everybody’s business. Everyone in the area knows her husband keeps his *sjambok* in a jar of salt and chases her down the street to whip her when she gets out of line. And she’s telling me about my husband,” she mumbled to herself.

She turned her head back to me.

“Close that backdoor before she hears me talking about her. Her ears are like Superman. If it’s other people’s business, she can hear through walls.” I closed the door, my fingers clasping my list.

She puffed out smoke again.

“Tell me, what time is your sister getting home?”

“She said she’s coming straight after work.”

“That Amara, she takes her chances. She doesn’t come straight home, she goes with Sameer. She thinks I don’t know. I’m not *toe*.”

And then my mother began to turn out and look for things I hadn’t cleaned properly that I ought to clean.

“I hope you not going to hide your laziness behind this university nonsense, forever studying this or that. You must clean properly. This house is so dirty the dust will eat us up.”

She told me to go get a cloth and a bottle of *Brasso*.

“Shine up the door handle,” she said.

Although my mother said she wasn’t worried, I was worried. I was worried about my father having another woman. What if he left? What would happen to us? Would he still pay my fees? I had never been independent. I wasn’t raised to be. I hated it that I still needed my parents support so much. But I did. Trouble between them scared me.

“I’m sure Daddy will still pay my fees,” I said, “I mean, no matter what happens.” It was a statement but in my heart it was a huge question mark.

“Look around you,” my mother said. “That couch in the lounge I had to lay-bye,” she pointed in the direction of the lounge, “and all this AMC Classic pots,” and she pointed her



hand around the kitchen, “and all this tiles, she pointed to the floor, and that fridge. Who do you think paid? Me.”

She started unpacking her AMC classic pots out of the cupboard to wash them. She did this about once a month. I sat down with the Brasso cloth and watched her.

“You’ll have to ask your father if he’s got money for your books. I’m not going to speak to that man tonight. He gives me nothing anyway, but he’s got money to buy your books every year.”

In my head a problem formulated. When my mother didn’t speak to my father, then no one in the house spoke to him. Our household broke off into the old East and West Germany, like there was an iron curtain between him and us. Two separate worlds. Then how would I ask for my books?

She was going to fight with him now for sure. Aunty Sadia had planted a seed. My mother would not tell him what she heard about him, I doubted that she would ever do that. She was afraid of his temper. You couldn’t just tell him anything. We operated in secrecy. We were like undercover secret double agents.

She would start a fight about something else. About needing more grocery money or fixing things around the house that broke, or even just leaving the toilet seat up or something stupid like him telling her to put the TV off during *Magrib*, because he didn’t allow us to have the TV on during a *wagt*. Anything really, she was going to fight about anything, except what Aunty Sadia told her. But fight she would. That was a fact.

“I need this I said, or I can’t do the work for the classes I’m going to take.”

My mother’s eyes caught mine.

“What about libraries?”

“Some of them I can get there, but not all of them. Plus, with the library how long can I keep it? It’s not the same as always having it whenever I need.” I realise I sounded spoilt. “The English literature books like Keats and William Blake I can maybe get from Rylands library. Mummy knows I like to walk there on Fridays, but you know how Daddy is. He doesn’t like it if he knows I was walking around, especially now since that Mariam Mia went missing.”

“But it’s good enough for me to take public transport, hmff.” She exhaled onto her pots, breathed misty shadows over it and rubbed it up with the kitchen dishwashing rag.

“Your father’s a mad man. He keeps you back from everything. That child that went missing is nine years old. You’re a big woman.”

“You always ask him stuff for me.”

“I always ask yes and I’m sick of doing your dirty work for you. It’s high time you start asking for yourself. I’m not going to talk to that man because you need books. You sort yourself out. What are we now rich people that we study and buy books,” she sighed loud, “you’re very posh for someone that’s got nothing.”

I wanted a clear concession that she would get me my books, but instead, my mother, shining up her pots, began a soliloquy on the trauma of her life. I listened to how my father had money for me but not enough to give her for groceries, and he never bought her anything nice like clothes. She paid for her own stuff. I heard how we would be living like stray cats, if she hadn’t taken her money to fix our place up. Because he didn’t care how he lived. Unlike her, he cared nothing for style, or nice things.

That night when my father came home from work, my mother was an iceberg. She avoided him. And he noticed it, he recoiled from her. This was how the war began, with silence.

She sent me in to ask him if he wanted to eat. I cooked, but she set the table for him. She dished up, and warmed his food. My asking him to come eat was role reversal. She usually asked my stuff for me. But when she wasn't talking to him, she'd send me in as her messenger, for everything she needed to communicate. It was awkward for me. Talking to him was a strained thing. It was like going to the principal's office. But it was easier asking him her things, than asking him for my own things. As told, I popped my head in at his bedroom door, where he was lying on the bed, shoes still on, and told him his food was ready. When I spoke to him I grunted out only the necessary. No extra words. He responded the same, with only the essential vocabulary. His voice was hard like a boulder that could crush you if it toppled onto you.

My father ate alone. Always, even when there was no fight. After he sat down at the table, he would call me if he needed something. Like if I had to pass the *atchar* from the fridge or fry his *paaper*, he would call me.

My mother busied herself with something in whatever room he was not in. It was like someone hit the mute button on the house. There was no trouble. Not yet. But everything felt like a tongue-less repressed stutter. In the middle of the silence Amara came home. She was in a good mood until she put her bag down. In our room, the room we shared, she asked, "What's happening now again? I can feel the tension."

It was like our house could uninstall joy, and drain it from a happy face.

“Aunty Sadia told mummy that people have seen Daddy around with some woman.”

“Not again.”

She said that because this was not the first time. My father, strict as he was in the house with us, had what my Aunty Hasiena said, was a long eye for women. He was a religious man, a devout Muslim, as far as I knew, a moral man. But his weakness of the flesh was that he loved women too much. This was not the first time he had been seen with someone.

My mother came into our room and asked Amara why she was home late.

“Don’t go with Sameer without asking me,” she said. “You went out with him last night, and it was a Thursday night. You know Thursday night is the beginning of *Jumuah*, you can’t go out on Thursday nights. Now tonight you late again, you can also take advantage.”

Amara was my mother’s star child. If my mother was tense on her, then she really was in a difficult mood, because Amara usually got off scot free and I got the brunt of her anger.

“I didn’t go with Sameer,” Amara said.

Sameer Khan was the boy she was dating. My mother was thrilled about him. She said he was “a real catch.” This was because he was from a well to do family. His father owned a string of bakeries. They baked bread and doughnuts on a large scale.

“But that’s because Amara is beautiful and popular,” said my mother, “so she can pick and choose.”

“I went to visit Nawaal. Mummy can ask Aunty Hasiena, I was there after work.”

Nawaal was our cousin, Aunty Hasiena's daughter. I was almost in the same age group as them, Amara was three years older than me, and Nawaal was a year older than Amara. But I was very different from them, mostly because I was an introvert. On the few times I went with them, I felt shy and out of place. So I just kept my distance.

Nawaal had studied at university and had a clique of varsity friends that Amara liked to hang out with. They were the popular crowd. That was how Amara met Sameer.

Nawaal had a brother, Tahir. He was the same age as me. When we were very little kids I played with him, but as young teens we just went in different directions. Me, being such a quiet person, we drifted away from each other. So even though Aunty Hasiena came by our house all the time to visit my mother, and Nawaal was friends with Amara, I never hung out with any of them, because I was quite antisocial, and kept to myself.

"You stay depressed," my mother often told me. And I think she was right.

"I tried to phone Hasiena today, was she at home when you were there?"

"She's stitching. She's busy making a dress for someone's wedding, sitting at her sewing machine."

Aunty Hasiena was a housewife who made extra money by sewing dresses for weddings. It was not big enough to be a small business, but she was really good at it.

"I want to tell her about this man," my mother said.

"Rania told me," Amara said.

"Can you believe it? He's starting his old tricks again. I'm so disgusted. He's pathetic."

My mother made sure the bedroom door was closed all the way and she came in and sat down on Amara's bed. They started whispering. Discussing my father's abhorrent behaviour and how terrible he was.

"What does he do? Just visit the woman or is it a full on affair? That's *haraam*."

"It's *haraam* if he's not married. What if he's married to the woman? A second wife, he could do it without even telling us, what do we know?" Amara said.

"Then he'll have to support the woman. He doesn't have money for that."

"Rania, your father, he's a real character," Amara said, and as she spoke, she picked a cushion up off her bed and threw it at me. Amara was free of the guilt of my father's actions, because her father, my mother's first husband, Muneer, was on a pedestal in my mother's eyes. He and Amara both. Me, every time my father did something wrong, I had to hear about my bad genes.

"Now mummy won't let me go out, because when he's in one of his phases it affects me and I must stay home."

"It's not true," my mother said, "you can still go out. We got nothing to do with him."

"Yes but if you not talking to him, then he gets in a bad mood, then all of us suffer, then I end up not being allowed to go out. That's what happens. It doesn't affect Rania, she never goes anywhere anyway."

"It does affect me. You don't know about my life."

"Oh please," she said scoffing, "what life?"

Over the next few days, my mother watched my father with the eyes of a woman looking to uncover secrets. Every time he went somewhere, to the shop to buy cigarettes, to his friends

to talk *Deen*, to *masjid* to make *salaah*, she cross questioned me like she was a lawyer.

“Where is that man going now? Where do you think he went? Is he dressed up? What is he wearing, looks like a madman?” She asked me as if I knew the answers.

And then as he drove out of the driveway, she'd peek out from the blinds in the lounge and watch him drive away, mumbling complaints under her breath.

“Where does that man think he's going, mad thing? He's up and down in that broken car of his. He sits in it like it's a Mercedes. He's too idle that's his problem. If I was him I'd paint the dirty gates in front, can't even do that.”

And so she'd go on, making lists of everything that made him ridiculous, useless, and repulsive to her. And when he came home she'd give him dirty looks, but never so that he'd see. She'd stare holes into his back like she hated him, and divert her eyes away when he turned around, and act like she was stirring a pot or busy washing dishes.

Sometimes she'd catch my eye across the room or the kitchen, and point her eyes in his direction and roll her eyeballs or shake her head, so that I could support her in despising him.

She tried to give him chores to do. A cupboard in the kitchen that was off its hinges had to be fixed, the yard was untidy and there were holes in the concrete that needed repair, the washing machine had to be looked at, she tried to keep him so busy that he didn't have time to leave the house after work. He always just said yes he'll do it, but he needs to go to the hardware to buy wood or his drill isn't working, he's going to his friend Riedewaan to borrow some tools. And then he'd leave and come back late and he never really got around to fixing anything. And that just pissed my mother off even more.

Come weekend, he'd potter around with some of the stuff she gave him, but before too long he'd be gone, as my mother used to say, he "made himself missing." When he was gone she was even more miserable than usual. She smoked more than her usual 10 a day, and anxiety turned her into a witch. But I never heard her once admit that she cared where he went. The opposite. The more he hurt her the more she professed hatred. As if admitting that she cared where he went was a condemnation of her, of the worst kind. Nonetheless, her face was drained of all its blood and she watched the big clock against the wall in the kitchen to check how many hours had passed and she counted them, and always knew the exact time he was gone.

She went into his cupboard too, when he was gone. Snooping to see if he had bought new clothes, she said he had. He was getting all dressed up instead of just wearing his *salaah* top over his old pants and shirt. He was dyeing the stray grey hairs in his beard with *henna*, to make him look younger. She was interested in the prices. She wanted to know what he was spending on himself. She looked for price tags and then she just closed his cupboard. When he came home she darted dirty looks and acted like she didn't know and didn't care.

I put off asking him about my books for a few days. I thought of asking Amara, but she gave her whole pay packet over to my mother, and my mother gave her a small allowance to work with. My mother said she was saving her money for her, for when she gets married, she would need some things of her own for her trousseau. We were all expecting Sameer to be the one she settled down with.



With my father, my mother always said, “you must know when to ask.” So I waited, while the quiet revolution ran its course. I waited for the right time. It was important to me. My world was small. The promise of getting this education meant opportunities. It meant getting out of this house. It meant freedom. I could get a job with a qualification, one where I could make some money. Something I never grew up having. Something my parents never had much of.

My degree was my Sameer. And the idea of better things excited me. In the middle of little comfort, I dreamed. I dreamed of things that would make this dismal reality, all better in the long run.

### Chapter 3

#### Old Maid

The state of my life was amplified on a Sunday, and that state was loneliness.

My father was not there for lunch. He went to eat at his mother's. She didn't like my mother, didn't approve of her marriage to my father, and so we were never invited there.

My father went there every Sunday though, for her traditional Indian meal. That was his other life, the one separate from ours.

On Sundays I made pot-roast chicken with sweet potatoes and squash, and yellow rice. My mother avoided cooking as much as possible. I learned my recipes from the *Cape Malay Cookbook*, and the *Indian Delights*. Both books were a gift from Aunty Hasiena. She said everything a woman needs to know was written between those pages. My mother was glad, it took an extra chore off her hands.

We didn't really eat together. We ate individually. The food was in the pot on the stove and you could dish when you were hungry. After we did the dishes, there was this empty quiet. My mother took a nap. Amara went out with her boyfriend.

If my parents weren't fighting, then later my father would come home and we'd go for a Sunday drive. I often went with my parents, even at 21. But on days when they weren't talking, like now, he didn't come back home until very late that night.

I was home alone thinking about an assignment I had to do, or studying. A state of nothingness seeped in through the cracks in the walls.

I opened the front door, stepped out onto the *stoep*. I looked out over the park we lived across from. The pepper trees were holding their leaves like they were tired, those alien trees that didn't belong in the area, just like me. The see-saw with yellow paint chipped off, bared its metal underneath, reflecting the hot sun. The cut off tyres which were made into swings for sitting in, idling, the chains the tyres hung from, lightly creaking in the soft breeze. The grass in that park was a faded out yellow green.

It was so hot that summer the tarmac on the pavement was fire under my bare feet. The air felt like I was lying down in a warm bath with closed windows, a sauna on my skin. I had to run back inside to get flip flops. Where did people go on Sundays? It was like the world had emptied out, and I was the last survivor in some science fiction drama. Outside was normally busy with kids playing games and people walking up and down to the shop around the corner, but on Sundays everything felt desolate. Maybe people were keeping their kids indoors too, because of the little girl that had gone missing. There were placards up on electric poles, with her name and her face, "Mariam Mia. Have you seen this girl?" I missed the noise of strangers. Like having a TV on in the background even though you weren't watching. Somehow just the distant buzz of something happening around you, kept you company.

Bored, I went outside with my sketchbook, looked for something to draw. Seemed the only thing around were stray cats, chasing birds. I walked across the road, into the park and sat on the deserted swing, my feet dangling on the sandy patch below me. I used my weight to move the swing forward and back, swayed dully.

I got off the swing and walked across the park. The grass was bleached out from the sun, but along the one border of the park there was a pretty patch of daisies the council had planted. I walked there and saw the flat, sandy, space, where boys from the area came to sit to smoke *dagga*. It was right against the fence. It didn't smell nice there anymore around the daisy patch, and as I strolled down the cracked cement pathway with holes of different sizes in it here and there, and weeds shooting up in between. I had to steer my feet clear of the broken off glass bottle necks lying around between the dried up acorns on the floor.

I saw two of them, boys, coming into the park and I knew I had to leave. They were probably coming to smoke. I rushed out of the park, trying to avoid them, but on the way out, we had to pass by each other. It was two of the Dirty Dozens.

The Dirty Dozens were a family. They were a large, extended family. They lived in the *cul de sac*, in a broken, run down house. It was so dilapidated, that you didn't think people could still live there. They got their name because they just didn't look clean. No one in the area mixed with them. It had always been like that. All kinds of rumours about who they were circulated amongst us neighbours. People said that they were inbred. They were presumed a family of brothers and sisters, but new children kept appearing, but birthed from whom? None of them went to school. So they didn't integrate with the community. They lived outside of the constraints of our little society. We didn't know their names. We just called them the Dirty Dozens. Some people said that their ancestors were

Untouchables back in India, that when they came over they still didn't know how to act around people like they were equals, and so they ostracized themselves. The other thing people said about them was that they were con-artists and criminals. When little Mariam Mia in the area went missing they were the first people everyone suspected.

When I saw them coming, I crossed the grass to put distance between us. They stopped and called out to me, "*Motjie*," one of them said. "Do you want to buy some spices? Curry spices?" And he held up a plastic carrier bag to show me.

"Is that spice?" I thought. I presumed there was *dagga* in there. I made like I didn't hear. I just walked faster and ignored him, looked down. They were known for doing that. Selling whatever they could get their hands on. Another of their tricks was to go up to people on the road, and claim they accidentally stuck without petrol. They'd approach anyone and ask if you couldn't help them out quickly with some cash.

I hurried home avoiding them. There were only loiterers outside today. In my room, I realised that I had lost my sketchbook. The Dirty Dozens were milling around in the park. I could see them so I didn't want to go back in.

I sat down to read, did some writing, forgot about the sketchbook. I loved my art. Writing and reading and painting kept me alive. I had a book of stories and a book of poems that I wrote in everyday, and my sketchbook for pencil drawings. I drew still life sketches from around the kitchen or the lounge, and sometimes I drew portraits from magazines or photographs. They were pretty good I thought. I mean, the likenesses were good. I could draw things exactly as I saw them.

But nothing escaped my mother's irritation.

It was late afternoon now and I was in my room reading Bukowski poems, when she walked in with an armful of washing, *tsked tsked*, and rolled her eyes at me.

“What you busy with now?” she said.

I didn’t answer. And she walked toward my bed and put the ironed washing down.

“Put that down and pack away this stuff.”

“It’s my work,” I said.

I lied.

“I don’t even think your father should buy you more books. It will just encourage you to lock yourself up in this room even more. Do you know who reads, old maids my girl. And I’m not looking for old maids on my hands.”

I tried to ignore her.

“Why don’t you go outside and get some fresh air.”

“I was just outside now. The Dirty Dozen’s are smoking *dagga* in the park.”

“You know Amara’s in Sea Point while you sitting here soul alone, reading books.

That boyfriend of hers takes her all the nice places. Those places are packed now in summer, packed with young people enjoying themselves and you sitting here high and dry.”

“I don’t want to be enjoying myself,” I said, “I want to study.”

I realised as I said it that it didn’t even make sense. I was always alone, and the correspondence studying had isolated me even more. I never met anyone I connected to. I never met anyone period, and if I did get in contact with people my age I didn’t know what to talk about and I was scared they’d think I was weird for being so alone all the time.

“That studying is no good, you too alone. And correspondence is for people who work, not for people to sit at home whole day because they too scared to go out of the house. You’re making yourself like a prisoner in this house. I don’t know why your father keeps you back so much.”

With my mother I felt like I had to pretend that I my aloneness was my choice, that I wasn’t actually unhappy, and my life was not a failure. So I never told her I was sad, and I never told her that I was lonely. The truth was, I wanted to go out and have companionship. Live. I wanted love. But I wouldn’t admit it to her.

“Did you see what happened to that butcher’s son, what’s his name, Ali,” my mother said as she sifted through the washing to take out my stuff and leave it on the bed for me to hang away.

“That boy studied and studied until his mind cracked. He went off his head, loony tunes, was walking down the street talking to himself. You want to end up like that?”

“I’m not crazy.”

“You’re not far from it, sitting so alone all the time, *malles*,” she said. “Just like your father.”

That was one of her nicknames for me. I just tried to pretend I didn’t hear her. I was always doing that. It was how I coped. I looked down into my book, but she was in a mood. She came toward me, bent down to make eye contact like she was trying to connect to an extra terrestrial she just found on Mars, like she was trying to find someone inside the empty spaces in my eyeballs.

“Look at me when I speak,” she said, “where’s that book you write in whole day, that poems you write, all that nonsense you forever busy with like a mad thing.”

“Why do you want my stuff?” I was sarcastic and aggressive in answering her. I was rude.

“Stop sounding so miserable. And don’t cross question me.”

I gave her a dirty, unmoving stare. She went toward my desk, and rummaged through my papers.

“Leave my stuff,” I said half screaming, half restrained. She ignored me and rummaged until she found my hardcover book with the word POEMS on it. She picked it up and I jumped up to grab it from her. I tried to pull it out of her hand. She pulled it out of my reach and turned her back to me. Then she opened the book and started tearing out pages and ripping them up, throwing the pieces to the floor.

“What are you doing? Stop it,” I said over and over, swallowing tears as the papers with my words, fell to my feet.

“This is for your own good. You must get out of this house. You must go out and mix with people for a change. Stop. Reading,” she emphasized her words neatly pulling her face into a stretch. She picked up her washing off the bed.

“You’ll thank me one day. Now get some fresh air before you go mad in this room.” I didn’t want her to see my cry so I swallowed oceans down my throat, picking up the pieces of my pages from the floor. It wasn’t fair. I’d been outside all afternoon, it didn’t make a difference. It was just as lonely outside.

I went to sit in the park. I was scared she’d see me in my room and get angry that I disobeyed her. I sulked on the low wooden poles along the border of the yellowish public park lawn. The Dirty Dozens were gone. I read my book in the fresh air, like I was told to.



The fresh air didn't make any difference. I re-read one line of my book a hundred times, stuck in the same spot, and my eyes welled up fresh every time after I wiped them dry.

## Chapter 4

### Bison in Yellowstone National Park

I was almost asleep, half asleep. I didn't know the time but it felt late. I lay in my single bed, alongside Amara's bed. She had come home earlier bragging about where Sameer took her. Apparently they went to St Elmo's pizza place in Sea Point. For us, who grew up not being able to afford a bucket of KFC, a guy like Sameer was what my mother called "class."

My mother and Amara had been cackling earlier. My father was still not home, and my mother was in our room listening to details of Amara's date, like she always did.

"Tell me everything," my mother said.

And Amara indulged her, as much as she could. Every bit of information seemed to delight my mother, hearing what Sameer bought Amara, a little teddy bear and some trinkets from *Cardies*, a silver necklace with an A, as a pendant on it. My mother oohed and aahed. She listened to stories of the posh places he took her to and even hearing how other boys asked for Amara's number and Sameer got jealous, titillated my mother. My mother inhaled the bits of her tales like she needed it to breathe.

I didn't want to hear so I turned my head to the wall and tucked myself tight under my duvet. The TV was still on and Amara said, "She's sleeping again. She sleeps whole day, doesn't go anywhere and when I get home she sleeps again. A normal person will want to at least talk."

My mother slapped the duvet where my feet were.

"Stop sleeping so much. It's true what she says. You're sleeping me *rop*."

I was irritated. Amara went out all day, then wanted me to sit up and listen to her talk about the fun she'd had.

"I didn't sleep today," I said, "I was watching TV."

"There's nothing on TV. What do you watch all day?"

I had to be sarcastic.

"It's Sunday so they played my favourite, nature shows and gospel, if it's any of your business. I like hearing about Jesus Christ."

My mother hit my feet under the duvet again.

"Don't joke about the prophets. *Jy's vol iblis*."

But I *had* been watching nature shows. It wasn't a lie. Earlier, I had been entranced by a program that was on, about Bison in Yellowstone National Park in the USA. According to this show, this animal did this weird thing, where it peed around the beast it wanted to mate with. The male made a boundary of urine around the female, to alert the other Bison that this one was spoken for. And if some animal trespassed over that urine boundary, they'd fight it out.

After watching that interesting program I loitered around the house, killing time. I stuck my head in the kitchen fridge every ten minutes looking for something to eat. This

was my lonely behaviour. Each time I thought I might find something that I'd missed the last time I stuck my head in the fridge, which was ten minutes before. Finally, I pulled out some cheese, and made toasted cheese sandwiches. When I was bored I ate. I drank coffee. I bathed. Those were my hobbies.

I had taken a bath late afternoon, and read my books while in the tub. I half dozed off, woke up when the water got tepid. I wasn't supposed to sleep in the bathroom. There are *jinns* in the toilet. You're supposed to move in and out of there fast. But I had a habit of putting on my favourite music. I had a little radio I took in with me. I listened to my favourites, *It's Always You* and other jazz music, by Chet Baker, while reading *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. I soaked under some bubbles I made myself with shampoo and leftover pieces of soap that I collected when the soap bar was at its end.

That was my afternoon, and it wasn't sleeping. But I didn't need to explain my use of time to Amara. And when my mother hit me for saying Jesus Christ, I smiled to myself. When they bugged me I'd say something just to get my mother going. It was a private joke. I laughed at that before I fell asleep, how wicked I was. But I fell asleep feeling so empty. I could feel winds echo through my bones. I slept with that emptiness and sleep was never an escape. Loneliness had a way of seeping into my sad, quiet, dreams.

#

I felt like I had been asleep a long time, when I awoke abruptly. There was noise, voices, and it was coming from the lounge. I opened my eyes. The room was dark except for a ray of moonlight shining a horizontal beam through an opening in the curtains. It looked like a

light beam from Star Trek. I reached my hand out toward the small bed stand between my bed and Amara's. I fumbled to feel for my alarm clock to check the time. The voices were shrill. I pulled the watch to my face, the red beam from the digital numbers bright in my eyes, making me squint. The time read, 12:40AM. It was after midnight.

My eyes and ears adjusted and slowly I began to hear everything. My father had just come home, and my mother and he were in the lounge, arguing.

“Where the hell do you come from at this hour?”

There was no answer for a moment, and my mother said it again,

“I said where do you come from this time of night?”

Her voice was emotional, strained, like a thin metal cord being pulled at either end very tightly.

“Playing darts?” My father sounded a bit sheepish, conciliatory.

“Playing darts with who I wonder?”

Her voice pitch went higher as the sentence ended. I knew what was coming. I had witnessed this before. My stomach knotted into tight little fists. My heart rate accelerated and I could feel my nerves frazzle out like loose wires. I felt edgy as I lay in my bed like a stone pillar, lifted my knees to my belly, tightened my duvet around me, and wrapped my arms around my legs.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to block out what was happening, but at the same time, my ears did not want to give up listening.

During the silent war, my father took advantage and went out too much, and stayed out too late. My mother said he went “rolling go,” until she snapped and they had a confrontation. This was the confrontation.

I looked over at Amara. She was snoring. But she had had a busy day. A head full of nice memories and a stomach full of Sea Point pizza. I was easy to wake up.

“This woman is jealous,” I heard.

“You think I’m jealous of you? That will be the day.”

“You’re jealous yes,” and my father said it light-heartedly and gave a little chuckle.

“You’ve got a hope in hell of me being jealous of you. An ugly, old, thing like you, I must be mad.”

“I *mos* told you I went with my friends, what you going on for? You crazy, man.”

“A married man with a big child out gallivanting, *sies*, you should be shy man. Do you see me out and about running around? Don’t you think I can do it if I want to? The women do it, *hulle’s sleg*. They out there on the streets, and do you know how many men I could get. You bladdy lucky I’m not the type to *jol*.”

“I told you I went to Riyad’s place, to play darts that’s all. And look how you going on. *Jy’s mal man*. I work whole week and I just hand over my pay packet, but I can’t move my *gat* around here without being cross questioned, *naai* man, I also need a break.”

And then I heard stomping and a bang. Like he had thrown over a chair and stomped it to the ground to emphasise his perspective.

“You think I’m a *fokken* idiot? I know you too well mister. I might look like a fool but I’m no fool. Oh no.”

“Must I babysit you whole weekend? This woman is mad.”

“I didn’t ask you to take me out. And you got all dressed up to play darts? With a new shirt and new shoes and sprayed full of that cheap spray you buy at Clicks on special? Since when do people get all dressed up like *labarang* to play darts with Riyad? *Nogal*.”

“*a-ah, naai man*. I’m not going to tolerate this. Look how you going on. This is *kak*.”  
I heard him kick something.

“I can’t go anywhere without you going on like this.”  
And then I heard him bang the chair again and I heard footsteps and he was walking away from her, because his voice moved to the kitchen, opposite their bedroom.

“Don’t come bang chairs at me. *Jou nommer agt*.”

“You got no respect. Don’t talk to me like that. *Jy’s arubbish*.”

“I’m rubbish, you mean you rubbish.”

And then I heard a loud crash. My father had thrown something like a vase or something to the ground and it must have smashed.

“You think I’m scared of you. *Breek ie goed. Is mos my goed, ek het betaal, nie jy nie*.”

I heard another smash. He was in the kitchen and he was throwing out glasses, one by one. Smash. Smash. Smash.

“Stop breaking my stuff,” my mother screamed out nervously.

“And who pays the rates. And who pays the water and the electricity. And who must paint and maintain the place. You buy a few chairs. This woman thinks she pays for everything.”

“I work. You give me nothing. I buy my own stuff.”

“Oh, you, you *mos In. De. Pen. Dant*.” He said it like he was challenging her.

I heard another crash. Something else got thrown.

“I’m the boss here,” he said, as he threw things and I heard them crash one by one.

“I’ve got a good mind to leave you with that child of yours. Then you can *sien en kom klaar* without me. I’d like to see how far you get.”

Another crash.

“Stop putting me in the bladdy eyes with that ugly women you forever seen with. The neighbours all know about you already. I should pack my things right now and leave you with Rania. See if I care.”

I looked over at Amara again. Her eyes were open now.

“They fighting,” I whispered.

She closed her eyes and turned away from my face to face the wall.

“*Your* father,” she whispered.

Her words pinched. They weren’t finished.

“My mother was right about you. I shouldn’t have taken you. I could’ve got so much better.”

“You slip out quietly like a criminal without saying where you’re going and come home this time. You’re a good for nothing.”

“You’re a suspicious woman. And you don’t do anything constructive for me. You don’t even cook for me, Rania cooks. Or I eat *takeaways*. You useless, man. I don’t even complain, but I got a wife who can’t even cook or look after me.”

I heard footsteps on the tile again. I traced the sounds moving from the kitchen to the bedroom.



“And another thing,” she said, “why should I pack my bags and leave if this place is full of my things that I bought? If anyone’s going to pack their bags it’s going to be you. Let me tell you that. I’ll speak to Mr Palekar. I’ll be the one who stays here.”

There were footsteps again, out of the bedroom now, back in the lounge.

“What are your things? This?” I heard my father say.

And then I heard a loud crash. It sounded like he had taken something hard and knocked it bang against the wall. He did that when he lost his temper. He broke things.

“AND THIS?” he screamed.

Voices were loud enough now that I think Aunty Sadia next door might have heard.

I started crying silently. I was too scared to be sad. The tears were fear. I trembled beneath my duvet, as glass was splintering on the tile, more noise, more trembling, more tears.

My mother screamed, “Stop breaking my stuff. I paid for that.”

Amara said, “Close the door.”

“No,” I said, “I want to hear.”

“You *bis*,” she said.

“They talking about me,” I said.

“*Bis*,” she said, and covered her head with her blanket.

I curled up and shut my eyes very tight. I became aware of my lungs heaving, taking breath from this tense air. I tried to clear my head and pretended I was somewhere else, in one of my books, like the Great Gatsby. I was in Long Island and I was Daisy, the rich beautiful girl who Gatsby loved. Or I was in one of my favourite paintings, those paintings I

obsessed over. I was Picasso's muse, or Modigliani's lover, or a magnificent woman who haunted Gauguin and he got into fights with Van Gogh over. I was the girl they painted. The girl an artist was moved to paint. But even as such a deep dreamer, I struggled in this anxiety to scramble out of reality and get into my fantasies. I wanted to get to my happy place, but my nerves were quivering on the inside so badly, I couldn't keep hold myself steady enough to escape in my head.

I felt as numb and cold as a dead body must feel when it is so tired, it just stops. And I wasn't even in the fight. I was just listening to it.

"Is this yours, and this, and this?"

And each time he said it I heard loud crashing, more and more, violently loud.

My mother was crying now as she screamed. Screaming, crying, crashing. It was always a half cry really. It was never full blown weeping. Almost like a soaked sponge, being dried out, twisted at its end to give off its last drop.

The light in the lounge had gone on at some point someone had put it on. I crept out of my bed and tiptoed to the door. Amara whispered, "Close the door."

"I told you, no."

I crept out of our room and into the passage overlooking the lounge. My father was not there, he had shut himself in his bedroom. My mother was sitting cross-legged on the floor, on the cold tiles, snickering and swallowing her half cry tears.

The lounge looked like a tsunami had hid it. Like a burglar had broken in and ransacked the place. Tomorrow I would see the evidence. Walls and tiles chipped in places, legs of chairs that had to get fixed. I knew the kitchen looked the same. I had seen this before. Every bit of glass, lamps, glasses from the kitchen, anything that could break, was

smashed to pieces. Things had been flung. My mother had a wooden stool in her hand, the leg had splintered off. She was trying to put it back together, her tears dripping down over her face as she did.

She looked up and she saw me peeking from behind the wall.

“He broke my furniture,” she said in a soft, tearful, voice, soft as I’d ever heard her.

“My expensive furniture, I still have to pay this stuff off. I bought it on account.”

I wanted to go to her. But I didn’t want my father to hear me. I didn’t want more trouble. So I turned and slinked away. I closed our bedroom door gently, like Amara had said, and went back to sleep.

“Are they finished now?” Amara said. Her voice was muffled from under her duvet, where her whole head was hidden.

“I think so, mummy’s on the floor alone with her broken furniture, crying.”

I lay in bed holding myself. All my nerves had been lit up like Guy Fawks fireworks on the fifth of November. Must be what dogs feel like when they hear the firecrackers going off. I wondered if my mother really meant it, that she would leave me there, take Amara and go. But they probably wouldn’t split up anyway, and she probably wouldn’t go, I thought. She was always threatening stuff like that, but I was already 21 and in all the years, she had never followed through on a single one of her threats. After years of this, my parents were still together. I mean, I guess I knew nothing about love, but maybe they didn’t hate each other like they like they acted. Maybe they were like those Bison I learnt about in Yellowstone National Park. Maybe all these years they’d been urinating around each other, just to show they cared. Maybe for them, this was how you were supposed to love.

## Chapter 5

## Mountain Bike

I opened my eyes on Monday morning and the blinds were pulled up already. I felt the warm sun on my face. I stretched like a cat, pricked up my ears and listened. This was the aftermath of the fight. I hated it. Walking around like I was teetering on tiptoe at the edge of a cliff. Trying to avoid my father most of all. Not that he would say anything, he was quiet the day after a fight, he either disappeared in his car or he stayed in his room, kept the door shut. He normally acted shy, because he let his temper get the better of him. It was awkward seeing him embarrassed. It made him seem much smaller than I was used to seeing him, the way he walked around proud all the time, all ego, and control.

Amara and my mother were in the kitchen talking quite normally, having breakfast, getting ready for work. There were some leftover *koesisters* in a plate on the table from the day before. We always had them on Sunday mornings with tea. It was the *koesisters* my mother bought from Aunt Fawzi. I picked up one and took a bite.

My eye caught a glimpse of the broken glass from the night before. My mother had swept it up. It was now neatly bunched together in one corner of the kitchen, with the

broom and a dust scooper alongside it, waiting to be picked up and thrown out into the trash.

“Is Daddy here,” I whispered.

“He crept out early this morning. Left to go to mosque for *Fajr*, didn’t come back, went straight to work.”

“Are you going to work today?” I asked.

“I must go. I can’t afford to stay out of work. Then I lose my job again, and then that’s another worry.”

My mother was sitting at the table. She crossed and uncrossed her long legs, wrapped in silk pyjama pants, perched high up on the kitchen stool. A white fluffy slipper dangled off her toes. Her mascara had made a little black trail under her tired morning eyes. Her hair was wild from sleep.

“I’ll have to get to the shops to buy new glasses. How will I get there? I’m not talking to that man. I’ll have to ask Hasiena or Fawzi to take me, if they have time.” In the aftermath of a fight, Aunty Hasiena and Aunty Fawzi were invaluable, just because they could take my mother around, where she needed to be. They drove cars.

I took out my breakfast things, my mug with the picture of an alien on it. It was chipped on one side but I didn’t want to throw it out because it was broken. I was like that, I crept broken things. Just like my mother. I kept broken things and I loved things that didn’t seem easy to love too. At one stage I had an affinity for iguanas. I wanted one. I had a name for it and everything. I was going to call it Hitchcock, after Alfred Hitchcock, whose movies I loved. I wanted to get the scaliest ugliest scariest iguana I could find and just love the shit out of it. I didn’t want to love cute things like kittens. I wanted to love the

things that the world threw away. That was how I was. My mother nearly died. She said, no I couldn't get it. Instead I got some something unspectacular like me. I got a goldfish. And when it died I got another one, and I kept doing that. So I always had a little goldfish in my room. And I named each new goldfish I got, *Shakespeare*. Always the same name, because my goldfish had no identity of their own.

I made myself a cup of tea, switched on the kettle.

“Careful for the broken glass, don't step in that over there, I must still pick it up.”

I stood alongside the swept up glass puddle and leaned back against the kitchen counter, waiting for the kettle to boil.

“He's got no control of his temper. Turns into the devil himself if you say something he doesn't like.”

“You can't tell him anything.”

“And what's the point of being so *salieg* if you act like that. So religious, built a Noah's ark Wendy house in the yard to study *Qur'an* and *Hadith*, but don't know how to treat people, *iblis het hom beet*.”

“Told me he's family is better than my *gham* family. Is he mad, my sister is stinking rich, her children all study at the university,” she said. “Where does he come from, does he know how posh my sisters children are? His family is all married to their first cousins.” I didn't hear that part the night before, but I guess I didn't hear every little thing.

“You know what he does,” she said, “he does it on purpose. He instigates fights so that I can be angry and leave him alone for a few days. Then he's free to come and go as he pleases without answering questions. He manipulates me like that. He torments me just so that he can get out of the house. He's tricky him. Knows exactly what he's doing.”

“Then where does he go when he’s so missing, to that woman probably,” Amara said.

“Until he’s had enough fun and jollification and starts to creep in my bum again. Just you watch. I know him too well. I figured him out long ago.”

“And in the meantime we must walk on eggshells.”

My mother lit a cigarette.

“Even the neighbours know about his *slegtiheid*. I must hear about it from strangers. It puts me in the eyes. You won’t believe how much I hate that man. If I didn’t need his pay cheque I would have been long gone. Believe me, mad dog that he is.”

I stood by the stove warming my milk for my corn flakes in a little pot. My mother was still sitting at the table sipping her tea, when she got up in a burst of energy and went to the phone against the kitchen wall. She picked up the cream telephone receiver in one hand, her cigarette gripped between the fingers of the other, and she dialled. I held my breath, she looked suddenly worked up and I worried that she was going to try to get hold of my father, fight again.

“Who’s mummy phoning?” Amara said.

“That old witch,” she said.

My heart shook. I got heart palpitations when I was nervous. I suffered from that and migraines and throwing up. Some days I had migraines for days on end and couldn’t leave my room at all.

Trying to escape what was happening I picked up the box of cereal from the table and poured my milk, sat down, and chewed hard on my cornflakes. I concentrated on chewing that mouthful like I was learning to fly an aeroplane, and there were 300 people behind me,

counting on me to get them across the ocean, to another continent, another continent. I wished. I held the Kellogg's box really close to my face, read the back of the box as I swallowed.

And then I heard my mother say, "Hello, *motjie*. Mrs Ahmed." That was my grandmother. My mother didn't have a proper name to call her. But she didn't need one because they never spoke. And of course, the reason for this was because she hated my mother. As far as she was concerned, my mother had never been good enough for her perfect son.

She said that because my mother already had Amara when she married my father. She also accused my mother of trapping my father into marrying her by getting pregnant with me, which she may or may not have done. I never knew the truth.

Mostly, she didn't want my mother for a daughter in law, because she was Malay, and my grandmother wanted her son to take a pure blood Indian wife. In fact there were plans for an arranged marriage to a girl from the then, Bombay. But my father ran away to marry Shazia Stone, with a daughter named Amara, instead.

That was all many years ago, and my mother had been faithful to my father for the duration of their years of marriage, but that didn't matter. Once a woman had been labelled, that was who she was in other people's eyes.

My mother was never welcome at my granny's house. I was part of my mother, so I wasn't welcome there either. We were the women who ruined her plans for her son's life. And so we would always be the enemy, a reminder of her losing control over my father's life.



I was the physical manifestation of the war itself. She had told me when I was very little, and I still recalled it.

“You are not his child, you are not Indian,” she said. That was me. I was neither this nor that. I was in no man’s land. A goldfish named *Shakespeare*.

My mother must have felt desperate to make this call, to phone this woman for help. She couldn’t have been anything less than utterly desperate. And I didn’t want to hear it. I didn’t want to hear my mother beg. It made my stomach turn inside out and I think maybe that was what shame felt like. So I sunk my head down lower and read the cereal box harder. They were advertising a competition to win a mountain bike, a really nice brand new shiny thing.

“Hmm,” I thought. “I wish I had a bike. I didn’t have to go into the mountains with it. I could go biking along the promenade at the beach in Sea Point like those pretty tanned blonde girls do when we drove past there on weekends. They always looked so happy and healthy when you saw them, and they were always smiling broad white smiles. I looked at the crossword puzzle on the back of the pack and it said you had to complete it all correctly to enter and then you could win. That’s what the heading said in bright colours: Enter and WIN!!! I read the clues, ACROSS and DOWN. I knew some of the answers so I got up and rummaged around the kitchen general drawer right at the bottom of the cabinet, looking for a pen.

My mother was on the phone.

The answers I didn't know I could look up. The box said that the idea with the crossword was to show how much brain power and physical energy eating this cereal gave a person. It gave you this huge percentage of nutrients for your recommended daily allowance. That was on the pack too. My mother always told me I had a lot of brain power, said that I inherited it from my father's family, because Indians are clever.

"And you get your flat feet from them too," she said.

But maybe she was wrong, maybe I wasn't clever at all, or maybe if I was, I got it from eating cereals like this.

My eyes scrolled further around the box intently, trying to avoid the sound of my mother's voice making a fool of herself on the phone, by talking to people who didn't care about us. But I knew what she was saying because despite my ignoring her I could still hear every word so loud, reverberate through me. She was telling my father's mother that my father was going out like a single man, staying out late, that people had come to her to tell her they'd seen him with other women. Her voice cracked as she spoke, when she told *Motjie* that she should talk to him, remind him that he had a family, tell him about his responsibilities and how he should act. That it wasn't right for him to carry on like that.

My eyes were on the Kellogg's box. I read the fine print. No employees of Kellogg's could enter. I re-read it. Nope, I wasn't disqualified. I read it again to be sure, looked at the pictures. This was the bike you could win, these glorious people laughing widely with Colgate smiles on these bikes. They were extraordinary. THAT was what happy looks like, I thought. They were pop-a-wheeling and the front wheels of their bikes were high off the ground, defying gravity and flying with the air.

I thought that must be why my mother kept telling me to get fresh air. Maybe she thought it would make me all alive like them. I think that I decided then, that that was the right standard for normal, the standard that I had to measure everything by, measure my life by. In those pictures I saw the answer to life's problems. Bikes were the solution. I was ashamed because I knew in my bones that we here at this address in this kitchen, we, I, me, we fell short of this standard. *We were not this*. Happy and well adjusted and normal and so damn filled with joy, and on a pink bike somewhere with a matching helmet and cute cycling shorts.

But there wasn't enough of a crunch in all the cornflakes in the world that could have drowned out the sound of my mother over that phone, begging for respect from a woman who had already rejected us. Told us we were nothing worth keeping. But still saw her son every Sunday for her homemade *dhal* and *basmati* rice lunch. And I wondered if it was possible, to hate other people with such clarity, unless you really hated yourself first.

"But he's a married man and he has a child here," I heard my mother say. Her voice was proud and thick with suffocated pain. She was always so defensive, always in a surviving voice.

Then she was quiet for a minute, listening, and then I heard her say, "No. No, No. That's not right. How can you say he has a right to do it because he's still a young man, he's got a family." Then she was quiet.

I lifted my head and watched the silhouette of her face in the window in front of me, a shadow.

"This is not right," she said.

I heard a click as she put the receiver down harder than a normal conversation. She didn't say goodbye.

“What did that old witch say?” Amara asked her.

My mother put out her cigarette in the saucer of my cup of tea and then lit another one and inhaled and sat down at the small round table with us.

“You won't believe the nerve of that woman. She told me he has a right to take another wife if he wants to. That it's his Islamic right. Can you believe it? She knows about his other woman and she's encouraging it. He's not even hiding it from her.”

I took a spoonful of my cereal and swallowed.

“She acts as if I trapped him.” He was the one who chased after me. I never wanted him. I had my pick of men. Do you know how popular I was?”

“Who do they think they are?” Amara said.

“Better than other people and for what? They haven't even got money anymore. They got swindled out of all their properties. And did you see that woman's dirty house? Did you see her furniture? No taste. I might have grown up poor but my family knows class.”

It was true. My mother had style. In clothes, and in things, she had a natural good taste. She made mirrors look good with her perfect features and her tall slim figure, her long legs. At the local shop, the shopkeeper called her Cinderella whenever I went in with her. That was her nickname because she was so pretty.

Even now, with her mascara smudged a bit, because she had slept with it on the night before, and her eyes narrower than normal, red and puffy from the crying of last night. She tried to hide it but it was too obvious to hide, but even now she was pretty.

Surely my father could see it too? Didn't men value that? Men like that, don't they? People say they do, that they like sexy, beautiful, women. She was all of that. But look how he treated her. Just look.

## Chapter 6

### Cricket Ball and Flowers

The week passed quietly. My parents avoided each other, lived around each other. My father stayed out mostly, left early, came back late. When he came in we scurried to our spaces, the king had come home. We had to become invisible.

That Saturday he was gone early morning. Normally he would take my mother shopping for groceries but he was out before we got up. My mother, after lunch, had a visitor. It was Aunty Hasiena. My mother had arranged for her to take her to the shops, but not just to the shops. They had arranged to go somewhere else as well.

When Aunty Hasiena came in my mother was next door at Aunty Sadia's. I went to call her and she said she was coming in a minute. She was just "getting the information."

When my mother came through our front door she called out, "I've got details." She had gotten as much data from next door as she could get about my father's suspected affair, and she came back with approximate locations. What she really went over there for was to find out where the woman, the nursery school teacher, lived.

"And if you find the place, what are you going to do when you get there?" Aunty Hasiena asked.

“I don’t know,” my mother said, “I just want to see.”

I know she was too scared of my father to confront the woman. She wouldn’t just barge in and knock on a door and make a scene. She wasn’t the type, she was more bluff than bite. To her making a scene like that, directly fighting with another woman over a man, wasn’t classy.

Also, really confronting my father about it might change everything for the worse. His suspected affairs were more an open secret. We knew but we looked away. That way nothing had to change in our life. We danced a ballet around the truth so that we never had to deal with it.

My mother was scared of my father’s temper too, even though she pretended she wasn’t. Confronting him or the woman would provoke him.

But it was niggling inside her, the idea of the nursery school teacher. She couldn’t just leave it alone. I think she just wanted to see who the other woman was, to see for herself. To know she wasn’t imagining, or crazy suspicious. I think a part of her wanted certainty. To calculate what the proper quantity of her hurt ought to be based on the true facts as she saw them in front of her own eyes.

Aunty Sadia had given her the general area of where people said the woman lived. All she could say was where they saw my father and the woman together, on several occasions, and an approximate description of where people said the woman lived.

There was no street name or number, but there were landmarks. We didn’t know exactly which house, and so really my mother was going on a random chase.

Aunty Sadia told her the woman lived near the high school, the one Amara and I used to attend. It was in Crawford, not far from the main road. Apparently the woman had moved here a few months ago when she got the nursery school job, and rented a house in the area.

“How much does she get paid that she can afford to rent a whole house,” Aunty Hasiena said, “nursery school teachers earn *pennyhaypenny*.”

“She must get in other money too, maybe an ex husband or something that pays maintenance. Women like that, have all kinds of tricks,” my mother said, “don’t you worry, they know how to get men to spend money on them.”

It was not much information to go on, but it was enough to begin an investigation. Aunty Hasiena asked her if she was really sure about this.

“There is such a thing as knowing too much,” she said, “and after you know you can’t always go back to how something was before.”

My mother was sure.

“I can’t just sit on my hands and do nothing,” she said.

My mother told me to come with them. Of course I didn’t want to go, and she politely reminded me that I needed the “fresh air,” or my brain would crack, and I would become a proper Simple Simon, and I was already more than halfway there from being cooped up in the house all the time. “And besides,” she said, “I want you to see what your father puts me through.”



I couldn't argue and win. This was the kind of stuff Amara was exempt from by birthright. I was penalized for being the daughter of the man who drove her to such extremes, by being forced to participate.

I got stuffed into the back seat of the car, Auntie Hasiena driving, my mother in the passenger front seat, and we started driving toward the general area my mother was given by Auntie Sadia. We were looking for my father's car, to see if it was parked outside anyone's house in particular. It was an insane mission on vague facts, but I think we were desperate women, or at least we were being steered by a desperate woman, and desperate people do desperate things.

As we drove, my mother and Auntie Hasiena analysed my father's character. Every time they said something bad about him I felt like it was a condemnation of me. "Oooh he's a terrible man, that husband of yours," Auntie Hasiena said.

"Don't I know it? He can go and lick Amara's father's bum. There's no comparison. That man, now he was a gentleman. He never screamed at me or threw things, never *jolled*. Not once in all the time I knew him. He had manners. Upbringing you see. His mother was a Christian woman, you can say what you want about Christians, but they got manners hey, not like us *slamse*."

"Where do you want me to turn?" Auntie Hasiena said, now at the school, slowing down. "Should I go down this road, where now, did you say close to the high school, that's around these roads here and then there's a dead end on the other side by the canal."

"Turn here then go past the fisheries. There by *Goldblatts* fisheries. That's what Sadia said."

"But does she actually know where?"

“She knows everybody’s business and everybody’s whereabouts.”

We turned and we were driving slow, very slow, looking for any sign of my father.

“She said she thinks somewhere near here, around here.”

Aunty Hasiena took another turn and she and my mother rolled the windows of her VW down and looked around, searching, foraging with their eyes for any hint of an adulterer.

“Are you looking Rania, look, open your eyes, young eyes can see better than my old eyes.”

“I’m looking,” I said, aggravated.

There was nothing.

“Try the other road on that side and look into the driveways, do you know how clever he is, he’s clever enough to hide his ugly rusted car.”

My aunt had a cd playing in the car of a *sheikh* giving a sermon on women’s rights in Islam and why and how women should be honoured.

I concentrated on the sermon like I had done with the Kellogg’s cereal box earlier. I tried to drown out my aunt and my mother’s voices, making lists of my father’s transgressions. I felt like a bulls-eye and he was the dart.

On the stereo, the *sheikh* was saying that the Prophet (peace be upon him) only took many wives for political reasons. He did it to honour women who struggled so that they could have a caretaker and he did it to unite different tribes.

My mother heard it too and turned to Aunty Hasiena, “Do you know what that woman said to me, his mother? She had the dirty nerve to tell me he can take another wife if he wants to. Can you believe her *vuilplak* she got to tell me that?”

And then my aunt turned the volume of her sermon louder, “Now hear here what this *sheikh* is saying?”

“You hear that, the *sheikh* said that you can’t marry for lustfulness. The men of today are abusing this right. The religion is perfect. But it’s the people. They are the culprits. They abuse it for their own desires and wrong reasons.”

“Yes, they are using it for their own purposes. *Hulle’s sleg.*”

I looked up and I saw Aunty Hasiena’s eyes looking back at me in the rear view mirror. She was much more intuitive than my mother when it came to me, and she said, “Rania, we not saying bad things about you. We’re talking about your father. Not you.”

I needed to hear that. Because it seemed like everything bad they said about him was an indictment of me and everything good they said about Amara’s father was another reason why she was loved by my mother, and I was not. Because I was the one who came from bad things.

My mother startled me by shouting out, “there there, that’s his car, there, in that driveway, there!” She cackled loud from the back of her throat like a witch enjoying merriment. Like she had found something that made her very happy.

“*Uitgevind!*” she screamed, sounding almost excited.

“Where, there, that house over there?”

Aunty Hasiena stopped and made a u-turn. The road was rather empty except for a few cars parked here and there. It seemed like a middle class neighbourhood, nicer than ours. There were some nice big shady trees in some places along the road, and on a sunny day like today, it looked picturesque. Like maybe there were people indoors having nice lunches

and sitting around in their yards relaxing, *braaing*, drinking *Oros*, with kids playing on the green lawns. Crawford was a nice enough area, I thought.

“The beige house, that dirty house that looks like it hasn’t been painted in years. With the dry yellow grass that’s dying. There, over there.”

My mother said that, and I guess she saw the place differently than I did, although it was one of the older houses in the road and maybe did need a fresh paint.

“I see it. He doesn’t even try to hide his car.”

“Don’t park so close,” my mother said. “I don’t want him to see us.”

So Aunty Hasiena reversed down the road and stopped a few houses back. My mother exhaled hard.

We sat in the car. “Now what are you going to do now? Are you going to knock on the door and catch him?”

“Put that radio off I can’t hear me thinking,” my mother said. So Aunty Hasiena put the radio off and then she did something she liked to do, she cracked all the knuckles on her hands. It made a crunchy noise and somehow made me feel more nervous. We were in hot pursuit.

“Are you going in?” Aunty Hasiena asked.

“No, Hasiena. I can never go knock on that door. If that man knows I’m here he’ll kill me. And you know what he does to the place. I can’t afford to buy all new chairs and glasses again. I just replaced.”

“Now what are you planning to do you can’t even see what’s going on from here.”

My mother turned around to face me, I could barely see her eyes behind the car rest, but her head was angled toward me, “Rania you go. I want you to confront him.”

I almost swallowed my tongue.

“Confront him? Why must I go?”

I was going to vomit from discomfort churning in my belly.

“I want him to know, that you know, exactly what he is. That his child knows what he is. Instead of the *salieg Imam* he pretends to be that lays down all the rules for us. He’s a hypocrite.”

She said those words like it gave her a deep satisfaction to say it.

My stomach curdled. I felt like a Bulgarian yoghurt, the kind you throw over a spicy breyani.

“I really don’t want to go,” I said speaking from the pit of my stomach. “If he catches me he won’t buy my books. He’ll stop paying my fees. I still have to give him my list of books, I didn’t have a chance yet.”

“No he won’t, he’ll pay your stuff.”

“How do you know? If I make him angry he could stop.”

“Stop being like that. Do what I say if I tell you something. Why must you always have a story?”

“I can’t just go knock on the door. He’ll want to know how I found him. How I got here? What will I say, it doesn’t make sense. He’ll know it’s you.”

“She’s right,” my aunty said, “then she’ll have to bring your name into it. Do you want him to know you following him.”

That made my mother think, “he’ll kill me,” she said.

My mother realised that her plan was not thought through. That she was acting rash and I prayed she could see that my being here was crazy stupid. But she was here. She had hunted for the place and now here she was and my father was the prey for once.

“Just creep up to the window and see what you can, and then you come tell me. I want to know what’s going on inside that dirty house.”

“No.”

“No?” Her eyes darted at me. “You don’t want to help your mother. You want to sit by and watch that rubbish of a father you have making an idiot out of me.”

She sighed hard and turned her body away from my direction, like I was something she couldn’t bear to be near.

A tide of guilt rose up in me and washed right through me settling into my intestines. I couldn’t stand it. I felt like a terrible person. I had no choice but to say, “ok fine. I’ll do it.” I swallowed my own vomit rising in my mouth. “Now what must I do.”

My mother turned to me, her tone was appeasing, soft.

“Just go see what they doing my baby. I just want to know what goes on behind my back. A woman has a right to know, am I right Hasiena?”

“There’s a window on that side, do you see, just behind that tree,” Aunty Hasiena said, she was peering at the house through the front window of her car and pointing to where I should go.

“Do you see there, those curtains are flimsy and they’re more than half open. If you climb over the wooden fence and just maybe get something to stand on. Look there. There’s a log, just stand on it, and then maybe you’ll be able to see inside.”

“Go my child,” my mother said to me, and she was looking at me with softened goo goo eyes and talking in a soft baby voice.

I climbed out of the car and ran across the road and toward the house. I looked behind me and saw my partners in crime watching intently. My mother made a movement with her hands showing me that I should keep going, like she was brushing her fingers forward, sweeping her hands like a broom, encouraging me to be brave.

I scrambled over a low fence and looked around, my heart beating fast like I was a criminal. The garden was filled with plants around the border but the grass was untamed. I saw the wooden log, like a makeshift bench near a big hibiscus flowered tree against the far wall. I dragged the log over to the spot by the window and stood on it to peek inside. The window had white interlaced burglar bars in the pattern of a sun spread across the whole window. The lace curtains had lots of little holes in the pattern hung on each side. I could see the silhouette of things inside the room, but I didn't want to be spotted so I held my head low, near the bottom of the window frame.

I peeked in, knees bent, because the window was not very high up. I could see my father through the lace. And he was sitting alongside a lady. She must be the nursery schoolteacher my mother was swearing at all the way on the drive here. I couldn't see her face too clearly but she seemed a chunky, thick boned woman. Perhaps fat.

She and my father were sitting at a round dining room table in chairs pulled out next to each other. They were bending over what seemed like a book or something and they seemed to be engrossed in the contents.

I looked around and I saw a cat, ginger, fat, lazing on the couch in the corner of the room. I could see a television set and a cabinet with mirrored backing and ornaments stacked in it. I looked at the cabinet, but my reflection was distorted, like circus glass, and it smudged into the reflections of all the little decorations stacked inside it. I was an absurd looking, colourful, smudge, in the cabinet's mirror, from where I sat hunched outside, on the other side of the half open, window.

Then I saw a lizard run across the window sill and in fear and horror I lifted my hand and bit my tongue to keep myself quiet. I slipped a little, lost my footing and fell back. I didn't fall far, but they heard me inside because I heard the woman say, "What was that?" and then I heard the chairs pull out against the sound of the floor.

I scrambled to my feet and hid behind a bush. The front door opened and I could see the bits and pieces of the lady standing in the doorway. She was looking around. My father came up behind her, "Who's there?"

She looked around the garden and I held my breath.

"No one," she said, "probably a cat or something."

She closed the door and they went back inside. I exhaled, but kept hiding for a few more seconds till I was sure they were not coming back out. Then I made my way to the fence and I scrambled over it and ran down the road back to the car, not looking at anything I passed.

"Well," my mother and aunt said, looking at me waiting for answers.

"Daddy is inside," I said. "And he's sitting at a table with a lady, in the lounge."

"I knew it!" my mother said. "That good for nothing, what the hell is he doing in there? That rubbish."



“These men are all good for nothing. You can’t trust them.”

“He’s just sitting with her at a table, bent over a book.”

“Sitting at a table you say? Over a book?” my mother pulled her face up in a distorted twist.

“Yes, with a lady.”

“Lady?” my mother said sarcastically, as if the notion of the woman being a lady was incredulous. “What does the thing look like?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “Fattish.”

“Is she a fat woman?”

“No, not fat. Just, fattish, big boned.”

“Fatter than me, is she pretty?”

“Never prettier than you,” Aunty Hasiena said.

“Men don’t bladdy care. As long as the thing is willing they game.”

“If I know him, he’s probably showing her a nice time. He doesn’t spend a cent at home but when it comes to other people he’s Mr Big Pockets.”

“Describe her,” my mother said.

“I couldn’t see her face.”

“Well what *could* you see? Did you see anything at all? Is she dark, light, what? Say what you saw.”

“I couldn’t *see* it was dark in the room.”

“Dark in the room because the house is probably so dirty that’s why. You also a waste of time, I send you to go see and you tell me you couldn’t see.”

“She seems average, black hair tied in a *bolla*. That’s what I saw.”

“A *bolla*?”

“Yes. Low down in her neck, a thick loose *bolla*.”

“What is she *outyds*? And what were they doing I would love to know?”

“Were they *vrying*?” Aunty Hasiena said quite crudely.

“No I didn’t see that. They were just sitting at the table.”

“Sitting by the table,” my mother said it like she was perplexed and trying to solve a magic cube. “What does he have to talk about, bladdy sex maniac.”

I thought for a minute and for some reason I tried to make it sound as innocent as I could.

“I think they were reading the book in front of them.”

My mother’s face grew even more confused.

“Reading a book? The only books he reads are Islamic books.”

“Maybe he’s teaching her about the *Deen*? What did you say her name was? Is she Christian woman? You can’t also just accuse the man. You don’t know what he’s doing there. Maybe it’s *dawah*.”

“Don’t you believe that, he’s probably boring her with all that religious books he reads.”

Aunty Hasiena let out a short laugh at my mother’s sarcasm. My mother looked at her and she looked at my mother, and then they both looked at me.

“What kind of an affair is that?”

“He can’t even have an affair properly,” my mother said.

“Now what Shazia, now you at a dead end.”

My mother’s face was anxious.

“I still don’t have evidence. He can make up any excuse for being there. If I bring this up he’ll use it against me. I know him.”

“Just leave him man.”

“If I leave him where will I go? I can’t afford to live on my own.”

“Also true, and why should you leave, you the one he’s married to you the one with his child, if anyone should leave it’s that *jintoo* he’s sitting with.”

“I hate that man so much, you’ll never believe how much.”

“But what if he decides he wants to leave you, take this woman? Then you in a predicament anyway, these women are like vultures when it comes to men. You must fight for your man.”

My mother sighed with contempt.

“Fight for him. That will be the day. I’ll never do it.”

She lit a cigarette and we sat in the car, them in the front seats, me in the back, and a plan was hatched. The point of the plan was not clear to me, if it was for my mother to hold onto my father and make sure he didn’t leave her, or for my mother to show my father and this woman her how much she didn’t care about him, or if it was to scare this woman away, or if it was just to say fuck off world I’ve had enough, I couldn’t say, because the plan didn’t make any good sense and achieved no objective at all. But the plan was made, and again, I was the one who had to execute it.

My mother and my aunt drove to Kenilworth Centre which was the closest mall, and they went into a small Chinese toy shop. They bought a cricket ball, and a pack of multi-colour

crepe party decorations. Then we went home and I was told to run in and get our big garden scissors from the yard.

We drove back to the teacher's house, and parked a little down the street, hidden under a big tree. My father's car was still there. We sat and we breathed, then suddenly we saw my father come out of the house and get into his car and drive away.

"Get down," my mother said, and we sunk down low in the seats so that he couldn't see us. When he was out of sight, my mother said, "Go do your thing. Be careful, don't get caught."

I had been briefed on our drive back there, knew all my instructions, but my heart raced. I was so scared but I had no choice, my mother had spoken.

I walked toward the house and when I got near, began to hunch over, and crept forward slowly. I moved toward the fence stealthily, like a cat in pursuit, my heart thudding like an earthquake.

I got to the garden. I had the plastic carrier bag with me and all the stuff my mother had got at the mall. I looked around. I didn't see anyone. I was tense.

I crept over the wooden fence, still following my mother's instructions. I pulled out the garden scissor. I had to put the bag down to free my hands. I went over to the garden patch with all the lovely colourful summer blooms, and starting chopping off all the pretty little flower heads, decapitating them.

I cut left right and everywhere without looking to see if I was even destroying everything properly. It was a mad frenzy of savage flower murder. Massacred petals fell

around my *takkies* around my feet, and I just kept walking along the garden, chopping and chopping more plants, I got some of the small trees too, until the lawn was a mess of petals and leaves and twigs, it looked like a flower graveyard.

I wasn't done. My mother had told me to do more. I went back to the plastic bag and got out the packet of crepe. My hands shook, I was careful to be quiet but the rustle of the plastic packet was so loud. I looked around again, I had been doing that a lot, I hunched low beneath the windows of the house. Nobody had seen or heard anything yet. I unwound the crepe from the cardboard strip it was wrapped around and starting draping it around the cut off branches and trees around the garden. I draped it everywhere I could reach and then threw some on the lawn between over and around the cut off flower heads.

I picked up my plastic bag and got out the cricket ball. This was the last thing my mother told me to do. I needed to be close enough to hit hard but far enough to run without getting caught, so I climbed over to the outside of the wooden fence, stood just beside it on the pavement side, and as hard as I could, aimed and flung the ball like a mad devil. My mother had said, "throw that ball like it's your husband in there that slut is trying to steal, it's your family she's breaking up."

My long plait flipped right over into my face as I swung and I heard the crash of glass. The cricket ball flew through the window, the window I stood at earlier watching my father and the teacher at the table with the book. I didn't look but my body was shaking and I wanted to be anywhere but there.

I heard the crash and then I ran and I ran away from the direction of the house, down the road, past all the houses where I pictured the people sitting on their green lawns *braaing* and drinking *Oros* with their families after lunch. And I didn't stop and I didn't look back

anymore. When I reached the car I shuffled inside and Aunty Hasiena like a bank robber sped off, my mother screaming at me like I just graduated university or won a prize, “Did you see that Siena, she threw that ball.” My mother sounded delighted, excited, and exhilarated all at the same time.

“Did that bitch see you?” she asked as we drove away at high speed flying down the near empty Sunday suburban road in Crawford.

“I don’t know, I didn’t look.” I was out of breath and Aunty Hasiena was looking in the rear view mirror like a criminal as she drove the getaway car, “But *sjoe* I almost thought you were going to get caught when you took so long with that paper on the trees, my heart was going *kadoof kadoof* for your part, girl.”

My mother let out a gleeful laugh.

“Hahaha, That’ll teach that man stealing bitch, chatting up other women’s husbands, teacher *se voet*.”

My mother reached out from the front seat and patted my leg where she could reach it, this time not slapping me, this time congratulating me on a job well done. It was the closest I’d ever gotten to a hug from her, her patting me on the leg like that. It was like she was proud of me. I had stood by her. I took her side. And it was one of the happiest things about her that I recall, was how she smiled at me that moment. She looked at me and she winked. I smiled back. And that was as close as my mother and I ever got to saying, “I love you.”

## Chapter 7

### The Golden Girls

My mother didn't confront my father about what he was doing at the nursery school teacher's house. Since that day nothing at home had changed. The silent war raged on still, like an open, bleeding wound. We all avoided him in our small house, by finding things to do in whatever room he was not in.

He could not have known it was us there that day, because he never brought up the issue, not that night or anytime after that. He never even hinted at it.

For my mother, knowing he was there was something she needed. There was really no point in asking him about it. He would deny and deny. He was that kind of flagrant liar. And perhaps if the wound was entirely opened up and fleshed out, she was afraid that it couldn't be patched up again, afraid that he might choose any of his other women, over her.

So she kept quiet, carrying her knowing like a disease breeding in her stomach. They kept doing their toxic ballet, on tiptoe around each other.

She was in the kitchen now stirring a pot of chicken curry she made. She was rinsing off fresh cooked rice, frying *paaper*, mixing *dhanya* into *dhey*, warming things in the microwave, she had an apron tied around her, like a real Stepford wife. Although she was

not the housewife type, when she and my father argued, she cooked and became very domestic, serving his needs where she could.

She called me into the kitchen, looked up from the pot she was stirring and said, “Go ask that man if he wants to eat.”

I popped my head into his doorway and asked. He asked me who did the cooking that day.

“Mummy,” I said.

He said that he wasn’t hungry. I went to the kitchen to tell her. She was still stirring.

She grunted a grunt to match his response.

“Complains I never cook and then when I do he doesn’t want to eat,” she mumbled under her breath so that my father wouldn’t hear but, at the same time, maybe still hear.

“He thinks I’ve got nothing better to do than stand ready for him.”

I went to my room and I could hear the silence thick around me. The total detachment between each of us living in that semi-detached house was heavy like rainclouds in every room. The walls whispered of unspoken pain and I listened. When you are very alone, you become fluent at listening to the walls.

My mother had gone into the Wendy house in the yard to get the ironing board. She plugged the iron into the socket in the kitchen wall and quietly did the ironing, with her secret knowledge of where my father had been. As she ironed I was sure it was shadowing her thoughts. My father sitting at tables with women he wasn’t married to, with women who wore their hair in *outydse bollas*, women who weren’t as beautiful as she was, or as stylish, with good taste.



She gave me cleaning chores to do, things which hadn't been polished to her satisfaction I had to do over. Apparently the kitchen cabinets were dirty and I had to wipe them all off with a wet *Handy Andy* cloth. I sighed and I did it. It was unfair. Amara got to go out with Sameer and I was stuck here with her bad mood and my parents issues contaminating my oxygen, forced into doing housework.

Afterwards, I went to my room, opened my copy of *Wuthering Heights*, which was my favourite romance, and I tried to escape from where my body was physically stationed. I left that address and in my head I ran with Catherine and Heathcliff on the moors, fantasising about a wild, passionate love like theirs.

But my escape was shortlived. A little while after I got comfortable, my mother appeared in my doorway.

“Rania, make yourself useful and go fetch my pyjamas in my room. I'm not sleeping in that room with that man tonight. Go. It's in the dresser drawer. I don't want to see that man's ugly face.”

And she put herself down sitting on my bed at the foot of it. I stared at her.

“For once in your life Rania, please do something.”

I exhaled hard, and crept into their bedroom. My father was lying on the bed reading a book, his head hidden from me, and I trolled through the drawers as silently as I could for my mother's pyjamas.

“What you looking for?” I jumped at the sound of his gruff voice and stopped. Without turning around to look at him, burying my head into the drawer, I said, “Mummy sent me to fetch her pyjamas.” I said it as fast as I could.

He resumed reading, and I heard a page turn and I went on searching. I grabbed my mother's pyjamas and slipped out of the room as quick as I could.

This was the usual, when my parents fought, my mother packed her things and moved out of the bedroom and made a bed a separate space for herself to sleep, away from my father. She slept in the Wendy house where my father kept his religious books.

"*Jirre* Rania, this isn't the one I wanted," she said. "I wanted the other one with the leopard print, this is too hot tonight for this thick material. What is this, it's for winter."

"He's in the room," I said, grunting and irritable.

"Now just leave it then, you can also do nothing for a person. How am I going to sleep in this thick thing, it's 90 degrees outside."

I was already on my bed again, with my book, and when I looked up from my page, she was straightening a picture frame against the wall. She caught the scant reflection of her image in the glass covering the picture, preened. She puffed up her hair like she liked to do, and she leaned into the glass a little and bit her lips together. She told me to do that too when my lips were dry.

"Bite your lips together," she said, "then the blood can run and it will be nice and pink, looks like you're wearing lipstick. Your lips are always so dry. *Skruf*. That's why you can't get a boyfriend."

I rolled my eyes behind my book.

"Amara not back yet?" she said, asking the obvious. That was the forever question she asked me. She obviously didn't know what to do with herself, displaced from her bedroom.

"No," I said, "not yet."

“She knows that man is a terror and I already lie all the time to get her out of the house. The least she can do is try to get home early. She’s trying to get me into trouble.” Then she sighed and said, “but what can she do, she’s so popular, she must make the most of it. I was like that when I was young. Popular.”

She leaned into the mirror again and looked at her face from all sides.

“That Sameer is a *lekka* boy. She will have a nice life. He’ll buy her a house and look after her. Not like this life I had,” she said.

I glanced at my mother over the edge of my book.

“You must also get you someone,” she said, “then you won’t be so miserable all the time. Old maids get so bitter like you, always nasty to people.”

I thought that was funny, because she was always so mean to me herself, and she had a husband. Here she was telling me the importance of having a man, while she hid from hers, all the while gripping her invisible tentacles into him with games and manipulation. She acted like she didn’t want him to make sure he didn’t leave.

Amara got back just then and we discovered that my father was out again.

“Is that man’s car here,” my mother asked Amara as she came in.

“No I didn’t see his car outside,” she said. “He’s slipped out again. He slips out so quietly and makes himself missing. Did you see how quiet he goes, *skelm*.”

“Why so late?” my mother said.

“What was I supposed to tell Sameer, that I have to get home extra early because there’s trouble at home. It’s embarrassing.”

“Don’t tell people what goes on in this house. It’s nobody’s business.”

I heard the bed mattress creak as Amara sat down on her bed.

“So did you have a nice time?” my mother said.

I heard the mattress creak again, as she got up and walked over to our cupboards. Amara didn't say anything. She just turned her back to us, got undressed and put her pyjama pants on.

“Well, what did my son-in-law say?”

She climbed into her bed and pulled the duvet to her chin, “I don't even feel like washing my face now I'm just going to sleep with all this makeup on.”

“It's going to make you look old before your time.”

“I don't even care.”

“How was the party? You look so nice in that outfit you had on.”

Amara was quiet.

“You always tell me what happens when you go out. Now you not saying anything.”

A short silence, and then she told us.

“He said we should take a break from each other.”

My mother's face froze into a cold stare.

“What?”

“A break mummy,” she said, pointedly.

“But what do you mean a break?”

“*I mean a break mummy*, a breather. I don't want to talk about it, but we not going out anymore. We broke up.”

“But why Amara,” my mother was incredulous, “he was such a nice boy. You don't meet someone nice like that every day.”

Amara said nothing.

“I really thought he was ready to introduce you to his parents. No man, my baby. There must be a reason, people don’t just break up?”

“I can’t help it. Whatever I did or didn’t do, I can’t help what he decides.”

“Did he meet someone else? These women have no shame, especially if a man has money, they chase them.”

“It’s not that, there’ve always been women after him. It’s his parents. They want him to marry someone else, his mother’s friend’s daughter. She’s studying Dentistry at UWC.”

“But they can’t tell him what to do. He must make up his own mind. People don’t arrange marriages anymore.”

“Well that’s what they want. And he works for his parents. They bought him his car, he lives with them. He’s not independent. He said he can’t go against them.”

“And why don’t they want you? You’re such a nice girl. They didn’t even meet you yet. You come out of a decent home.”

My mother puffed on her cigarette.

“It’s over,” Amara said.

“Just wait and see. You never know what can still happen. He could change his mind.”

Amara pulled the duvet over her head. My mother smoked.

“You know what you must do. Make him jealous. Go out with other boys, let him see you enjoying yourself, and don’t phone him. You have to ignore them. The more you ignore someone, the more they want you.”

And that was my mother's advice on relationships, without fail. I lifted my head from behind my book, I had to ask her.

“But what if two people like each other, and they both do that to trick the other person. Then what? They'll just end up ignoring each other.”

My mother sucked in her nostrils toward her nose, looking at me quite funny.

“Agh, you're such a silly child.”

“But if you not honest about how you feel, then how will the other person know how you feel? And if someone doesn't want to be with you, then why would you want to trick them into staying with you? You should want them to choose whatever they want of their own free will so that they can be happy. If you love someone you should want them to be happy, even if it means you lose them.”

“What do you know? Do you have a man? You have to get them and then you have to keep them. And you have to know how. Some women can get a man but they can't keep him. Did you know that?”

“Well I don't want somebody who I have to trick,” I said. “What's the point of having a man sitting next to you if he doesn't want to be there? It's not about having a body next to you, it's about having the heart inside the body, the warmth, the love, the connection.”

“Shut. Up,” my mother said, and she said it firmly. “You are better when you don't talk.”

And she reached her hand out and hit my foot where it was lying, under the duvet, and smoked her cigarette.

“Amara will get Sameer back. A beautiful girl like her, what more does he want? And she’s fair of complexion also. He won’t get better. What’s he going to talk about with some dry thing studying dentistry, teeth? Those women with the education think they’re very special. Don’t be intimidated. Education’s got nothing to do with being a woman. It has nothing to do with making a man feel like he’s a man. And his family’s already got money, they don’t need any more, they don’t need a woman who works.”

I cringed at the sound of my mother saying, “nothing to do with making a man feel like he’s a man.”

Sameer didn’t know it, but he had just devastated my mother’s life plan. I had my dreams, and my mother had hers. Amara would marry well. My mother would move in with her and look after her children. She wouldn’t need my father anymore, and that would show him. Put him in his place nicely, the end. That was the fairytale.

In my opinion, Sameer was not as great a catch as my mother and Amara thought. It was true, his family had money. They weren’t poor like us. And his family was educated. But there were things about him. There was one time he threw me out of my own room because he wanted to be alone with her. He locked our bedroom door and I stood outside banging, screaming that I needed my shoes because I had to take a walk to Mr Allie’s shop to buy curry leaves and *masala*. He unlocked the bedroom door, opened it slightly, and stuck his head out and said, “where do you keep your shoes.”

“Under my bed,” I said, irritated.

He closed the door in my face and I heard him scrambling under my bed and Amara was giggling like some airhead that someone was tickling with a feather. Minutes later his head appeared in the door again, slightly opened, and he threw my shoes out at me.

“There,” he said. And then he locked the door again.

Then there was another time he came to visit one afternoon during the *Ramadan*, which he was not allowed to do, and I saw him eat a sandwich and drink a glass of Coke, which is *haraam*.

And then there was the time he told me I had nice long legs and I would look good in shorts. I didn't think any of that was very classy.

And I never thought he had a good effect on her because he turned her into someone insecure. And I had never seen her like that with any of her other boyfriends. I mean like, I'd be in my room studying and listen to them talking on the phone or in the lounge sometimes, and I'd hear Amara doing the strangest thing. She repeated things to him, things that she stole from me, to make her sound cleverer. And then she pretended that they were her things. Like she took one of my art pictures one time and told him that she drew it, which was a blatant lie. It was mine. And she'd take things I said, like if I told her I wanted to visit this little island in Greece, she'd tell him she really wanted to go there, and when she repeated the island's name, she'd get the pronunciation all wrong. Or she'd hear me mention something about tennis, which I loved watching, and she'd mention Wimbledon to him, knowing nothing about tennis at all, having never watched or understood it ever in her life, just because she knew I loved it. She took my ideas, and stole them. And I thought it was bizarre, because she was always telling me what a useless retard I was.



I told my mother, and she just pulled her face and said, “that’s nothing, *los af*,” she dismissed it with a flick of her hand.

“People do that don’t you know.” So I left it. But I didn’t like it. I thought, was that what marrying up meant? That you had to pretend to be someone other than who you really were, more somehow, because it was clear to you that who you were, wasn’t enough? And that’s how you knew that you were moving up in life.

But he had money, and he was the one who could save them from this life, a life under my father’s thumb. And I suppose in the real world, that’s how people value other people. My mother tugged at my legs that were under the duvet, my feet right beside where she sat.

“Rania are you sleeping,” she said, “go to the kitchen quick, bring me a glass of Coke *kanalla*.”

I didn’t answer, so she pulled the blanket off me at the side of the bed. “Rania,” she said shaking my legs, “*wake up, you sleep like a dead person.*”

“I’m awake,” I said. Aggravated.

“Stop being so miserable, speak nice. You really need to get sunshine in your bones. You must take vitamin D tablets. Where are you ever going to get a man with that bitter attitude, depressed thing, Go get me some Coke.”

I pulled myself out of bed and went to the kitchen, passed by my father’s room and saw the tips of his feet at the edge to the bed. He was back. He left so quietly we didn’t hear him. He came back so quietly we didn’t hear him. He was silent like a ninja in a Bruce Lee movie, when he wanted to be.

I got the Coke out of the fridge and poured a tumbler half full, took it into my room, it was my mother's late night addiction, that and her Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes, and her cashew nuts. She had a bag of luxuries and she grabbed a handful of peanuts and gave it to me. And she grabbed another handful and gave it to Amara. We took it. She always bought enough to share with us, so that when we watched TV together we had something nice to eat.

A re-run of *The Golden Girls* was on TV now, and they were talking. My mother had made herself more comfortable on the bottom edge of my bed, back against the wall, legs lifted up and stretched across the width of the mattress, smoking, the shape of her long legs visible under the blankets like a foal just born, her make up as perfect as if she was ready for a night on the town, her lips siren red.

I gave her the Coke. They'd started talking about Muneer. I had heard this before, too many times. Muneer, Amara's father, he was *chateau briand* steak and my father was a polony vienna in a gatsby. The phantom Muneer, who I had never met, who died before Amara got to know him. Apparently he used to work in a bank. So he used to wear a tie every day, and to my mother that was the definition of respectable. Not like my father who worked in a factory warehouse, even if he was the supervisor. In Muneer's absence, he had become the most perfect ghost. Every recollection of him was testimony to his magnificence.

My mother spoke about how handsome he was, how gentle he was. He was light skinned like Amara.

"European roots," she said.

There was a red lipstick rim on the edge of the Coke glass now. There was a together-ness that night, despite Amara's break-up news. My mother assured her she would get Sameer back.

“He can't get better than you,” she said, “we poor but we decent. We got class, they not better than us no matter what they got.”

We flipped through the TV channels, and ended up watching a rerun of the sitcom *The Golden Girls*. We were talking and even laughing. Sophia from the TV show, made a joke and we forgot the silent war, and chuckled without holding it in. But we laughed too loud.

Within moments, everything went pitch black dark. Like a blackout. All the lights went off and the TV went off. We went quiet immediately. All the laughter ended abruptly.

“The electricity,” my mother said. We heard a cabinet door from the kitchen click closed, it was a loud click in the dark quiet house, then footsteps from the kitchen. My father's bedroom door creak open, and then we knew. This was not the first time this had happened. My father had gotten up from his bed and switched off the electricity at the main box in the kitchen. He had heard us laughing. And he didn't want that.

## Chapter 8

### Horse dentist

The next morning all the doors were locked and my father had taken all the keys with him. We were trapped inside. I had nowhere to go, but my mother and Amara had to get to work. My mother banged on the door when she realised what he'd done, but he was already gone to work.

She was all dressed up with her lipstick and high heels and she still had that roller in the front of her hair, the one she put in every morning so that her fringe would be smooth and fall over her forehead just right. She didn't cry but she was flustered and she was swearing.

"This is because of last night, that pig, we were too happy for his liking. Mad dog, wants to control everybody."

Her high cheekbones were draped sad on her face.

"How must we get out," Amara said, "I have to get to work, if I'm not there at half past eight I'll get in trouble."

"You have to talk to your father, Rania" my mother said turning to me.

I was still half asleep drinking my first mug of morning coffee “you must tell him *not to do this to me*, I can’t go on like this anymore.”

As she said the last part of that sentence it sounded like her voice cracked, but she caught it in time to stop herself from being heartbroken. What was it about vulnerability that made her want to instinctively hide it? Maybe she didn’t like feeling the victim. She was too proud. Vulnerability is a powerful thing but it makes you feel so powerless.

But from the look in her eye, I thought that in that moment she must have felt as sorry for herself, as I did for myself, those moments when she tore into me.

“You have to get a locksmith,” I said, but she didn’t have to.

She walked to her room and as she did she said, “your father will kill me if he knows so whatever you do, don’t say anything.”

“What?”

“I had this made.” She rummaged around her drawer, and she pulled out a key-ring with a set of jingling keys on it. “Here,” and she went to the lounge and looked through the window. “Do you see his car? Is he gone?”

He was gone. And she unlocked the door and the front gate.

“I had this made because I got tired of him locking me up, I’ll lose my job and what will he care, he won’t give extra money. You know that man.”

She peeked outside carefully, and stepped out, a nervous look in her tired, kohl lined eyes.

“Now we just have to get home before he does so that he doesn’t know we got out today. You hear Amara, come home straight from work, early if you can, no loitering. His moods don’t last long. Tonight he’ll put the key back on the key-ring holder in the kitchen.

This is just to show us whose boss. *Bly baas speel.*”

My mother was prepared because this was an old trick of my father's. He did it when he thought we were trying to be too independent. Back when I was still at school and he locked us in, my mother would write me a sick note for the next day. I knew that note so well I could say it by heart: Dear Miss, Kindly excuse Rania Ahmed for being absent, as she was not feeling well. Signed Shazia Stone Ahmed. That was how she wrote every single one of my notes every time I didn't go to school because she and my father were rioting. But now she was ready for him. She had learned to fight on his terms.

My father didn't find out they left that day, because he was getting home late, didn't come home straight from work. The key he took was back in the kitchen the next day. He put it there without saying a word. But my parents maintained the silence between them. My father was like a phantom during that time, hardly seen or heard from, but in such a heavy, weary, way.

My mother said she didn't care whether he was there or not, or where he went. But she said it so much and so pointedly, that it made me think that she did care. I was glad when he was gone. Just because when he was there the air was tense. My mother was insulting and nasty in ways, but I wasn't really scared of her, not like I was scared of my father. He had this way. This way of raising his voice, throwing things, laying down his authority, proud, showing he was in charge.

When he got in his car and left, it felt like some kind of peace. A country where the enemy had withdrawn, retreated from the border, and then I could exhale.

My mother complained about him endlessly. When no one was home she complained to me. When Amara was there, she and Amara made it clear to me what a rubbish my father was. And she spoke about him to Aunty Fawzi, who came by from time to time to visit.

Aunty Hasiena came by to, and my mother confided in her a lot more than in anyone else. Probably because it was her sister, she'd tell Aunty Fawzi or Aunty Sadia she didn't care about my father at all. But she might tell Aunty Hasiena that she wanted to make sure her children still had a home life, a family where we belonged. "Otherwise they drift," she said, "I don't want them to *wandel*." I think she meant that she wanted us to feel anchored. To have roots.

After lunch on the weekend Aunty Hasiena was over having *koesisters* and tea with us. Amara was at Aunty Hasiena's house visiting Nawaal. Nawaal was helping Amara "forget about Sameer", as my mother put it. So far he hadn't contacted her, and my mother's instructions to her were for her to go out and look gorgeous, act like she was having fun and show up in places he would definitely see her, preferably with another boy.

Amara followed my mother's instructions. But after Sameer, she wanted to change her appearance. She dyed her hair a different colour, a bright red. And all of a sudden she spoke about getting her front teeth extracted. She wanted four false teeth in the front of her mouth, "so that her smile could be perfect," she said.

My mother nearly died, "The dentist that touches your teeth I will have reported. You can't just pull a girl's whole front teeth out if there's nothing wrong with it. It's a sin. A beautiful set of healthy natural teeth."

But Amara was adamant, “I don’t care if I have to go to a horse dentist to pull it all out, I want a nice smile.”

“You have a nice smile, this nonsense now, over a man, my goodness gracious me.” As popular as Amara was, since Sameer left her, I think she thought she needed to feel prettier. When he left her, he damaged her self esteem, and she was trying to change herself, but she only knew how to do it in superficial ways.

Aunty Hasiena and my mother spoke about that while drinking tea in our kitchen. They spoke about Amara’s prospects.

“She must marry someone nice,” they agreed, “She’s a pretty girl, she mustn’t throw herself away on anyone. You see how we struggled. She must marry someone who can give her a good life *inshallah*.”

“*Ameen*,” Aunty Hasiena said. “Don’t let her pull her teeth. She’ll regret it.”

“No. I’ll never allow that. She’s just feeling down, now she doesn’t know what to do with herself, and wants to make radical changes. I mean I have false teeth but it was different in our time. I wish I could have my own teeth again.”

They sat around and talked and gossiped. They smoked cigarettes and drank tea, and remembered how hard their life was when they were young. Much worse than me or Amara had it, they said.

“You children are lucky.” My mother said that when she was young, her father dragged her home from a house party one night. He beat her in front of everyone at that party, including the boy she went with. She said he beat her till her nose bled.



“Look here,” she pointed to the crooked hook in her sharp nose. “This, this I got from the way he hit me, broke my nose that night. Do you remember Hasiena,” she said.

“These children think they’ve got it hard. They don’t know hardship. *Ons het swaar gekry.*” Aunty Hasiena said how lucky we were, because we had the benefit of a good upbringing.

“Never-mind what her father does,” my mother said, “he provides. He gives everything we need. He has his ways, he can be mad, but he’s also good to us. The people don’t all have such good father’s.”

“Now you singing the man’s praises again.”

“I’m just saying. He does what he must do. The men don’t do it. I know I complain, but he gives over his pay cheque. He looks after his family, no matter what. He teaches the children about morals and *Deen*. He protects them. Nobody taught us when we grew up. We had to go find out for ourselves. What did we know? We knew nothing.”

“Yes, you right. Your children are decent. But he must just stop with all his *jolling*. You must pull him right. A woman can pull a man right.”

And it was in this talking of pulling my father right that Aunty Hasiena told my mother about Mareldia. Aunty Hasiena heard about her from someone Aunty Hasiena met at the flea market in Muizenberg, where Aunty Hasiena sold her clothes she sewed.

This lady, Mareldia, “it’s her job to solve people’s problems,” Aunty Hasiena said.

“I must take you. Just for a joke. Hear what she says about all this worries on your head.”

And so it happened. My mother convinced Amara not to pull her teeth, stopped her from doing a foolish thing just because she felt unhappy with herself right now. But my mother could not stop herself from doing an equal foolishness. She was convinced by Aunty Hasiena to do something *haraam*, to do something my father would kill her for, another thing on that list, but she went ahead nevertheless and concocted an irrational new plan.

My mother went off to solicit the services of what was her version of a horse dentist. She went to see a person who was going to take an ugly love, like an ugly smile, and magically make it beautiful. Mareldia was supposed to take a rotten marriage, that was decaying, that was dead and ought to be buried, and make it stay alive in contradiction of nature.

It was insanity. But my mother was consumed by love and hate. She was consumed by anger and sadness. It came from loving and having expectations, and being let down in all of it. It was a heady mix, quite enough to wound any sane heart in such a way, that it made you go just a little bit mad.

## Chapter 9

### The Parrot

“I’m nervous for this woman, come with me my baby,” my mother said to me. “I’m not used to such things. Aunty Siena is *ou gewoond doekoems*.”

“Then don’t go if you don’t like it. It’s creepy and it’s *haraam*,” I said, “you going to get punished, I don’t want your sins on me.”

“I’m not going to hurt anyone. I’m going for a good cause, to keep a family together.”

“Take Amara with you.”

“Leave Amara, she’s depressed over Sameer. Let her go out with Nawaal them. You’ve got nothing better to do. Just that books you read whole day. Why don’t you read something constructive for a change, read your father’s books on *hadith*. You know it makes him very happy when you show an interest in *Deen*”

I knew very well that I was going to go along, like it or not. Amara gets to do her own thing. And I was the one trapped in my mother’s madness. Because he was *my* father, so I had to be part of the game. I was his flesh and blood, the closest instrument she had to him, a weapon she could use. I was artillery. And she wanted artillery on her side.

“It’s not fair,” I said, “Amara just does her own thing.”

“Who you blaming, not me I know? Amara meets people, she makes friends, and boys ask her out. You must get a life, don’t blame me because you stuck here and got nothing better to do. I’m not tying you down. Your father is strict, but you must make a way. See how *wakey* Amara is. She makes sure she gets out. When I was young my father beat me blue. But I made a way to go out. You must do your thing. Never mind your father’s strict rules. You must move around it.”

I wanted to scream. She was tying me down, and saying she wasn’t. She was telling me it was my responsibility to secretly break the rules. She and my father had me imprisoned. Not with ropes and chains, but in my head. My confidence was so low because of her tantrums, *because of their chaos*. And everything was always no, don’t do that, you can’t do this, that’s not allowed, it’s not permissible. Maybe I wasn’t a fighter like Amara, or her. Maybe I didn’t have what it took to go against the grain. Maybe I needed permission. Maybe I wanted consent.

Aunty Hasiena hooted outside.

“Come, make quick, you know this woman, get on her wrong side and she’ll ask me for petrol money. She can be how rich and I can be how poor she’ll still ask for petrol money.”

“Come come come,” Aunty Hasiena said, “I’m waiting in the hot sun.” She was fiddling with the radio, she put on Islamic tapes, lectures, a *khutba* playing on cd, and off we drove.

In a short while, we were parked outside a house in Fairways.

“I’m so nervous all of a sudden,” my mother said.

“We can leave,” I said.

“No no no,” my mother answered fast, “I’ve come this far. This is it, this is it.”

The lady who answered the door wore a bright multi-coloured scarf. It was tied over the top of her head like a bandanna, and knotted in the nape of her neck. The silk fabric hung along the one side of her shoulder like a tousled plait, and she wore big gold hoop earrings in her ears. I thought she looked like a pirate. She introduced herself as Mareldia and invited us in, my mother and Aunty Hasiena followed her, and I followed in too, trailing behind them.

“Did you find me in the classifieds,” Mareldia said, leading us into her house, “I always advertise in the back section of the Athlone news.”

“No a friend of mine knew you, Shanaaz Majiet,” Aunty Hasiena said as we walked down a carpeted passageway with overhanging chandeliers, and old photographs hung against the wall. One of the photo’s I noticed was a framed black and white picture of a group of children standing outside a building. I read the subtitle under the picture as I walked past, it said, *Gem bioscope, District Six*.

I knew that name, my mother used to talk about her young days going there. It was one of the things that she said always made her feel nostalgic. That, and buying fish and chips from Palace fisheries in Salt River, she said it always stirred memories in her.

“Shanaaz said she came here some time ago, had a problem and you helped her. Said I should give you a try,” Aunty Hasiena said.

“Oh yes, yes. Shanaaz I know her, she came here a few times last year, I gave her something to protect her from jealousy, *ghasad*. There was a woman going around town

spreading all kinds of rumours about her, was trying to ruin her marriage. Even went so far as to phone her husband and tell him all kinds of ugly things, tried to break them up.

Jealousy is a dangerous thing. Makes people spiteful, they will actively try to destroy you.

How is she now?"

"She's *alhamdulillah*. Last I heard."

We entered into a lounge just off the passageway and Mareldia directed us to sit down.

"Sit sit," she said pointing to a couch opposite a table, right across from where she sat down herself.

The room was dark, with thick curtains blocking any light from coming in through the windows. The air was thick and stale, stuffy, and the furniture was old fashioned. It was clean, but *outyds*. The lounge suite we sat down on was exactly the kind my mother hated. Maroon velour, with buttonholes and fake imbuia armrests and little clawed feet. Above our head more chandeliers, but old ones, but they were not very sparkly. They were dull, making the place look dated. It looked like faux Victorian décor, cheap imitations of something supposed to be stylish, very kitsch.

On the table in front of us were lots of little glass containers with different coloured liquids inside them. I thought they must be her magic potions, although it might have just been water with food colouring in it. There was a saucer with a sucker stick resting in it, with a purple gooey substance around the one end, like it had been used to stir her elixirs. There was a deck of cards stacked beside the saucer, like the cards gypsies use for telling fortunes. Tarot cards, I think. The room felt like it hardly ever got fresh air. I could feel the oldness of the oxygen weighing down on my lungs. In the corner of the room, I saw a TV

on a dark faux wood pedestal cabinet. It was old with a vintage aerial on top of it. There was a glass and imbuia cabinet against the wall with lots of lace crocheted doilies in it. It was stacked with glass trinkets and tons of snow globes packed side by side on the inside of the cabinet. It also contained a collection of little porcelain dolls with hoop dresses and aprons on them. Their hair was brassy brown red, made of a plastic, synthetic cotton, and their eyes were round like little ping pong balls, bright blue, and wide open, like they were watching over the room without blinking.

She obviously collected figurines and little snow globes. Some of the snow globes had the Eiffel tower in it, some had the tower of Pisa, some had the London bridge, they seemed to be mementos from travelling, although I suspected that Mareldia had herself never been to any of those places. She didn't seem sophisticated enough to have travelled the world as far afield as her snow globes. But I suppose you didn't need to be sophisticated to travel, you just needed money, and maybe reading tarot cards and making spells was a good way to make some.

What was creepy was the skull sitting on the table beside the tarot cards. It looked dead real, but I saw that at the base of it were cigarette butts and ash. So it had to be a replica. Unless Mareldia was so irreverent to the souls of the dead that she would use their remains as an ashtray.

My eyes adjusted to the dark, stuffiness of the room. As it did, I saw a fleck of light filter into the room through an open slit between the curtains. The block of light drifted into through the piece of exposed window in a thick horizontal stripe. I could see specks of dust flitting in the ray of light, lost, exposed, atoms.

I looked at my mother to see her reaction but her eyes were focused on a bird cage across the room, perched on a small glass coffee table with brass legs. There was a parrot inside the cage, with feathers as bright as Mareldia's *doek*.

"Did you bring the R 500," she said, "that's the price like I told you on the phone." She was speaking to Aunty Hasiena.

My mother fished in her bag. She always carried this huge bag with her and could never find anything in it. Finally she pulled out her old leather purse and got out a few notes that were folded up into a tiny little square. She unfolded it piece by piece, counted it, and as she counted each note, put that note down on the table in front of her, putting it beside the saucer. It was a miracle that she had money to waste on such things, I thought. She was always complaining that there wasn't enough and she needed more. I wouldn't be surprised if Aunty Hasiena lent her the money and she was going to pay it back bit by bit over the next few months. That happened every month to make ends meet.

Mareldia reached over and took the cash, counted it, and of all the places in the world, I watched her put it into the underneath of her scarf at the base of her neck, next to where the scarf was knotted. I marvelled, and wondered if her head was filled with banknotes and money. No wonder she tied her scarf so tight. I saw her nails digging the notes in under her scarf. Her nails were very long and painted red and I wondered what kind of Moslem woman wore red nail-polish. My father never allowed us to wear nail-polish because you couldn't take *abdās* and make *salaah* if you did.

But she was also doing *doekom* work so I suppose not everyone cares about rules.

"Did you bring what I asked?" Mareldia said, "I need a sample of his hair, with the follicles."



My mother fished in her bag again and this time pulled out a yellow hairbrush. I recognized it from my father's things, it was his brush. My mother handed it over to her.

I felt nervous all of a sudden. I couldn't sit still. I fidgeted, absent-mindedly, I reached out over the table and picked up one of the tarot cards that was lying spread out, back down, in front of me.

Mareldia saw. Shot me a dirty look, stuck her hand forward and with a sudden forcefulness she pulled the card from my hand. I was startled. I sat back respectfully, if not fearfully. I had stepped out of line. Mareldia stared at me and my heart rate shot up. She slowly took her eyes off me, as if she was warning me to watch it. She turned her eyes away from me in slow motion, and looked down at the card she grabbed from me. She turned it around, right side facing her, and stared at it. Then she looked at me again, then she looked back down at the card, and put it flat down on the table in front of her.

My mother had taken the brush back from the table while this was happening, and oblivious to me or my transgression, she was tugging with her fingers between the bristles. She drew out a clump of hair and handed it to Mareldia.

"This is his."

"And the woman you told me about?"

"I haven't got anything of hers. Just his hair and I brought this," my mother pulled a vest out of her bag and unfolded it. "This is his clothes."

Mareldia said, if I haven't got any of her things, there's nothing I can do to her."

"But can you keep him away from her, you said you can."

"I can keep him interested in you."

“Believe me I don’t want that man. I haven’t wanted him in years. I just don’t want him running around embarrassing me in front of the whole world. And I rely on him for his pay cheque. That’s why I’m here,” my mother said, looking at Aunty Hasiena, then at me, then at Mareldia. I suppose she felt the need to explain.

Mareldia took some of my father’s hair and stirred it into a bottle she had on the table in front of her. Then she picked it up, held it in her hands, and recited over it an incantation in Arabic. She sang it like a lullabye, *altawfiq bayn alhabi waltafahum bayn qulubihim* (reconcile love and understanding between their hearts.) She repeated it in cycles with a melody, first Arabic then English, then Arabic then English then Arabic then English. As she sang her mystic words, she lulled her body slightly backwards and forwards and backwards and forwards with her eyes closed, like she was going into a trance. She did this for a few minutes. When she was done, she lifted the potion to her mouth and blew over it back to front, and then she repeated it three times.

She put the potion down on the table and reached for a piece of cloth in front of her.

“How do you spell your husband’s name?” she asked, my mother spelled it and with a pen, she wrote my father’s name on the cloth. “And your name?” she asked, and my mother spelled it and she wrote it on the back side of the same cloth.

Then she reached for a lighter in front of her and stuffed the cloth into the glass with the potion. She lit the cloth and quickly the flame spread until the whole glass was on fire. Then she spit on the fire, and reached for a pitcher of water at her side, she doused it over the glass. The fire extinguished and smoke rose up from it. As the smoke rose she closed her eyes and recited her incantations again with closed eyes, and swaying backwards and

forwards like she was in a trance. Her eyes opened and as they did her eyeballs looked like they were turned over, glassy. It made her look like she was in another realm, it was weird. She came back to normal, and finally she looked up and said, “This will keep him at home.”

Mareldia picked up the sucker stick in the saucer and stirred the potion. Then she bottled it and handed it to my mother.

“Put this in his food, once every day until the bottle is empty. It shouldn’t take more than a week.”

“That’s all I need to do?”

“If you want something stronger, I can send things. *Jinns*. Harmless *jinnns*, I don’t hurt people. Some people do but I don’t. Just to scare someone so that they know they must watch it. But if you want me to send it to the woman I need her hair.”

“No no,” my mother said, “keeping him home is enough. No *jinnns*, *kanalla*.”

“It’s up to you. I have done all kinds of *werke*. I do exorcisms too. If you know someone possessed by a *jinn*, I can cleanse them of the evil spirit.”

“Does that happen? People get possessed?”

“All the time, there was a girl the other day, when her parents saw her stomach grow like she was pregnant, they got worried. She was acting strange, different. When we threw the holy water on her she slithered like a snake. After we cleansed her, her belly fell flat again. She was pregnant with a demon and we had to exorcise her.”

My mother put her hand to her mouth in a show of horror.

“Let me try this, I’ll come back if I need anything stronger.”

And then Mareldia said something ridiculously practical. She asked my mother if she needed a carrier bag to put her concoction in. My mother said, “*ja, kanalla*, in case this stuff seeps into my bag.”

“And then your purse falls in love with your lipstick,” Aunty Hasiena said with a chuckle. My mother and I giggled, restrainedly.

Mareldia gave us a stern look.

She left the room to get the packet and I stared at my mother incredulous. I had been holding my breath, afraid to let air escape my lungs while I listened to the story of the exorcism.

“Why did you bring me here with you? I told you I don’t want to come. This place is weird. This lady is creepy.”

My mother stood up from the couch and looked down at me, still sitting on the couch.

“Do you see what your father has driven me to? What I have to do to keep the skin on my face. *I want you to know my girlie. I want you to know. That thing you call a father.*”

And then Mareldia came back in with a small *Pick n Pay* plastic bag and gave it to my mother.

“*Shukran*,” Mareldia said. She looked at me and stroked my face. I cringed, pulled back. She smiled.

“The card you picked up,” she looked toward the card I taken earlier. It was lying face down on the table. “A lover will enter your life, soon.” She winked, “for that, no charge.”

Then out of the silence, the parrot unexpectedly began to speak. It mimicked with its squawky parrot voice, what I had said while Mareldia was out of the room.

“This place is weird. This lady is creepy. This place is weird. This lady is creepy,” it repeated over and over again without stopping or taking parrot breaths in between. It didn’t let up at all, and just kept going like a song. We grabbed our potions, and hurried out of the front door with our *Pick n Pay* packet, flaming from embarrassment, our faces bloodshot red.

As we got to the car we couldn’t keep our laughter in and we burst into a loud crying hysterical fit of amusement, bent over, bellies cramping, loud laughing.

“*Sjoe* that place gave me the *heebie jeebies*,” my mother said.

“And now that woman knows because the bird repeated everything,” Aunty Hasiena said, “you Rania, you put us in the eyes.”

“You don’t think she’ll put a spell on us, do you, I mean she’s a dangerous woman,” my mother said laughing and mocking, tears coming out of her eyes.

“Don’t joke Shazia,” Aunty Hasiena said, making herself serious, “the woman can exorcise you.” She paused, fingering the potion in her hand and then said, “Do you believe in this, you don’t think she could harm us do you? What do you think Zia, are you going to use this potion she gave?”

I didn’t believe in things like this, not like Aunty Hasiena and my mother, but I couldn’t stop wondering about what she told me. The possibility of what she said was so wonderful, a lover coming soon. I wanted it to be true. I wanted to believe. It was a thread of hope for

me to hang onto. I wanted it so bad, and the idea of it being for real made my heart pound fast and hard.

And then I understood why people wanted this, the idea of having the power to control an uncontrollable universe, in an easy to follow series of practical and pragmatic steps. It was a comforting thing to believe, that we had that power. Us humans, we just couldn't give up the idea of control. But the beautiful thing was, no matter how much we suffered, we were too wonderfully stupid to stop hoping. And I had hope in me now.

Did my mother believe it would help her keep her husband? I was waiting for my mother to answer Aunty Hasiena, but my mother was laughing so loud she couldn't even speak.

## Chapter 10

### The price of Keats and William Blake

My mother believed that her dreams were signs of things that would happen in the future. And maybe this magic she bought for R500 needed only that to work, a belief that such things were real.

She made sure my father ate at night. She dished for him, left his plate on the kitchen table, and covered it with a dishcloth. Whenever he got home he warmed it in the microwave, and ate.

Now I don't necessarily believe it was the potion, but in about two weeks, the silence between my parents dissolved. One night, my father came home from work and just started speaking to my mother like nothing disagreeable had happened between them. I heard her in the kitchen washing dishes, and then I heard him, in an appeasing voice, tell her that his work was sponsoring him with a restaurant gift voucher.

"You can go if you want to," he said, "I'll take you."

When I went into the kitchen later I saw that he had put the voucher down on the kitchen table, leaving her to think about it.

At first she didn't say anything. She told him he could "put the voucher down there, she'll look later."

My father went into his room quietly to lie down. As the night passed, I heard her voice call out to him. Then I heard her say, "Now when is this now." And just like that, the long silent war was over and they were talking again, for now anyway. We didn't know the details of what happened to the nursery school teacher, but she was not the one going to the restaurant with my father, my mother was.

"I don't actually have time to go to fancy restaurants," she said. "I've got work to do. This house is forever dirty I'm never finished in this place."

My father, encouraged by her dismal reply, walked into the kitchen to see her and said,

"*Agh*, anytime you want to go. It's valid for a whole month."

"You want me to go to a restaurant? These restaurants can't make food. I don't eat their bland stuff. They serve old food. They freeze that stuff for months. And you know me with my sensitive stomach."

"We can go to a nice place where the food isn't old. You can choose."

My mother was quiet at first.

"Now you must say when," she said.

"I'm flexible," he said. Which may have been the biggest untruth about himself I ever heard him utter.

But so it happened. The fight was over. The teacher lady was gone. We did not have reason to fear her anymore. We could feel it in my father's energy at home. It was my father's cycle. There was a woman. There was trouble at home because of it. Then, this woman that



we had endless conversations about in front of the TV while he was out of earshot, seemed to vanish from his life, and therefore our lives, like the Cape Town autumn morning mist disappearing into the thirsty noon sky.

Just like that, the insecurity of our fragile family breaking up, the worry of being physically and financially displaced and losing the home we had, was over for now. And we were a happy family for while. Until some unexpected day, when the cycle began again, and a different, new, woman appeared.

Now no-one knew what my father did with these women. He was a *salieg* man and it was inappropriate to suspect him of real *haraam*. I never did. Surely he wouldn't? Not a man like him? Sin was beneath him. As far as I was concerned, all he did with these women was read books. I saw it with my own eyes. He didn't *jol* in a bad way. Not in the dirty way. He just liked women's company. He liked talking to them. It gave him a little warmth in his life to make up for my mother's coldness. I mean, she didn't even cook for him.

"You don't want to hear anything about your father," my mother said to me. "And for what must I cook and feed a man who treats me like that. Woman after woman. I'm cold because of how he treats me. Hy *jol*!"

"No he doesn't," I said, "he just talks to them. You have a dirty mind if you think anything else."

"All you're interested in is that he pays your fees," she said. "Forever taking his part against me. After everything I do for you."

We suspected, and questioned, and wondered, and even speculated second marriages and undercover hidden divorces which made it all *halal*. We pondered the probability of a

second life he may have kept veiled from us, a life that involved even children we didn't know about, that may one day show up on our doorstep and claim assets that was their birthright as much as ours. But we knew nothing for a fact. In the end it was all just unsubstantiated guessing. There was a weird comfort in not knowing for sure. But there was also a very real anxiety in it.

Right now the *Belt Buckle* factory was my parent's cupid. They had given my father this meal voucher, and it was as close to a date as they would ever have, a sponsored date. But there was an extra ticket that the work had given him, it was a voucher for a family, and I heard my father say, "Shazia, you can tell Rania she can come too."

I didn't want to go. Of course I didn't have better plans but I was still 21 and I hated having to go to places with my parents. It made me feel pitiful. Like a loser. At home I could hide, no one saw that I was alone, but going out with my parents was just humiliating.

I told my mother no. That I was not going. She said that he wasn't asking for my permission, he had told her that I must go with them.

"He likes having you with," my mother said, and the voucher is for three people so we don't want to waste one space.

"Take Aunty Fawzi or someone," I said.

My mother gave me a dirty look.

"Then your father can start an affair with her. I put nothing past anyone."

I walked away and she called out after me, "you better not argue with that man, you know how he can be if he wants to."

Twenty one years old and with my parents on a Saturday night, that was a special kind of sad. Going with them on the Sunday drives I could still handle. Not on a Saturday night though, it screamed, no friends, no life.

I say this because on Sunday I was accustomed to going for drives with them, and this Sunday, I did.

My father got back from lunch at his mother's, and my parent's routine Sunday drive was back on.

"Is Rania coming?" my father said before they left.

My mother answered, "she just wants to sleep, she doesn't want to come with us."

"Ask her, she's alone all the time."

And then my mother said, "*yirre*, she's a big woman already. Leave her if she wants to be alone."

My father insisted. And so my mother called out to me, "We going for a drive. Come with us."

I ended up going despite not really wanting to, just because they drove past nice places and I figured a nice view was better than four walls. My eyes needed a break from my books. And it was easy not to be seen in the car with them. I could see out, without being seen myself. On a Saturday night at a restaurant it would be different.

The scenery of places we passed was pretty, but I always felt so hollow inside. Like a ghost with a giant hole where my heart ought to be. *Vacant room to let*, my heart should have said, because there was so much emptiness there.

I sat in the backseat of my father's rusted green Toyota, slid down low, hiding. My father drove us all over the peninsula. Past busy beaches, Sea Point, Camps Bay, all along the coast dotted with happy people eating ice creams and walking their dogs, and he drove us through nice, tree lined neighbourhoods with high walls and tennis courts behind them. The kind I liked to dream about. "Imagine living here," my mother said in a dreamy way. My father turned to her and said, "You come from District 6, what do you know?"

"Rania it's nice hey," my mother said to me.

"Yes I like it."

That bugged my father.

"Don't teach the child the wrong things," he said. "Don't teach her to be materialistic." And then he got a little preachy. I suppose influenced by all the stuff he read in his books. "You know, I don't even want a new car, because it puts pride in a man's heart, then you go around thinking you're important because you have a car that costs a lot of money. And that's the devil playing with you, puffing up your ego with wrong ideas. *Dunya goed*. A man must stay humble and not be swallowed up by worldly things. The only thing that can elevate any person is a sense of decency and shame. Once you lose that you've got nothing, no matter how much money or whatever else you've got. Right Shazia?" he said and looked to my mother to agree with him on his moral point.

From the backseat I saw her shoulders rise up slightly like a cat, like she was hissing but silenced. She turned her head to the window and just looked out straight ahead. Then my father went on a sermon about humility and godliness and why we were better off than

anyone else because we had morals, and that was the only thing that meant anything in this short life.

Sometimes I thought maybe he was ashamed to admit he couldn't afford the things we wanted. So he convinced himself that he didn't care about it. A kind of counterfeit humility, a convenient cover for the shame of having failed his family by not being able to provide the material luxuries we would have liked to have.

Or maybe it was disappointment because he had failed his own self, fell short of his own desires. Maybe that's hard for a man to live with. Being responsible for people you love and not being able to give them everything, and to watch other people have what they lack. Maybe it hurt a man's pride.

I wondered if it could be the reason for his random rage, that desperation that I saw inside of him when he flung chairs and broke glasses. I could never pinpoint the exact reason for his chaos. But there had to be a reason. People don't become any particular way without a reason, especially not if you're a good man. And I know my father was that. He was a good man.

And that was how the drive went. Peppered with sermons, and a little bit of religious education, talk about the *Deen*. I rolled my eyes for those parts. But there were parts I liked. My father put the radio on and he let the music play. The music was only for my benefit, because he didn't listen to music, only Islamic tapes. That was as loose as he got in front of me, allowing me to listen to modern music, even serving it up for me. That was the best way he had of making sure I enjoyed the drive too, and that I was comfortable and happy.

Billy Paul sang, *Me and Mrs Jones*. It sounded good driving past a sunny beach filled with umbrellas and bikinis and everything that looked like the dream of a life I wished I

could have, but I didn't have, and this, slinking down in the backseat of my father's Toyota was as close as I could get to it. So I didn't mind old songs. It was something nice in my life.

One of the places we drove to was, Hout Bay harbour. Opposite the harbour was a gated, open, grassy field filled with old cannons. My parents got out and strolled through the historical display. I got out too, and walked alongside my mother. My father explained all kinds of historical stuff to us. I don't know how he knew all that stuff, maybe he was a tour guide in a previous life. He knew everything about Cape Town. And we listened to his stories and his explanations with keen interest.

My mother insisted on wearing stiletto sandals everywhere, she said she didn't feel dressed without them. Her slim, skyscraper heel broke on the grassy field, right in the middle of all the cannons and she had to take them off and stroll along barefoot. The most romantic thing I saw my father do was carry her broken sandals for her.

On these drives with my parents I turned into a voyeur, an uninvolved spy into other people's enjoyment of life. I just wanted to be like those people I saw roaming about. Everyone else in the world seemed to be one of the Kellogg's cereal box people. The laughing, happy, smiling, normal people, I wanted to be that, like how Amara was.

Having me with them gave my parents something in common. Sometimes, I don't think they knew how to be alone together.

And then my father spoke about how really smart I was and how happy he was that I was studying.

"She's clever." He was proud of that.

“You don’t need to study to make something of yourself. Look at Amara, she’s so popular. She’s going to marry a nice boy. She can pick and choose any man she wants. Isn’t it better to be like that, than a lonely old spinster with some qualification, isn’t it?” She knew he was very impressed with me for studying, and that gnawed at her.

My father went quiet for a minute, like my mother had just knocked all the air out of his stomach and deflated him completely.

He didn’t bring up the restaurant during that drive. But when we got home, the tickets were still in the kitchen, on the counter, tucked under the fruit bowl. And then my father asked again.

He wanted to know when we were going, let’s go this coming Saturday, he said, and tell Rania so that she knows.

I whispered to my mother, “I’m not going.”

She didn’t say anything to him that evening after the drive. She waited a few nights and then she told him, or I mean, she must have told him, because he called me to his room. I didn’t know what he wanted but it felt like being called to the principal’s office. Like I was in trouble and he was going to dish out a suitable punishment.

I was nervous and popped my head into his bedroom. I looked at him awkwardly and said, “*Ja.*”

He was bending over his bed. He had a suitcase with him which he carried to work. He was the supervisor after all, of the belt buckle factory, and my father loved carrying a suitcase and shuffling his papers. Sometimes he just ferried his religious books in it, to and from work, so that he could discuss theology with his colleagues. He was always trying to

convert people, *dawah*. If he didn't have religious books in there, he'd have work papers in it. But he also just loved to carry a briefcase.

My mother scoffed at the pride he took in his briefcase and in his job.

“He runs around doing errands for those *verkrampste* whites at his work, they treat him like a *boytjie*, but he takes so much care with their papers you'll think he's the boss in that racist place. They'll never give him a real opportunity. Keep giving him titles with no pay.”

He didn't have much formal education, but he took pride in learning, and he liked having books, and he liked reading them, and talking about what he read, with my mother, when they were on talking terms. My father was like that. He liked to feel respectable.

I realised that I was a tool for that too and it irritated me. When I registered for my first year of study, he drove me to the admissions office himself, and after, before he took me back home he took me back to work with him and he took me to his boss's office. We sat beside each other in silence in that car. There was no talking, except for the necessary,

“Close the door,” or, “What time do you have to be there?”

He was authoritarian, and it made me feel physically inflexible around him. Like a metal pole, stiffened by nervous tension. And I sat beside him in the car like I was made of something very rigid.

“This is my daughter,” he said to his boss, “she's just registered at university, going to study, maybe even be a doctor or a lawyer.” I was irritated, knowing that I had registered for Library Science. His boss smiled and said that was wonderful. And my father beamed. And I was embarrassed because his face beamed so much when he said it, it just made me feel shy, like something that shouldn't have meant so much, meant everything in the world



to him. But I didn't feel like he was proud of me even. It felt weirdly like he was proud of himself. That somehow what I was doing validated him in ways he had craved validation. And I was just his instrument, another thing, like his suitcase full of books that belonged to him, that fed him in some way.

He was shuffling some papers now, standing over his open briefcase, and he pulled out a few books and put it down on the bed.

"Your mother said you don't want to come with for supper."

"No," I said, I mumbled it very quietly and very nervously, "no I have work to finish."

"It can wait. You at home whole day every day, but when you must go one place then you have something to do. Do it the next day."

"I can't, I have my first assignment to finish."

"Don't *twice-fy* when I speak. If I tell you something, then that's it *finish and klaar*. I don't want to hear anything else." His voice was very stern and very threatening.

"I don't want to go with. Why must I be forced to do something if I don't want to do it? It doesn't make sense."

"I'm the father. I tell you what you must do. You don't tell me."

"I'm 21 years old and I don't want to go with on a family outing. I can do what I want to."

His voice rose instantaneously, like loud thunder it began to boom like lightning striking.

“Then you pack your bags and you go live somewhere else. You think I care about your age. That’s western philosophy. We don’t think like that. I’m the father here, until the day they put me under the ground, I’m in charge here,” and he stomped his foot to the floor, as if that was the exact place they would have to put him, “whether you 40 or 50, you do what I say. I’m in charge here.”

I bit my tongue. Swallowed all my feelings, and turned to leave the room. When I was out I mumbled half audibly under my breath, in a very irritated and sarcastic tone, “I don’t. want to. go.”

Then all of hell erupted.

“What did you say?” and I heard his footsteps, his shoes, loud and thunderous come storming like an army coming toward me, *doof, doof, doof*.

He was angry, and loud, and wild. He came out his room, after me. I turned around and saw his dark face turned quite red. I got scared, and I started to cry as I saw him rushing at me. He grabbed my arm and he dragged me back into his room. I was screaming crying at this point and pulling my body in the opposite direction away from him. I was nervous and off balance. He was twisting my limb, hurting me.

“Leave me alone, I don’t want to go,” I said, stubborn as ever. He pulled me into his room, flung me like a sack of potatoes onto the bed. My face hit the mattress and from the side of my eye I saw the books he had left there, beside his open briefcase. I could read the spine of them, it was Keats, Collected Poems, and William Blake. All the books from my list that I had asked my mother, to ask him, to buy for my studies.

And I felt his hand strike me on my shoulder, and then again on my back, and he was hitting me, not exceptionally hard, not hard at all. They were gentle slaps. But it was definite hitting. I covered my face so that he didn't get me on the cheek. I was crying, a little audibly, but also softly. It was not tears because of physical pain, but more tears because of how I was being forced to submit, and from the humiliation. And the tears ran while he slapped me soft but wild, and he was screaming over me, "You don't tell me what you want to do."

It lasted a few moments, and then he stopped and I was crouched into a semi-ball. I was still using my hands to protect my head, still scared, and anxious. Tense. Mostly I felt very alone and every bit of me wanted to leave 20 Jane Avenue, Rylands, pack my things and just get out of there, just like my mother always said she would do when she fought with him. But just like her, I but had nowhere to go, and no money to take me.

"Take your books," he said. "This is the books he wanted, and he shoved them in my direction, nearer my head. "I've got a good mind not to pay for your studies anymore." His keys jingled and he left. The front door slammed shut. His car pulled away from the driveway, I heard the engine. I was still lying half over his bed.

I worried that he wouldn't pay for my next semester. I had to be less wilful. I grabbed my books, held them near my chest. My mother must have given him the list, told him I needed it when they started talking again.

At the bottom of the pile, underneath the literature and poetry, was a cookbook he bought me. I looked at it and the cover read, "Cooking with love." And there was a picture of a table with an array of food on it, and little red hearts all over the picture.

My mother was in the kitchen wiping off the metal breadbin, shining it up with a cloth. Her hands were moving very fast.

“He’s got no right to lift his hands to me,” I said.

She rubbed up the breadbin even faster.

“I told you to listen. You don’t know that man like I know him. When he gets the devil in him he loses all control. I’ve got no power to stop him. He’ll kill us both if he wants to.”

“But I don’t want to go,” I said.

“Sometimes a person must compromise to keep the peace. We don’t just do what we want.”

I wiped the tears from my face. I clutched my books and looked down at them.

“What did he give you? Your books?” she said. I flipped through my books as I spoke to her. Her face was serious.

“Yes, and this too,” I said, and I held up the cookbook with hearts on it to show her. She wiped the bin even faster.

“What does that say?” She stretched her head out to read the title, “Cooking with love,” she read out loud. “My word, doesn’t ever give me anything.” And I looked back down to my book but I could feel her staring at me, boring a hole into the top of my head as I read the recipes. When I looked up, my mother diverted her eyes from me like a bullet just missing my glance. She looked back toward the breadbin, and she kept wiping it up in a quiet earnestness.

“I also cook,” she said. “And Amara also cooks. She makes much better food than you. I can’t eat that bland curry you make.”

As she wiped, she mumbled under her breath, “obsessed with his daughter. Crazy man.”

And I left the kitchen, and she was still wiping the breadbin very hard, and if it wasn't made of metal, I think she might have broken it right in two.

## Chapter 11

### David Copperfield

On Friday afternoons I liked to walk to the library in Rylands. I did it even though my father didn't like me walking around in the area alone, just like he didn't like me taking taxis alone unless it was the busy work time when everyone else took one too, otherwise it was too dangerous, he said. It was as close as I got to rebelling and doing my own thing.

I'd take out books on art. My favourite thing was reading about Van Gogh and Gauguin and all the Impressionists of the late 1800's to early 1900's in Europe. I became just a little obsessed with it, and fell head over heels in love with dead artists. Vincent van Gogh, who lived at the Yellow House in Arles and cut off his ear and handed it to a prostitute at some bar. Amedeo Modigliani and his alcohol induced black-outs. It was all fucking crazy, self destructive insane, beautiful, shit. It enthralled me. It tasted like home.

There was a part of me that thought maybe I liked it just because I knew my father hated me to be influenced by Western culture. The way he lay down the law and tried to tell me what I had to believe, it made me want to like things he didn't approve of. I was like that, rebellious but just inside my head. If he forbade me an idea, I would embrace it.

But there was something more than that about these artists and writers, something that gave my world meaning. They suffered. And I suffered. We were fellow sufferers. They made art. And I made art. Or at least I wanted to. They were my kindred spirits. There was beauty in their chaos and I loved how pain could be made into art, how it could be beautiful. I couldn't inhale it fast enough. And I thought maybe, maybe, in some bizarre way, even someone like me, I could make sense in this world. Maybe it wasn't all mountain bikes and Colgate smiles along Sea Point promenade. Maybe there was a place for people like me too.

And who was I? I felt like I was the girl who never got the happy ever after. I craved love. Here was I, not knowing anything about it, never having had a proper relationship, but feeling so sure that I couldn't breathe unless I tasted what being loved felt like. And I hadn't been breathing up until now had I? I'd been underwater my whole damn life and I hadn't taken a single breath of fresh air to fill my lungs. I was afraid that not having love was like not having air, it was going to kill me slowly, slowly, slowly, but everyday a little more. And if not having it didn't kill me, then I would go insane from the pain, from the absence of it.

I was bitter. I was angry. I was hurt. I blamed my mother. I had pent up rage directed at my father. Rage at him for raising his hands to me even though he hadn't hit me to hurt me physically. He wanted me to be under his control. Wasn't that hurting someone too?

The good between my mother and him didn't last long. He stopped coming home straight from work again. And my mother started picking on him when he came in late. There were

dirty looks, there was spitting behind his back, making barely audible comments but also just loud enough to be within his earshot.

She mentioned to Amara and I that he got new clothes. She began to snoop, went through his cupboard when he wasn't there. She gossiped with Aunty Hasiena, and with Aunty Fawzi. She asked Aunty Sadia if she'd heard anything.

My parents fought again. It was another big blowout. The kind of fight where glasses and plates were thrown, and there was more screaming. For me there was more hiding in the bathroom. Then after the fight, more deathly silence. There was more anxiety and more avoiding.

Life was a tiptoe balancing circus act. We were the trapeze artists and we were the clowns. I saw the women in the house, gripping with our toes to a tightly pulled acrobatic piece of high wire. You do it enough times it becomes second nature.

The fights opened up the door very wide for my father. It was his free pass to come and go without explanations. As a married man, that was how he unchained himself.

The place was so small you couldn't cry in peace. I cried in the bath or under the bed sheets before I fell asleep at night. Not enough privacy to be sad.

Amara hid by getting out of the house. She visited friends, cousins, socialized. She always seemed happy no matter what was happening in the family. Some people are like that. You don't know what they're going through unless they tell you.



I was different. I hid by becoming withdrawn. I avoided them, in a small place that meant I became a recluse in my bedroom. My room was my cave, with Amara out mostly. If cousins or aunts came to visit I'd pretend to be asleep and wait for them to leave before I popped my head out from under my blankets. It didn't matter what time of day or night it was, I was either sleeping or washing my hair. I came out when I was hungry. I'd wait for everyone to be in their room or to leave the house, go out, and only then I'd creep into the kitchen to stare into the fridge looking for something to eat, leftovers. If there was nothing, I'd dig into my mother's snack cupboard, take her hoard of cashew nuts or eat up the big packets of Simba chips she bought. My mother said I was a cockroach, because I only emerged when people left and ate everything in sight. I tried to be unnoticed, to take up as little space as possible, if I had a superpower that was it. As a human being, I had learned to erase myself from concrete reality, I'd taught myself to disappear. I was better at it than David Copperfield.

Tonight, my father was out and my mother was in our room watching TV with Amara and myself.

We were watching re-runs of *The Love Boat* on SABC 2. This was our thing. We loved watching re-runs of old TV shows late at night, while chewing cashew nuts from my mother's luxuries packet. And my mother had her cigarettes too.

We were watching a version dubbed into Afrikaans, joking at how the lips of the actors in those old dubbed movies, didn't move to the sound of the audio.

“Look how stupid this is,” my mother said, “these peoples’ lips are moving like a karate movie. This film is so phony hey. Look how these men and women are chasing after each other. Foolish.”

I loved these love programs. My mother always scoffed at them.

“Isn’t there something else on? I don’t want to watch this love nonsense,” she said.

“I’m watching it,” I said.

At 21, I had never even been kissed. So I didn’t know about love. I relied on movies and books and TV to learn everything I needed to know about what I would have to do when my time for love came. So far the furthest I got was that I had had crushes on boys back in high school and even in primary school. I was the kind of nerd, for whom just seeing the boy I liked from across the school quad for three seconds, made me my heart do gymnastics and gave me a buzz, like I imagined being drunk would feel. I’d get twinkles in my tummy and my knees felt shaky. I just felt light all over, like I was a gas cool drink, a Fanta orange, filled with fizzing bubbles.

I think these random bursts of sunshine bubbles were the closest feeling I’d ever had to feeling happy. I imagined that was what happiness must feel like. And I thought therefore, that happiness and love must go together.

“This is a bunch of crap,” my mother said, talking directly to the TV. If you can find a man who doesn’t hit you and he’s not too lazy to work, and he doesn’t run around after any old woman, then you’re bladdy lucky. These people run after love like it makes everything better. It doesn’t. Don’t worship love my child,” she said, “It’ll mess up your life.”

“But doesn’t love feel nice?” I asked her. And I understand that by saying something like this, I made myself look like an utter idiot in my mother’s eyes.

“Nice?” she said half incredulous, half mocking. “Not even sex is as nice as they make it out to be. Make a man the centre of your life, and I want to see where you end up.”

I looked over at Amara. She was laying on the bed on her stomach, feet up in the air, reading a Cosmopolitan magazine, or rather, looking at the fashion pictures. She didn’t say anything to disagree with my mother, she hadn’t been paying attention. But I don’t think she believed what my mother said any more than I wanted to.

Amara had told me once that she was in love. But she had so many different boyfriends I don’t think she ever stayed in love for too long. She was seeing someone else now. But she wasn’t telling my mother. I guessed that maybe she was keeping it a secret because he was someone my mother wouldn’t approve of. Or because he just wasn’t Sameer, and my mother still harboured a hope that he would come back.

I don’t think Sameer was coming back though. One morning recently, I saw when Amara getting dressed, she had a love bite on the side of her stomach. I asked her and she said it was a bruise where she hurt herself. “Don’t lie,” I said, but she just insisted. I knew she was lying, there were three in that area, and I could definitely tell they were love bites. I wasn’t that naïve.

“Sameer again?” I asked her. She told me that Sameer was long gone.

“He’s got another girlfriend,” she said. And he’s parents are you know, those old school staunch Indians, they don’t want him to marry a Malay girl.

“Do you still like him?” I asked her, and she said that she didn’t want to end up like our mommy.

Maybe she could marry him, but the relationship with her new family would never be easy. She'd just be an outsider in a world that didn't want her. And she didn't want to live like that. Spend her whole life like mummy, always fighting, holding onto things by your fingernails, gripping, because you were made to feel that you didn't have a right to have it, that it wasn't for you to have, because you weren't good enough.

Even though we weren't especially close, I never told on her. I wouldn't tell my mother about her secrets or her love bites. There was a trust there. Besides, I didn't want extra drama at home.

I looked over at her and I could see she was engrossed in her fashion pictures.

"Amara, mummy says she hates love." I said it half like a question, half like a statement.

"I like boys and I love getting attention," she smiled, and crossed and uncrossed her feet as she said it, let out a little giggle.

It was true, she did love being the centre of attention and I used to think she was just organically popular because she was born that way. But after high school, when I was older and I noticed more intricate things about her character, I saw that when I was at places with her, she flirted a lot. She was over friendly sometimes and laughed too loud, stroking someone's ego to make them think she liked them, just to get noticed.

I came to realise that boys asked her for her number because she wanted them to, because she led them on in subtle yet noticeable ways. Her popularity was never just a natural response to her existence as a human being. It happened because she knew what she wanted and she made it happen.

And I saw that half the time she wasn't even interested in the boy she was flirting with, and she didn't even want to date him. She just wanted him to ask her for her number. So then she'd get to say he liked her. And she'd laugh and giggle as she told my mother about some or other guy who asked if he can phone her. I came to think that she was the kind of girl who needed to be noticed. It was necessary for her happiness. But I realised that it wasn't really because she was so pretty, but because *she believed she was*. And that made her confident, just like I wasn't really less beautiful than her. But *I believed that I was*. And that made me shy. It was what we believed about who we were, that was the thing that made all the difference.

I didn't know anymore if this family had made me into an introvert or if I was born that way. But I was repressed, embarrassed to admit I wanted to be liked, embarrassed to admit that I even had feelings that could be hurt, or that I yearned for positive attention and affection. And so I pretended I didn't care about being alone, when the truth was, I was dying of loneliness.

"It's ok for you," my mother said looking over at her, chewing her nuts, "you're a young person. You must still get married and have babies. A person must do that. You must get married, or what will become of you. You must make a life for yourself. But just don't be forward that's all, men don't like forward women. They get scared of them. You get those women who jump on the men, sex maniacs. *Sies*."

"You must have liked love at some time," Amara said, "if you got married and had babies."

"No, that I did because I had no place to live.

My father didn't look after me like Rania's father looks after her. No matter what, he puts food on the table and he puts a roof over her head and then he still pays fees for studying. I had to work from the time I was fourteen, had to help with money. And then I still got a *pakslae* every weekend for going out. That time we used to go to house parties. But it was smart parties, not like the discos of today's time where you just get *skollies*. There were no *skollies* back then in District 6. Even the boys that stood around the shops were gentlemen."

"That was when you married Muneer. But why did you marry my father?" I said. It was something I didn't understand from the way she and my father engaged with each other, and I always felt a need to make sense of it. I wanted to know what brought them together.

My mother lit a cigarette. "That time I was a woman with a child. One pay cheque alone isn't enough to survive on. Your father, you asking me about now, why do you want to know? Do you know how he chased after me? I can tell you things. I was still beautiful then, and thin, even after I had Amara. I didn't lose my figure."

"He chased you?"

"He was foolish. He chased me yes. Your father used to irritate me the way he kept *dik*. I thought I will never be interested in an Indian man like him, but he was so nice to Amara, so I got used to him. And then I thought we could make a stable life."

"So he chased you and he got you?"

"That was long ago. It was a different situation. But you must never chase anyone. The more you ignore them the more they want you."

Amara agreed.

“You must know how to handle them. You hook them by showing interest, and then you cut them off cold. And then they come running after you, you have to do it right. You must never let a man know you want him. Or you’ll end up like you, an old maid,” she said, and laughed at me.

“You don’t manage people,” I said. “You just be honest about how you feel and try to be kind and respect each other.”

“Oh Rania,” Amara said, “Grow up.”

“This man laying there in his room now, used to follow me around like a lost dog. I used to go in to buy cigarettes at his father’s shop and then he’d give it to me for free and one day he followed me home just to see where I lived. Until finally one day he asked me to go to the bioscope. I didn’t want him even then. But he didn’t give up, he tried so hard. And look how he goes on with me now.”

She smoked her cigarette and thought back some more.

“And back then do you know how jealous he was of me! You know that old mirror we used to have it in our room even when you children were young, that mirror from back in the days of District 6. You know the one with the long crack in it on top, that’s in the Wendy house now?”

Amara said, “That mirror is so old, it’s vintage.”

“We’ve had it for years. Do you know how it broke? If furniture could talk,” she said, and she told us the story of how it happened.

According to her story, my father served her in his father’s shop when she came in to buy cigarettes. He’d drive past her house at random times to spy on her. She said she would be

sitting outside on the *stoep* on a Saturday afternoon, and she'd see his car slowly cruising by just to get her attention. It was a *Valiant*. And then on Saturday night, she'd open the curtains from time to time and see his car parked opposite her house, in the dark lit street. That time Amara's father was "out of the picture" and she and Amara were living with her mother, my other granny, who was then divorced from my grandfather. My granny had a rule about sleeping early so all the lights in the house were always switched off by 8pm sharp, and so my mother kept a candle in a glass jar, lit it with Lion matches and she'd look out the window every fifteen minutes or so, hold the candle up to see if his car was still there. He did that for weeks before he got up the nerve to come knock on the door and ask her out. And then she said they talked, and he took her and Amara out.

"He was nice," she said, and that was important. He spoilt me and Amara, bought us chocolates and slides for Amara's hair." She puffed out smoke from her cigarette. "He was like a different person then, not like he is now."

"I can't believe that the two of you were like that," I said.

"Do you know how over Amara he was?" she beamed when she said it. I rarely saw her beam. I knew they must have dated, romanced, but it was just unbelievable in the climate of our life, to imagine them in that way.

She said they used to take drives out toward Town, in the city centre and they used to like to stop at the Parade. "One day," she said, "it was a hot Cape Town summer day, the sky was bright blue and clear like glass." And I knew what she meant, Cape Town had days like that, where the warm South African sun glowed its sunlight down on the hot African soil, the earth sun-baked and glistening. On such days the air was warm and soft on your skin and if you looked up you saw Table Mountain clear in the distance. It seemed to divide



the sky into two distinct quarters. From the city the mountain looked like a flat table. From the Cape Flats, the mountain had the shape of a man lying down with his feet outstretched, like someone resting. I knew what she meant about the summer days being perfect for young lovers.

“Back then,” my mother said, “the parade was still dotted with all those little outdoor stalls. They used to sell all kinds of things, and food. We used to stop there for ice cream and chips and he’d buy sweets for Amara. I vaguely remembered the parade like that. It had changed so much over the years. In the past there were rows of flower sellers there, selling fresh picked proteas and bunches of roses and sweet smelling carnations.

“It was busy there then,” she said, “never quiet.”

Your father used to park there, between all the cars, like a drive in almost, everyone parked in the middle of the Parade. It looked like a postcard, and there was that statue right in the centre of the square. We sometimes sat on the statue, on the step leading up to it, around our feet, and ate fish and chips with the pigeons all around us.

“Whose statue was that?” she said trying to recall, “Edward VII or someone.” We’d eat right there sometimes, with the car doors open to let the fresh summer breeze pass through. Sometimes we went to the Gardens to eat on the grass. Then he and Amara would run around chasing squirrels, *nogal*, of all things. And he bought her those plastic dolls with the bright bathers that looked like Barbie’s. He used to be nice.”

“You were telling us about the mirror. How did the mirror break?” Amara said.

“Another man came to talk to me, and he went berserk. He got so jealous, he *somma* threw his car keys at me. I said it’s not my fault, I don’t invite men to smile at me, the man came to talk. I mean, I told the man I’m not interested, and he’s standing and talking, what

must I then do, hit the man away? We got into a big argument. He said it's because I encourage the men. That was never true. I was never the type to encourage men. I never had to. He got so angry that day. He took the stuff that I loved the most, my pink brush I remember, he threw it hard against that mirror. It cracked, just like that, seven years bad luck. That's how jealous he was."

"He's not a jealous person now," I said.

"I never give him reason to be. After he broke that mirror do you know what he did? He took a scissor, and cut up my favourite jeans. My nice tight denim jeans, the one I used to love to wear with my high heels. Broke my shoes too, cut the stiletto heels off all of it, just because a man I don't even know stopped to talk to me. *Sjoe* that man was very jealous of me back then."

As my mother described my father's intense, passionate, controlling ways, I got the distinct feeling that she revelled in it. As cruel as he was to break her stuff, she had loved it. It excited her, and made her feel special.

But I think too, that there was another part of her that suffered because of it. His obsession with control which I felt now myself, it hurt her in ways that she couldn't bandage. I think she loved it until the hurt of it outweighed how special it felt at first.

"I can't wait to get married," Amara said.

"You must marry a nice boy, someone who can look after you. Don't make the same mistakes I made."

"I'm just going to focus on my studies," I said. "I want to be able to take care of myself one day. Then no one can ever tell me what to do."

I wanted to say, “I want to get married to a nice boy too.” But I couldn’t, not if one of her nicknames for me was old maid. It was too embarrassing.

“Amara doesn’t need to study,” my mother said, smoking, “she can have any man she wants. Just make sure, whoever you choose.”

Amara laughed like she enjoyed the sound of that. That she could pick and choose, have anything she wanted.

“Wait, let me go sleep before that man comes,” my mother said. “I don’t want to bump into him in the passage.” And she got up, grabbed her bag with sweets and cashew nuts, her cigarettes. With her arms full, she left. I heard her footsteps outside our room, her high heels on the cold tiles in the lounge, trying to avoid my father.

She was back in the Wendy house again. She made her bed on the couch between the old broken fax machine my father had from that time he tried to start his own business, and all my father’s spare tools, like drills and a mitre, and other DIY gadgets he liked. It was a crowded space. A space where we stored all the stuff that had to be thrown away that we were too lazy to clean out. The couch was small, and she’d take the pillows from her room and get a warm blanket from the spare bedding she kept in a cupboard. She’d lay it flat on the couch, and then she’d sleep on that like it was a mattress. So that she didn’t slip into the grooves of the couch where the one sitting spot ended and a new one began.

I was in the kitchen getting a glass of water, the Wendy house was just across from the kitchen door in the small yard. I heard her turning in, making her bed amongst all the things we wanted to throw out. The things we didn’t have space for.

And I thought about how superstitious she was and I thought, “Why did she keep that broken mirror?” Didn’t she see it had given us more than 7 seven years of bad luck, more

than our fair share of misfortune? But maybe she liked it, because it reminded her that my father had once been very jealous, that once he had wanted her to belong only to him. And that he would go unbearably mad if she did not.

And as I went back to bed and fell asleep I heard my father come in and go to his room. And turn in. And I felt sorry for her and I wondered if she slept comfortably enough. And the next morning my father was gone early and Amara was putting rollers in her hair for a big date and I asked my mother how she slept. She said, "I make that couch so comfy. *Lekker*. I sleep like a dream, my own space, in peace."

## Chapter 12

### Chainsmoking

There were rumours about my father again. People gossiped and it got back to us. We didn't know what to make of what we heard, but it changed the taste of our oxygen. There was a prickly sensation of not knowing the real facts. Our life at 20 Jane Avenue Rylands was not perfect. But it was our life. It had the familiarity of a comfortable old chair with tattered upholstery. We didn't want to lose it, even the parts we complained about.

This time it was Mr Allie, the shopkeeper, who told my mother when she went in to buy a half a loaf of white bread and a packet of Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes, that my father had been seen at the Dirty Dozen's house. Apparently he was "fixing things."

*"Fixing things?"* she said utterly perplexed, when she told me about it, "Now he's a handyman."

Mr Allie said that he was doing odd jobs for them, installing a new latch, mending a cabinet. The Dirty Dozen's told him themselves, when one of them came into his shop to buy something.

“Now what would he want to do that for, he doesn’t lift a finger at home and those people are dirt poor they haven’t got money to pay him,” my mother said. “I’ve asked him 100 times to fix the leak in the toilet he’s too lazy to do it.”

It was another mystery, another reason for my mother to distrust my father. None of us said it, but we all knew, the women at the Dirty Dozen’s house were said to work as inexpensive prostitutes on the *Vlei*. Aunty Sadia had two sons who were drug addicts, and they said that some of their friends went to them sometimes for good rates. The rumours of prostitution would explain where all the little children always running around at that house came from, if the Dirty Dozens were all related and they were in fact not inbreeding.

“And how does he even know them well enough to go over there, unless he’s been talking to them,” my mother said. That made her angry, “embarrassed,” in her own words.

“You can be poor but you don’t have to be dirty,” my mother said. They were dirty. But the women still dressed in sexy outfits, wore short stretchy skirts with long red nails with red lips and sometimes white high heel sandals. It was convenient to condemn the Dirty Dozen’s. When Mariam Mia went missing they were the first suspects. Did my father forget about that? They might be dangerous criminals. All in all, I thought the Dirty Dozen’s looked like people who were overwhelmed by the task of survival. They were making do with conditions that were less than what they deserved as human beings. And they had offended a community who had unspoken rules, that people who were members of that community were expected to comply with. The Dirty Dozen’s fell short of these rules by living according to a standard that was considered too low for respectability. Our community judged them, without knowing who they were, and we labelled them, like a tin

of canned beans or a jar of *atchar*. It was as easy as it was unfair. We just put them in a box clearly marked, “Disgrace,” and, “Do Not Touch.”

My father didn’t. On some level he had reached out to them, allowed himself to be seen amongst them. Could it be theology? Maybe he was over their preaching to them, making *dawah*, trying to instil godliness and salvation. But people wouldn’t jump at that explanation. They jumped at the worst possibility.

The idea that my father had any association with them horrified my mother. And Amara. And me. “What would people think about us?” Because the ugly truth is, we thought we were better than them.

It was downright scandalous.

“What can he be thinking, even if he is just helping them, he must be mad in his head to go there,” my mother said, fuming. “Is that his type now? To stoop so low and put me so in the eyes.”

“*Smyt hom neer*,” Aunty Hasiena said, “that’s just taking it too far.”

I got the brunt of it again, me, not Amara of course.

“That father of yours is a good for nothing. I will be better off without him,” she said, “I can’t anymore. I ‘m going to phone the *imam*, I want a *fasag*.”

I’d heard her say it a million times before.

“I must put up with all his shit just for that little peanuts paycheque that he brings home. *Hy’s mos ‘n ou*. What a cheek. Going from one ugly slut to the next and I must get my name dragged through the garbage can because of him.”

She stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray on the table beside her. She was half talking to herself and half talking to me.

I watched her go into what was now his bedroom and start unpacking his clothes. She had snooped before, new clothes was a telltale sign that he was visiting someone. But this was different. She was pulling his clothes off the hangers and throwing them onto a heap on the floor and on the bed. She was in frenzied, emptying out his cupboard. She opened his drawers and started throwing out his socks and his underwear. And she found a box and her heart crashed so loud I could feel it, "What's this?" she said, pulling the box out from under his socks.

"Is this condoms, *daai vuil vark*." But it wasn't. It was just a box with Panado headache tablets in it, and she took that and she flung it out too, on top of the underwear pile on the floor.

She ripped all the bedding off his bed and rolled it up into a big black garbage bag.

"Let his bed air," she said, leaving his bed bare. I stood in the doorway and said, "Must I wash it."

"No leave it. I'll have to burn that bedding if he's been with the Dirty Dozens, disinfectant won't help. This man will give us all a disease. *Sies*."

She smoked frantically, back to back. And I watched her exhale hard, smoke from her cigarettes billowed around her face till I could barely see her beautiful sharp features anymore, her high cheek bones, her deep set sad eyes, she was as invisible that moment as a woman could be.

She walked through the haze of smoke and emerged on the other side, looked at me and said, "and make your hair right. You look terrible."



## Chapter 13

### Potatoes can't fix this

I was sitting by the lounge window drinking tea on Saturday afternoon. It was after 2pm and I was still in my pyjamas. I rarely got dressed, it seemed pointless if I wasn't going anywhere and no one was coming to see me. I meandered through days and weeks like this. I had just had a bath. Hot baths with my favourite music playing in the background on the little radio and cd player I took into the bathroom with me, were my indulgence. I put the radio on the toilet seat, across from the bath, so it wouldn't fall into my tub and electrocute me. But after my bath, I simply got right back into my pyjamas.

I felt lonely, very lonely. Like maybe I was the only one of my species on the planet. I was so disconnected from any other human being. I was merely existing in the absent spaces between the throbs of life.

I was staring out at our little garden, and the park across from where we lived. I remembered how when I was very young, I used to climb those very same trees with my cousins, trying to reach the top of the branches as far as we could. We'd sit on the grass, our legs crossed, our laps filled with bunches of loquats, or stolen from the neighbours' trees or plucked from our own. We'd eat handfuls, with a 1,5 litre bottle of Coke that we'd

pass around between us, pour it into the only cup we had, a plastic yellow cup that we bought at the seven eleven on the corner nearby. We'd dream. About who we were going to marry when we grew up, and what we wanted to be. We imagined happy lives.

Normally on a Saturday there would be a group of children playing cricket or soccer in the park. Their playful screams trailed soft echoes through my afternoon silence. I could always hear them as I sat indoors alone. I heard their laughter drifting up into the blue sky to kiss the clouds, voices playing childhood games, a dog barking somewhere, metering out into the distance.

Today the street was near empty. Since Mariam Mia went missing, people kept their little ones indoor a lot more. There were stray cats around, wandering into the park, watching the birds stealthily, sleeping under cars. Neighbours blinds were drawn closed, like they were not home or they were taking an afternoon nap. It was a little bit like a ghost town.

I felt empty. I longed for someone to have a real conversation with. Someone who wanted to hear about my art, my painting and my writing, and how I loved to bath and listen to old music by Chet Baker, and Earth Wind and Fire, and the Doors. Someone I could speak to of my dreams of Paris, my love of Modigliani, someone who wanted to share pizza with me and who wanted to hear how I climbed trees when I was a little kid, how I bought Surf Joy suckers and Double O' cool-drink at Mr Allie's shop.

This wasn't the dream I'd dreamt when I was a little girl. This wasn't how I'd pictured it. It was supposed to unfold so that every bad thing that had ever happened to me was redeemed. It was supposed to unfold so that everything was so good, that it made all the bad worth it. I wasn't supposed to grow up and feel like a loser.

I was aching and I couldn't articulate it. It was this house I thought, I would never be *seen* in this house. This house is eating me alive. It is devouring me, chewing my flesh and crunching my bones like an old car being thrown into the junkyard. I felt like there was nothing beautiful to live for. I felt ugly. I felt I was old and had missed my life by being too slow to bloom, too slow for everything others had already experienced. I felt the clock was ticking and I had missed *it*, whatever *it* is. I felt it was too late for me. And I was only 21.

I sipped my tea. The sky outside was bright blue, a summer Cape Town sky. A car drove by and it had loud music on, a welcome intrusion to the quiet. The people in the car had happy faces. The car revved loud as it went by. I could almost hear their faint chatter and giggles in the air. After them an ice cream truck came by slowly. It was playing soft, slow, ice cream truck music. It parked opposite, near the park and a few kids came out to make a queue. Up the road, the local school was having a fete all afternoon and all night. From Mr Allie's shop you could see the Big Wheel, and there was other fairground stuff too. Maybe that was where everyone was today? There were candy floss stalls, spinning cups, sugar coated candy dummies on sale. I didn't want to go alone. You needed a boy who likes you to take you to something like that, so that you could have fun. Nothing was ever as good, if you were doing it alone.

It was like happiness was spinning around me in slow motion, it was all happening outside of my world and I was only here to observe. Not to participate. Tears came quietly, gently down my cheeks and I wiped them away fast, embarrassed. Scared that someone might come home might catch me looking sad. If they did, I would lie and pretend I was ok. I had no bravery in me. No strength to speak my truth. That kind of bravery comes from

feeling loved. Maybe I was loved. Technically, I was. But I had never felt that I was. I had never in my life on this earth, had that privilege.

I was staring out the window, lamenting, when something strange happened. Sitting by the window, I saw someone come to our gate and look around to see if there was anyone there. The person unhitched the gate's latch and came up the driveway. I could see his face clearly because the space was small. It was one of the Dirty Dozen's. I didn't recognize all of their faces, but all of them looked equally untidy and unwashed and dishevelled, in a way that made them stand out quite obviously. His face I knew, he was the one who tried to sell me spices that time when I randomly passed by him in the park. When he neared the door I lost sight of him, because of the angle of the window. My heart tightened up, like an unopened bottle of gas cool drink that had been shaken, ready to pop. What was he doing here? I heard a knock on the door and I moved back in my chair, inching away from the sound. I was not going to answer for one of the Dirty Dozens. We had no business with them. Was this because of my father that they were now so bold to come to our front door? I was angry, like my mother would be. I held my breath. Afraid he might be here to do mischief. I waited for him to leave. A few minutes later I saw his head pop up in the driveway again, on his way back out. He didn't close the gate. Left it open, and disappeared into the park. I watched him walk across it, away down the cement path.

I kept watching a few minutes. I waited. Then I opened the front door to go close the gate. But on the step at my feet, I saw something. He had left something there. I stooped to pick it up. It was a book. I opened it. I read my name, *Rania Ahmed*, written in my handwriting. It was *my* book! My sketch pad that I had lost that day in the park! Of course.

That was the day he tried to sell me the spices. I must have dropped it near the swings and he must have picked it up.

I flipped through it. All my drawings were still there, my still life, my self-portraits. And as I flipped more, I found new drawings, drawings that weren't mine, sketches of the park, of the Dirty Dozen's house. A portrait sketch of me! They were very good, very artistic. At the bottom of each of them was signed, Sanjay Patel.

I closed the book in a hurry. He was an artist! I threw it back to the ground, wiped my hands off on my clothes like they were dirty. I didn't want this. Who gave him permission to draw a portrait of me? How did he even remember my face? He must have drawn it from the self-portraits I had in my sketch book, did his own artistic interpretation. Why? What did he have a crush on me? What if they did abduct that girl and I was next on their list? I walked out to the bin, and I threw the sketchbook, with all his gorgeous drawings, in the dirt bin. "Where it belongs," I thought, as I closed the lid of our garbage can. I hoped that he wouldn't dare to come back.

If he picked up my book and he knew it was mine, he had no right to draw in it. Did one of the Dirty Dozen's think that he could be my friend? How embarrassing, I thought. Wasn't I enough of a social leper already? My mother and Amara would have a field day with this. I would never live it down. I knew immediately I would never tell anyone.

So I went to my room, just to kill time with my books. I started a new sketchbook with new drawings. I was drawing, when Aunty Hasiena's car pulled up. I knew my mother was with her. They'd been to the shops. With my father gone, she was carting my mother up and down to do errands.

Yes, since she'd found out about the Dirty Dozen's and burned his sheets, my father was gone.

This time, my mother had thrown all my father's things in a pile, and incinerated it. He went mad when he got home. I was angry at her for provoking him.

"You started it," I said, "you got right in his face and taunted him."

"Now what must I do, just keep my mouth, I've been quiet all the years my tongue is lame already from being quiet. I don't want to be quiet anymore. I want to hear the sound of my voice."

"You made trouble," I said, my limbs shaking. "Now we must all be nervous and scared all the time again. I hated to feel unsure. If she was quiet and didn't argue back at least there was peace.

"I'm glad I told him. I'm glad I told him I want a *fasag* and I'm glad I said I phoned the Sheikh." And that was what she had said. She told my father that she phoned the Sheikh, but she was lying. She never phoned him at all.

"I'm just going to tell him that so he can get nervous," she said to me and Amara. And then she began an elaborate lie with my father telling him every night what the Sheikh said today about his behaviour and her rights, and that he advised her that she should leave my father unless he took steps to better his ways.

She told us to corroborate her story, in case he asked questions, we were told to confirm that the Sheikh was counselling her on my father's bad character, and that the only reason she was still there was to try to give her children a stable home.

It didn't go exactly the way she planned. She wanted my father to submit to her, but he packed his bag the night before, and agreed to time apart. The next day, he came with a

*bakkie* he borrowed from someone, to collect his bed from the bedroom. He had never left before. This time, he responded to her reverse psychology with double reverse psychology and her plan backfired. He said that he was going to stay at his mother's for a few weeks until she was a little bit calm.

He left the Friday evening, and my mother was in our room watching TV, smoking frantically and talking about how much she hates him and how she was sure he would come back because he was nothing without her, and he would realise that soon enough.

That was how it happened, and I heard them talking about these events now as they came in at the front door. They went into the kitchen, and as they did I heard my father's name being thrown around, as always. My mother was saying that the stress was killing her. She called out to me, and I showed my face at the kitchen door.

"Did your father phone?" she asked me. "No," I said, "the phone didn't ring."

"If it rings you answer it, in case it's him. Because I know you, you ignore the phone ringing, ignore the doorbell when people ring it, you make like you don't see or hear anything around you."

She wasn't wrong. I didn't answer the phone because I knew it was never for me. And I didn't answer the doorbell because the visitors were never for me and I was not a secretary for Amara's boys or for anyone else.

"Help me with this," my mother said, "seeing as you are here." She was making her special concoction, the one she learned from her mother who learned it from her mother, and she learned it from her mother before her. It was supposed to be a cure for nervous conditions, something which had run in their family for many generations. "Here," she said,

“fry the potatoes.” She handed me round potato slices that she had just cut. That was the main ingredient for the remedy. Potatoes fried in cod liver oil.

I silently obeyed.

“You must tell Rania to speak to him,” Aunty Hasiena said as I fried the potatoes and she sat at the kitchen table. She opened the ceramic rooster head and put her hand in and pulled out a butter biscuit.

“He will listen to her,” she said chewing, “she’s *mos* his favourite. *Baie lief vir haar.*”

I never understood why they said that, when my father and I didn’t speak to each other, barely grunted *salaamalaykum* at each other when he walked into a room.

“That madman,” she said, “he’s like somebody that’s in love with his daughter. If he could marry her without committing a sin then he would do it.”

I stirred the potatoes. I’d heard her say so many crazy things and I wish I could say I ignored her, but every crazy thing she said infected me.

“Strange hey,” Aunty Hasiena said incredulous. “So impressed by his own daughter, it’s like he wants to keep her all to himself.”

“She can’t go anywhere or with anyone, he get’s jealous like he’s her husband.”

“Strange thing.”

“He’s a psycho,” she said. “*gepla met die maan.*”

“It’s done,” I said, taking the pan off the stove.

She was sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea with Aunty Hasiena.



“Here, wrap it up in this.” She handed me a strip of brown paper that she had cut off a roll, like the kind you use to cover school books. I put the oily fried potatoes on the brown paper and she pulled the strip of paper out of my hand.

“Can’t you do anything right. Haven’t you seen me do this before.”

And she took everything from me and started arranging the fried potatoes in a neat horizontal row, over each other. Then she recited a *dua* over it as she folded it closed. And after she recited holy words, she blew over the closed strip of paper with the potatoes inside it, three times.

And that was the trick. Holy potatoes.

“My mother used to do this she said, *Mamma* did this that time when she got the baby blues. After she had her seventh child and she was getting divorced. She was very nervy that time. Shame, she also struggled and had a hard life.”

“Oh that poor woman had it bad. We have it easy compared to her. We must say *alhamdulillah* instead of complaining. We have a roof over our head and all our children together. We grew up each at a different aunty’s house, because we couldn’t afford to live together in one house with our mother, there wasn’t money.”

“That was normal back then. When you so poor you give your children to aunts to raise because you haven’t got space to keep them. People couldn’t always afford. But then, they also used to have so many children back then. I can’t imagine myself with 7 or 8 children. No wonder our parents couldn’t cope.”

I was sitting across from the table watching my mother’s fingers, watching the way they moved with the brown paper. “Here come help me,” she said.

“Let me help you,” Aunty Siena said.

“No Siena you sit, drink, let her help me, she does little enough.”

My mother held the brown paper between her two hands at either end, keeping it together so that the potatoes didn't fall out. “Take this end,” she handed one side to me and she held the other.

“Wait, bring me a *doekie*,” and we put the brown paper strip back down on the kitchen table.

“You must actually lay down when you do it,” Aunty Siena said, “get *lekker* comfortable in the bed and put it on and then you must rest so that it can work through your head.”

I came back with a scarf and we began again.

“Wait,” Aunty Siena said, “You must do it right, let me go, get out of your way.” And she lifted her cup of tea to her chin and threw her head back slurping up the last few sips, making sure the cup was empty, and then she greeted and let herself out.

“I'll drop Amara later,” she said, “She's sitting by Nawaal,” My mother went to her makeshift bed at the back in the Wendy house and I followed her there. My father's room was empty but there was no bed, so she slept here. She made her bed on the couch and lay down.

“Come put this on for me,” she said.

“If Daddy's not here you can move the couch into your own bedroom now,” I said.  
Or why don't you sleep in the lounge.

“Not in the lounge no, that's too open. And in that man's room? *Sis*, what if he comes back tonight, let me rather stay here so long.”

I wanted to shake her and say, “Mummy. I don’t think he’s coming back tonight. And these are potatoes. Potatoes can’t fix this.”

But I just held the brown paper between the edges of my fingers on my two hands, trying to hold onto the brown paper without letting the potatoes fall out.

I dropped the scarf on the bed in front of her and she told me to fold the brown paper with the potatoes inside, over her head like an alic band.

“Then you tie that *doek* over it, like the *doek* that that woman Mareldia was wearing, remember.”

It was tricky getting it right. I held it all in place on her head while she took the scarf and wrapped it over the potatoes and brown paper and then told me to take it from her and tie it at the back, like a *miedourah*.

“Tie it tighter,” she said and I tugged at it till she said, “ouch, that’s too tight.” So I loosened it a bit, and she said, “so yes, that’s enough.”

She looked ridiculous. The potatoes under the scarf were thick and lumpy it looked like a helmet she was wearing. She lay down looking like she would never look if my father was there to see her, slid down her pillow with a cigarette and spoke calmly to herself.

“Everything will be better now. After a nice rest”, and then she brushed her free hand comfortingly over her forehead, soothing herself.

“Do you need anything,” I said.

She opened her eyes.

“Bring me some sugar water.”

I went back into the kitchen and from the cupboards grabbed a glass, ran the kitchen tap.

Cold water filled the glass and I filled it with sugar from a small bowl on the kitchen table.

I gave it to my mother to drink.

“This will calm my nerves.”

My mother looked frail. She was so thin. Like an insect.

“Do me a favour Rania, you are here, go next door and ask Aunty Sadia for some sleeping tablets. I need something to help me sleep. Ask for a few, she knows I’ll give her again next time.” I went next door in my pyjamas and I got them. Aunty Sadia didn’t question, she just gave me some of her sleeping tablets and said, “here, tell your mother I’ll come pop in by her later.”

In the backroom, I put the tablets and a glass of water on a little table beside her makeshift bed. I looked down and saw her bag, the one she carried with her on car drives with my father. The one filled with her comfort snacks: packets of pan peanuts, cashew nuts, and her favourite, glazed pineapples, that she dished out to me and Amara when we watched our reruns of old TV shows in our bedroom during her prolonged silent spells with my father, when he was the enemy.

She opened her eyes and asked me to pass on her cigarette from her handbag. I reached for it and handed it to her with a box of Lion matches. She lit her cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke just past my face. I coughed.

“Pass me the tablets,” she said. And I handed them to her with a glass of water. “Sit here by me a little,” she said, “you never sit by me. You so quiet. Never talk. You can read your books here by me. Then I’m also not so alone.”

I fetched *The Bell Jar*, by Sylvia Plath, and read silently, sitting on a stool beside her bed. I stayed like that a while, maybe half an hour.

I watched her as she quieted, I could see her grow still. Her head half laying half sitting up against a pillow against the back of the couch, her eyes deep and tired, like she was thinking in another world.

“You still here?” she whispered, “Amara not here?”

“I’m here,” I said softly, “Amara didn’t come back yet.”

“She’s also never here when you need her, that one. Does her own thing. Not like you.”

She seemed very calm.

“You’re my best child,” she said, “You do everything for me.”

I almost choked. I was sure Amara was the favourite. Ms Popularity. And I thought to myself silently, “Mummy, I know you love Amara more than me, and it’s ok.” But I didn’t say it. I reached over to feel her forehead. It was warm.

“He ran away,” she said as I stroked her cheek with my palm. Her eyes were still closed as she spoke. I wasn’t sure if she was dreaming or awake.

“Muneer? He died. Remember, he died when you were pregnant with Amara,” and I stroked her other cheek now, and then stroked her hand, which was outside of the blanket.

“He ran away from us. He didn’t want us.” Her voice was very soft, vulnerable. I didn’t know if she was delirious, or out of denial and being honest.

I sat a while longer, then left her like that, in a half dream state with an ashtray full of cigarette stubs and a scattering of sleeping pills next to a half empty glass of sugar water on her side table. I could tell she was scared because my father was gone. Maybe all she had to do was tell him she wanted him to stay. Tell him to be kind to her, and for her to be kind to

him. The answers all seemed simple, but it wasn't simple in a world of cowards where feelings made you bleed like knives and swords. She had her own methods, potatoes.

Later Aunty Hasiena came back to check on her, to talk about what next. I was in the kitchen making myself a sandwich, the door of the Wendy House was open, and I heard Aunty Hasiena say, "why don't you sleep in the girls room with them, if you haven't got money for a new bed. If your back is so sore from that couch, you can push their beds together and the three of you can sleep in one big bed."

And my mother said, "Shh don't talk so loud, I don't want them to hear I sleep uncomfortable." And she got up and closed the door, but they were all thin doors and I still heard her say, "Because I don't want to inconvenience them you know. I want my girls to have their own space. I'm already enough in their way."

That moment something inside me clicked. I looked at my mother the way I looked at my Van Gogh paintings and my poetry. I saw that she was a work of art. And the way I used my writing and paintings to escape my real world and to survive this life, it was my way of making un-pretty feelings feel beautiful. And my mother did it too. She escaped the pain of her real life, by painting over ugly memories, and making them into something more special.

She did it by making Amara her star girl. She did it by making Muneer her invincible hero. And that's why she had foretelling dreams, and broken mirrors, so she could take the hurt and make it bearable. And I saw that now. That my love-despising mother was her own escapist masterpiece. She was poetry. She herself, her actual life, it was a work of art.

And I wanted to go to her and say, “All the pain you go through, and you’re still here for us, keeping a family together and protecting us the best way you know how. Mummy, you are more beautiful than you even know you are. I’ve just been so wrapped up in my own hurt, that I never even saw yours.

## Chapter 14

### Truck Stops and Farm stall Bread

We spent many of those sticky hot lingering December days doing nothing together. My father was gone so Aunty Hasiena was around a lot to “help my mother through.” Potatoes on my mother’s head became a regular ritual. Whenever I wanted to make chips there were no potatoes because she’d used them all.

“You need to learn to drive,” Aunty Hasiena would tell her, “that husband of yours is terrible to hold you back so much, not wanting his wife and daughters to learn to drive. It’s not right. Look now, you’re lost without him. I’m not a learned person, but that’s not Islam, he keeps using Islam as an excuse to get his way. But it’s *him*. It’s just what he wants. He must open his mind *man*.”

And so it happened that Aunty Hasiena took my mother out on Sunday mornings to go for driving lessons near the empty soccer stadium, where we used to go for our school sports back in high school. I don’t know how well she fared because I didn’t go with them, but my mother came back in a good mood. She said as soon as she learned how, she would teach me and Amara.



There were some nice times back then, while my father was gone. There was a new lightness in the air that came with his absence. My mother was more free-spirited, even though she said she was worried about money. It was a lifting of sorts, a heaviness that left the rooms, a density that was washed out of the walls. We were just a bunch of girls and we even talked and laughed and made jokes.

She put so much effort into doing things for me she'd never done before. She was always asking me if I'd eaten something, if she had to make me something. And then she'd fry me eggs, the way I liked it, soft and runny in the middle, or she fried up some smoked fish, the ones Auntie Hasiena's husband, Uncle Shabier smoked himself, or she made me a sandwich. And I showed her my new sketchbook. I'd done a pencil portrait of her from a photograph back when she was young. It was a photograph where she looked very beautiful with long layers of silky hair cascading down her petite frame, thrown in a middle path over her head. She looked at my pencil drawing and held my book up to the light.

"You've got real talent," she said, "you must just get discovered. And then we'll be rich," she laughed. "Then I don't have to worry so much about Amara getting a nice husband or your father leaving us." Somewhere in there, there was a compliment, and that was different from the mother I knew. It was almost like she was becoming a different person. Or maybe I was. I don't know.

My mother went out a bit. She was up and down with Auntie Hasiena, and Auntie Fawzi came around more to visit. She even took Amara with her once. One of Auntie Fawzi's cousins got married, and she didn't want to go to the reception alone, so my mother and Amara went with her. They got all dolled up for the occasion, bought stylish

new outfits. Amara wore a cream pant suit. My mother wore a simple understated black dress.

Aunty Fawzi came to pick them up, wearing an ankle length metallic gold skirt, and a matching blouse, and turban. She glimmered from top to bottom like a disco ball. My mother saw her coming up the driveway and said, “Look how this woman looks, no wonder she’s single. She looks like a Christmas tree.” When Aunty Fawzi came in, my mother smiled at her and said, “You look nice. *Uitgevat.*”

Aunty Fawzi smiled and said, “This is going to be a posh wedding. It’s one of my rich cousin’s daughter’s getting married. Did you see the venue on the invitation? Look here, the reception is at a hotel. No *blatte* and *breyani* for this wedding.”

It was nice to see my mother socializing.

And because she had gotten it into her head that I had to overcome my “absolutely normal shyness,” she made a plan to take us out one Sunday, her and Amara and I. We went with Aunty Hasiena and her family, Aunty Siena’s son Tahir, and her daughter Nawaal, and Uncle Shabier, her husband. We went on an early morning hike.

We put on our takkies and they picked us up just after *Fajr*, that was sunrise time. My mother made tuna sandwiches, and cheese and tomato sandwiches for us the night before. We packed it into our haversacks before we went to sleep on Saturday night. She also boiled some eggs for snacks.

That Sunday we drove out to Crystal Pools in Gordon’s Bay with Uncle Shabier and Aunty Hasiena and them. We squeezed in at the back of their car when they picked us up.

We made our limbs fit. The drive up was sweet. There was something lovely about an early Sunday morning before most people were up. The roads were open, the sun was just rising and the air was crisp like fresh lettuce straight from the fridge. It was chilled with a sharp bite. Our bougainvillea in our garden and the loquat tree had tiny droplets of dew moistening the leaves. There was an adventure on the horizon and I could inhale it, it was so palpable.

We had our bather's on under our tracksuit pants and we yawned and listened to music as we hit the road out of the city towards the warm coast, toward those little towns of Somerset West and Strand.

When we got there and parked, sat in the car and ate our sandwiches. They were a little soggy, but delicious overlooking the azure blue sea, still and deep. We had a conversation and joked around a bit. My uncle was a funny man. The ocean, just behind the small stone wall on the curb of the bendy road, was glorious in shades of deep deep blue, just like one of my favourite paintings by Cezanne, where he painted the Gulf of Marseilles.

My mother pulled out a flask and poured us homemade coffee into plastic cups she brought with. It was still warm.

We got out and breathed into the chilly, summer morning air. Our breath made dew vapour in front of our faces and for some reason it amused us and so we kept blowing little mist circles at each other to show how cold the air was.

We crossed the near empty road, heading opposite the ocean toward the mountain, light-hearted and chatting, we found the gate to the nature reserve, and walked in.

For the next few hours, we walked the mountain trail through scratchy green shrubs and indigenous wild plants, over rocky ledges and down steep walkways. The wind was strong, and we were walking against it, but the air was a delight, and everything around us was so vast and so perfect. We could see the hilly mountain tops. It seemed so close, so clear. We walked through valleys at other points, scrambling against reddish brown rocks. And then at other points, we could see the horizon meet the ocean. There was just something about nature and the open air that made you feel ok. Like your problems weren't as big as you thought they were. It gave you a new perspective, and it was revitalizing. I almost forgot how blue I'd been, and I felt better just being there. Conversation has that effect on you too. It was calming being able to enjoy people's company, just talking, and laughter. It was funny, because it seemed like my mother was right, I did need some fresh air after all.

Uncle Shabier knew the way and we followed him. We made our way to the first pool and when we got there, there were a few groups of people swimming. It was magnificent. I wished I had a canvas and some tubes of paint. It was the kind of picture you wanted to paint in bright impressionist tones. Keep it forever. There was a waterfall that poured itself into the rock pool below.

"Get in," Uncle Shabier said, "go swim. The other people are swimming." It was spectacular. Some people were climbing up the rocks to the top waterfall, and jumping down. "That's kloofing," my cousin Tahir said, and then he did that too. He was real adventurer. He must have loved danger, because he was used to going dicing with his car, which Aunty Hasiena was always complaining about because it was dangerous.

We sat on the rocks below with coffee and watched him and other people jump off the rocky edge of the waterfall and dive into the cool water. My parents would never have allowed us to do that so we just watched.

“That’s too dangerous,” my father would have said, and my mother did say it now. Everything was always no with them. But we took our tracksuits off and played in the mountain water, which was so cool.

Uncle Shabier was easy to be around. He teased us and play-pushed us into the rock pool.

“Now you’re a free woman,” he said to me laughing, “you don’t have to worry about your father locking all the gates at home.” I smiled. My father had a reputation for that.

“Now you going to run wild my girl,” he laughed his loud booming laugh.

“She must go out more,” my mother said.

“Watch this one. You hold them back like that, then when they break free, there’s no limit. Next thing you know she’s coming home with a White boyfriend,” he joked to my mother.

“No never, she’s too quiet.

“Still water runs deep,” he laughed, “it’s the quiet ones you must keep your eyes out for.” I got very shy and looked away. I wasn’t used to people paying attention to me or noticing me in a positive way. I put him on my favourable list of people.

He laughed with his kids too, joked with them, chatted. His daughter, my cousin Nawaal told him about a boy she liked. And he said, “he can come visit, but he better be careful, I’ve got a bullet with his name on if he does anything wrong.” Then he laughed jovially, like he was just kidding.

“Agh, daddy,” my cousin said, “just don’t embarrass me in front of him. No baby pictures.” And then he leaned in to her, put his arm around her shoulder and gave her an affectionate squeeze.

Nawaal and Amara chatted, about boys no doubt. But when Tahir was done jumping off the waterfall, he came to sit with me on the rocks. He was close to my age, we were a few months apart, and Aunty Hasiena had dragged him along just because I was there. He could’ve been out with his friends but willingly he came along to keep me company. We had a bit of history together. We played together when we were under 12 years old. We just lost touch with each other in our teens because he had his own friends, and I was so quiet and always studying. He might have been my first real buddy, and I didn’t have many of those.

Tahir and I reminisced about how we played together when we were young. We spent a lot of time that day sitting alongside the rock pool on the mountain remembering childhood, talking about old memories.

“You always had everything I didn’t have,” I said.

And it was true. Uncle Shabier had his own business, and financially he seemed better off than us. So in my book he was rich. Back then, I always had to play with Tahir’s stuff because I didn’t have my own. He had roller-skates that I’d stick tissue paper into in the front of it, so that it didn’t slip when I wore them, because they were too big for my feet. He always had toys and he always had freedom. By the time he was 14 they’d taught him to drive and he could take his parents car whenever he wanted.

“Spoilt,” my mother said.

I wasn't surprised that he drove young. Cars were his thing. When we were kids he had this stack of cards we played with, it had pictures of Lamborghinis and Ferraris on it, and tons of statistics I couldn't understand, lists of engine capacity and velocity and speed. We collected and swapped them with each other.

We pulled out some sandwiches from the blue Tupperware.

"Do you remember he said, "How we climbed the roof?"

I laughed. We had. We'd climb the trellis gate alongside the garage of their house and clamber onto the cement pillars, walk along the top of the brick wall and make our way up to the roof of the house. We'd sit alongside the chimney and watch all the cars go by in the road.

"Once you dared me to climb into the chimney and I almost did, but thank heavens I did not."

"And sometimes we'd ferry up *koesisters* and bottles of juice for snacks," he said, and we laughed. We used to talk about what we'd do when we were all grown up. We felt big up there.

I wanted to be a writer, to write books. He scoffed that. He didn't care about books. He was too cool. Not nerdish like me at all. He wanted to be a race car driver. There was one thing that we both wanted though, that was the same thing. We both wanted a lot of money.

We had this crazy fantasy, "Do you remember *Tah-rani*?" I said. He thought a minute then let out a loud laugh. It was a combination of our two names – Tahir and Rania. The name we christened a secret, unknown, forgotten city that we dreamed of discovering at the bottom of a drain in the road in Athlone. We even pinpointed the drain. It was the one

on the other side of the field near the 7/11. We imagined we'd just be walking around playing in the road, and then climb down into this drain to look for a lost cricket ball. Then when we got down there, instead of rats in the sewer, there'd be stacks and stacks of gold and diamonds and valuable treasure. There'd be a whole secret city, and after we discovered it, we'd be the richest two people in the whole world. Then he could buy all the Ferrari's he wanted and I didn't know what I'd do with all that money, but I thought the first thing I'd do was go to Kentucky and buy barrels and barrels of fried chicken, because I my parents could never afford it, and I loved deep fried chicken. And then after that I thought maybe I'd maybe just go somewhere nice where there was sunshine and a beach I could see every morning, a town where everyone was nice and treated me like I was someone very important. Like a president or a movie star or something.

Reminiscing made me smile and I felt ok that day.

After we finished we hiked back, it was an easy hike. I had a nice time that day. The sunshine was good and I loved Gordon's Bay side of the world. There were baboons out that way too and on the way home we saw one on the side of the road. Tahir rolled down the car window and stuck his head out and screamed loud into the wind, "BABOOOOON!" And we laughed and Amara said, don't be *gham*.

On the drive home, we stopped over at the local mosque. We, the women, waited in the car while our uncle and Tahir went in to make *Thursalaah*. "We can make *salaah* when we get home," Aunty Hasiena said, and my mother nodded.

When we were almost home, Uncle Shabier stopped off at a roadside Engen, one of those little stop offs with the small town feel, where trucks went to fill up on the long road.



There was a Wimpy and a little shop, and we went in to grab some chocolates and buy water. We got Lays chips and I got a Bar One and a Kit Kat for my mother.

We bought suckers from the freezer, not the creamy kind, the cold icy kind that tasted like pineapples.

We didn't have to stop here. Our trip wasn't that far. But Uncle Shabier let us just because I wanted to. I loved roadside stop offs, it made me feel like I was a traveller. I can't explain, but like I was on my way somewhere. The air had that small town feel to it, with truckers coming in and out. Maybe because everyone was going to or coming from a holiday there was a soft summer feel in the air. It was hot too, and the sky was bright and clear, the air dry.

Uncle Shabier even bought us each a coffee, from the Wimpy there. I had my first real cappuccino. That was a real treat. I loved tea and coffee, but I'd only ever had homemade ones. I held the cardboard coffee cup in my hand and it warmed my palm. I felt pretty damn cool for a girl from 20 Jane Avenue, Rylands. Tahir and I drank ours standing next to one of the truckers who was filling up with diesel, eavesdropping on his trucker stories of adventure on the long road.

I was so happy. I swear it. I could've lived in that café halfway between home and absolutely nowhere and spend all my days in a shop that sold homemade fig jam and farm stall bread with raisins in it, and I could've lived off marmalade and the toast they sold and ate it every day, I swear I could. I would have been as happy as any human being could be in this life.

And I couldn't help but feel that maybe that was where I belonged. Maybe I belonged nowhere in particular at all, but just somewhere in between places, wandering, drifting,

searching. Maybe I wasn't born for boyfriends and settling down like Amara, or for mundane routines like vacuuming houses and polishing brass ornaments like my mother, or for rules that I didn't fully understand but I was expected to stick to because it was the law, like my father expected.

Maybe I wasn't born for the usual process, the normal routine, the accepted norm of a plan. Maybe girls like me weren't cultivated orchids. Maybe I was a wild sunflower seed. Maybe all I needed was the wind to pick me up and take me somewhere I couldn't even imagine in my head, and I could sprout in some distant unknown place, instead of being pruned, and cut, and primped into the form that other people wanted me to be. And if I blew with the wind, then maybe I could grow tall and be something that was beautiful in this world after all, in my own way. Maybe, if I had enough wind, enough space, enough freedom, maybe even a seed like me, could grow into something that bloomed beautifully.

## Chapter 15

### Virgin

After the hike that day, I visited Aunty Hasiena without my mother or Amara. Tahir had said I should come by whenever I felt like it. And so I did. I'd go up during the weekdays when I was home alone, walk up because they didn't live far. He was helping his father's friend out at work, a part time job, so he was always home early. I spent a lot of time that summer with Tahir. My mother said it was my chance to get out of the house while my father wasn't there.

Almost every day I walked up to their house with my towel in my haversack, and I walked around the left of the house, through the side entrance, straight to the yard, where their garden cottage and pool was, wearing my neon green bather under my clothes.

Tahir was there but he was never there alone. When I got to his house I met a group of his friends. He didn't tell me there would be other people. If I knew I wouldn't have gone, but he introduced me to everyone, and I met Haroon, Yasmina, Fiekie, and Shamiela. I got used to them fast.

Aunty Hasiena was hardly there so we had the place to ourselves most of the time. She ran errands all day, driving here and there, and up and down.

After swimming and splashing in the water, I lazed on the hot, sun-soaked red brick paving. That summer I perfected my breast stroke and freestyle across the length of the pool. I tanned in the sun until I was a deep, warm bronze colour. And then a few days later I'd start peeling like a reptile. But I loved the glow the sun gave me. I was caramel, but it was a smooth rich caramel that looked nice. I loved my brown skin. And after I'd been in the sun all day, my eyes sparkled.

I remember one time, Haroon was lying by the side of the pool, on the hot brick paving, his legs crossed half over Yasmina's legs. His hand was mindlessly stringing the top tied strings of her bather. His head was curved into her neck and he was tucked into her as she lay in the sun with her sunglasses on, her toenails painted pink.

Shamiela was splashing around the pool with Fiekie and he was chasing her in the water and grabbing her around the stomach. She giggled as he held her and said, "Say you love me, say you love me". She laughed and when she didn't say it he'd dunk her head into the pool. She'd come up spurting water and giggling, and then she held his hands back and laughed, "ok I love you, I love you", she said. Then she broke loose and ran around the pool and he chased her, wearing a snorkel mask and carrying huge turquoise plastic flippers, laughing.

Later, after Shamiela went home, Fiekie came over to me with a bottle of baby oil and asked me if I wanted him to rub it onto my back and legs.

"Why," I asked him.

"So you can tan," he said.

"But I'm already dark".

"No, you're olive."

I realised that I didn't like the idea of this boy I didn't know touching me so I said, "I can do it myself."

I took the bottle from him and started to rub it onto my legs. My legs shimmered in the sun.

"I can get your back," he said.

I hesitated for a minute. Then I said "ok."

He took the baby oil and squeezed it onto his hands. Then I felt the warm oil and his touch on my shoulders. Then his hands moved all the way around my back.

"That's enough," I said. And I squirmed forward. I was self conscious in that moment, I don't know why.

"Touchy, touchy," he said, and handed the bottle back to me.

Then Tahir called out to him and asked him for a smoke. Tahir had a girlfriend, Nadia, but she was at work during the week, so he hung out with his friends like a single guy, unless it was weekend and he got to see her.

"Is your mother here," Haroon asked.

"She's gone," Tahir said.

The boys got up from where they were and grouped together. They were lighting cigarettes. This was new about Tahir too. He smoked.

"You want a puff"? Fiekie came back over to me and offered me a cigarette.

"I don't smoke," I said.

"Try it, here." He pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and handed it to me.

I put it between my lips.

"Inhale," he said, "you have to inhale it."

I did. And pollution filled my lungs. I couldn't breathe. I started to cough violently. I was bent over choking.

Everyone laughed.

"Virgin," Yasmina said. They laughed again. I was embarrassed, out of place. I was what now, 21? Still hadn't kissed a boy. Unmarried you ought to be a virgin no matter what age, the *Qur'an* said so and my parents said so, but the word virgin meant more than that. It labelled my total lack of experience in everything that I had never done, and it made me feel shy.

"Fiekie," Haroon called out. "Here."

"What is it", Fiekie said.

"*Slowboat.*"

"Me too, me too," Yasmina said.

And they all took one, even Tahir. Only I didn't. I heard my father's voice in my head, telling me about the religious punishment for committing sin. After the fire burned you, your skin grew back so that it could burn you all over again. Fear overtook me. I was mostly controlled by religious fear, and guilt. I believed in following rules.

"Hey, Virgin, wanna try?" Haroon smiled at me.

"No thank you," I said, as politely as I could, but thinking, "they are going to get punished in the Hereafter for this."

"Good girl," Fiekie said, "that's the right answer," and he laughed. His laugh felt like it was a compliment, and I blushed, because I felt like he was impressed with me.

After they smoked a bit, we went out of the yard and around to the front garden to sit on the lawn and talk. We were still in our bathers and the sun was still hot. We walked through the trellis gate, the one Tahir and I used to climb to get to the roof to sit and eat. This time he didn't even look up at the gate, like climbing it had never ever happened.

We sat on the open grass on the front lawn. A few minutes in, Fiekie jumped to his feet in a state of horror.

“What the fuck was that, I saw a fucking rat *ma bru*.”

He all but squealed and ran for cover under the nearest tree.

“What?”

We all jumped up and looked around to see what he saw.

“No, you paranoid from the dagga man,” Tahir said, “Next thing you know you going to think the FBI is watching us.”

We all scrambled to our feet, and anxious, we saw it, not very far from where we sat was a fat brown thing.

“Fuck it fuck it,” Fiekie was saying without pause. He was hopping up and down on the grass like he was being attacked by ants, “*naai*, I'm going to *daala* out of here now.”

“That's not a rat brother. That's a mole, Tahir said. “We get it here sometimes.”

“Fuck it *bru*. That thing looks like rat. I'm not sitting here again.”

Tahir laughed.

“*Ja* but you're *mos* afraid of cockroaches too *ne*.” He was laughing as he said it.

“I don't like creepy crawly's.” Haroon was panicky. “Get rid of it.”

“What do you want a *man* to do, must I go fetch Baygon and spray it?”

Haroon went to the edge of the garden and picked up a huge stone from the ground.

“Step back,” he said. We stepped back. Then he flung the stone at the mole and missed. The mole did not scurry away.

Haroon picked up another stone and threw it. This time, the stone was not huge. The mole’s mouth was open and the stone was small enough that it went straight into the mole’s mouth, like a ball in a basket. The stone got lodged right there and the mole, with its mouth wedged open, started to suffocate.

“What the fuck? It’s suffocating,” Fiekie said.

“My *bru*, you killed it,” Tahir said.

“*Naai ouens*, that’s torture,” Fiekie said, “I *somma* feel *naar* now from seeing that.”

I couldn’t bear the sight of the mole dying like that. It was horrific and cruel to see it gasping for air. I vomited into my towel. I wanted to go home because I was upset about the mole, but Fiekie came over to me again and asked if I was ok. He soothed me.

“They didn’t mean for that to happen,” he said, “It’s not like we go around hurting animals, it’s not like we serial killers in the making or something. I’ll tell them, no *dagga* when you’re here. And no catching on *kak*, there’s nice girls with us.”

Tahir pulled me aside and said, “look, don’t go home. You can’t.”

“Why? What do you care?” I said.

He looked down and then looked up at me with a shy smirk on his face.

“Listen, I’m not going to lie to you.”

“Please don’t,” I said.

There was a moment’s silence.

“Well?” I prompted him.



“Your mother spoke to my mother. She asked her to ask me, to get you out of the house a bit.”

“What?” I was incredulous. “My mother asked you to be friends with me, how embarrassing.”

“She’s just worried about you man, says you study too much.”

“I don’t need my mother to organise me friends.”

“My friends like you. They want you with. Stay man. I’m going to come fetch you one night to come with us when we go out. What your father doesn’t know, you know *mos.*”

I almost didn’t go just to spite my mother. But if my mother knew they were doing mild drugs and *vrying*, she wouldn’t want me with them. So going with them, would punish her enough. She wouldn’t know she was being punished, but I would. I could be just as passive aggressive as she was.

The next day I was back there and with Tahir and all his friends. I only had that one neon green bather. That day it was still in the wash, but I went up to their house, to the pool anyway, in a shorts, just to put my feet in the water. I took a book to read while lazing in the sun, *Arms and the Man*, by George Bernard Shaw. Fiekie dipped his nose over my book, I showed him what I was reading, and he made an impressed face, left me to it.

“Who you reading, Englishman?” he said in a fake British accent.

“No Irish, you making fun of me?”

He laughed, jumped in the water, splashed droplets over my book.

I tried to ignore him, read on. I loved how the character Raina from that play sounded so similar to my name, Rania. But my favourite character by far was Louka, the feisty servant girl.

Fiekie called out to me, “Get in the water, c’mon, don’t be boring.” He splashed more fountains around me and it got all over my pages, so I gave in.

“Immature,” I said smiling, getting in the water anyway and putting my book down.

Aunty Hasiena let me borrow Nawaal’s bathing suit because I didn’t have mine and my shorts was all wet.

Just like Tahir, Nawaal had nice things too, but for her nice things meant nice clothes. Aunty Hasiena went into her closet and brought out a few bathers so that I could pick one. I was beside myself. They were stunning. Just like the ones you saw in fashion shoots in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Nawaal had signed up to a modelling agency so she always had the most fashionable stuff. I chose a hot pink bikini, made from a sort of leathery, glossy, material, and the bikini top had a zip all the way down the front, so you could zip it up and down. It fit me. For once, being too tall and lanky didn’t feel half bad.

After I put it on, I walked down the watery steps into the depths of the pool feeling like a film star. In my head I pretended I was like my mother and Amara, one of the Stone women. Beautiful and desirable, confident, not nerdy and awkward at all, not a misfit who hardly ever talked and had panic attacks around too many people. Not the half *moor* that my mother used to call me when she wanted to remind me that half of my DNA was my father’s. That fifty percent of me was something not like her at all, and something that she openly detested because her mother in law had rejected her. They rejected me too, and if

they didn't want me then I didn't want them back. There were times I hated having that DNA inside me so much I would have cut it out with a razor, if only I could reach inside my chromosomes that deep.

Normally in the pool, I loved to lay with my back on the water and float around with my eyes closed. I liked to pretend I was dead. Then Tahir would jump in wildly and splash the water around me and I'd come back to life spluttering bubbles.

But in this bather I was transformed. I was not me. I waded through the water like a gazelle, and fell into an elegant backstroke all the way to the end of pool. Then when I reached the edge, I swam back free style, the suit plumping up my bosom generously. In those few moments, I was another person. I was beautiful enough to be Amara's sister, beautiful enough to be Shazia Stone Ahmed's daughter. I was enough. Not inadequate. Not too little to measure up. I was the girl in the high fashion bather worn by models in magazines. Hanging out with Tahir and his friends, was I starting to enjoy myself, in spite of myself? I was away from oppression, and deep underwater, I felt good about me. It felt like freedom.

## Chapter 16

### The Dices

The roadhouse at Wembley was busy on Saturday nights. This was when the bright lights around the *al fresco* diner was outshone by the LED's from the modified cars that were parked around the place. I was there with Tahir and his friends. This was their scene. Hot Saturday night, the noise of drivers and people around us, cars getting ready to dice, but they were not going to dice here. They diced along the N2, after midnight. This was the pre-stop off place. They came here to wheel spin before the races, and buy food.

The actual races happened off Sable Road, on the N1. It was near Century City. Everyone congregated close to the Shell garage, right near Tyger Wheel and Tyre. Crowds filled up the bridge that ran overhead, across the N1, watching the races from above. There was no formal invitation. You found out about a race through underground *whatsapp* groups. Friends in tow, a polony *gatsby* that we bought at Wembley in Belgravia road, to share between the lot of us. This was as good as it got.

I was there with Tahir's crew, Fiekie, Haroon, Yasmina, and Shamiela. Tahir had his girl Nadia there too. I met her that night. She was wearing an American baseball jacket and white canvas Jack Purcell *takkies*. I thought she was a pretty girl. She stuck to him like

latex, hanging on his every move. I was still shy, but this was exhilarating, just being in this crowd, all these lights around us. I'd never had so much excitement.

We walked between the brightly coloured cars. They looked like candy coated smarties. The engines purred as the owners showed off. Drivers turned on the ignitions and put their foot down on the accelerators, just to show how their car could sing into the night.

"Listen to that," some of them said, flooding the engines with petrol. You could smell it in the air. You could hear a vrrrr, vrrrr, vrrooom all around. It was gentle and powerful at the same time. The sound filled the summer night air with a sweet, soft forcefulness.

"My mother complains," Tahir said. "But some nights I race." He said he liked to dice. It thrilled him more than anything. His car was done up nicely. He poured money into it. It was his biggest hobby.

"Don't do it tonight," I said, "not when I'm with. It's dangerous. I've inherited the Stone bad nerves."

He promised he wouldn't.

"*Naai*, not tonight don't worry."

His girl Nadia agreed with me.

"It's dangerous," she said, pulling him near as she spoke. They were obviously still in the puppy love phase, the phase where he would let her have her way at anything just to please her. He kissed her on the lips. Right there in front of me.

"Tonight I'm just here to *blom* with my *brasse*," he said. They were inseparable that night. If you wanted them apart you had to peel them off each other.

“Did you check the rims on this one,” Fiekie asked him. He was pointing to a done up car that had a fin on it. The modifications could have made it look like an intergalactic spaceship.

“A thing of beauty,” Tahir said. “The fin will make it go even faster. Aerodynamics and all.”

They peeked inside the car. The doors were open for people to look in. They admired the workmanship.

“Ferrari steering wheel. Nice,” Fiekie said.

“Hey *moffie*. Get your head out of my car,” a voice said from behind them.

The boys took their heads out of the car and turned around to see who it was. It was Trigger. That was his nickname. Fiekie told me later that he got it because he had a temper, and one time he pulled out a gun and stuck it in some guy’s face, just because he short-changed him with a R50. Despite his name, that was the worst thing he was known for. He’d never caused any real damage to anyone, but his nickname made him sound dangerous and he liked it, so it stuck.

“Who you calling a *moffie*? You the one who came second last in the dices last time,” Tahir said.

Everyone laughed. Trigger grimaced.

“*Naai*, that *ouens* had nitrous oxide on their side. This week I’m ready. Bring it baby.”

“Can we bet on that?”

Trigger smiled and patted Tahir on the shoulder.

“I don’t bet it’s *haraam*. But if you going to bet then bet on me, maybe your teacher was wrong, maybe you not so *dom* after all.”

We laughed.

The cars that came to dice on Saturdays were simple cars, converted into objects of desire by the hands of Cape flats mechanics and spray artists. Sure it cost money to modify a car, but it was a priority- as important as wearing a Diesel jeans or a G-star t-shirt. A man had to ride in style.

This was the prelude. Now that it was just after 12midnight, the area lit up like a nuclear bomb. Even more people arrived, bringing a party with them. Music played loud. Hip hop and rap boomed around me. I heard old school music, Tupac and the Notorious B.I.G. It was time for the dicing to begin.

It was loud, like a New Year’s Eve street party. They began with a rolling start. Cars stood at the robots, and when the lights went green they sped off, engines roaring as they let it rip. It was like a bomb gets ignited. The drivers respond in a heartbeat. Feet on the accelerator, exhausts fuming, their tyres hit the road. The engines growled like wild cats, and rubber burned hotly on the near empty streets. As the cars raced, the crowd from the sidelines moved into the street behind the speeding cars, over the bridge up ahead, forming an untidy mob. People screamed encouragement behind the cars racing out of sight. Music thudded into the night heat. As we watched, Eminem, rapping *Lose Yourself*, blared out so loud it shifted my heartbeat and I had to catch my breath. Sounds mingled. There was music over engines and engines over talking. People hollered and waved their arms as they screamed support. Some people could care less about the dicing. There was a pair of lovers

were in a deep embrace, their tongues halfway down each other's throats. It was a sultry summer night and the air was electric.

This was new to me. It excited me in a way I had never known before. It thrilled me all through my whole body. The chemistry in this sweaty night was addictive, like this night existed apart from and above anything else that happened before it or after it. The night belonged only to itself.

I stood alongside Tahir's car. He revved it, showing off the deep baritone it could reach. His friends listened, excitement palpable. Tahir put his foot on the petrol of the stationary car and we could smell petrol. It whiffed ever so gently under my nose, not so much that it overwhelmed me, just enough that it made me feel heady, and together with the bright lights and the people and the food and the cars, I was intoxicated.

"Did you ask for peri peri sauce on your *masala* steak burger?" Tahir asked me. He was opening the parcel we bought before at Wembley.

There was wild abandon in me. Tonight I didn't care for Van Gogh or my beloved Chet Baker. I wanted to hear Snoop Dogg, I wanted to throw myself into this culture. Everything Tahir showed me was marvellous. I loved it. I wanted to inhale it all so that it consumed me and filled me to the brim. I wanted to belong *here*.

We stood by the car and ate with our hands. We had strawberry and avocado pear milkshakes. I pushed delicious chunks of food down. Tahir was showing Nadia how to take big mouthfuls. Fiekie told me to do the same, "Don't be so *stervy*," he said. We laughed.



I gulped and got sauce all over my nose. Fiekie lifted his hands to delicately wipe it from my face and Shamiela gave him a dirty look. I retreated, stepped back from him. But it was not too serious. We ate and enjoyed our food. It was a drug that went well with the races, like *masala* steak burgers and *samoosas* and strawberry and avocado pear milkshakes were a natural accompaniment to dicing and speed. Everything about this night was sultry. Heady. I felt sad. Because it just occurred to me. I had so many years behind me and never experienced any of this before. It hurt me to think of everything I'd missed out on. And this was it. This was what I'd been missing out on my whole life.

Tahir whispered into Nadia's ear, I couldn't tell what. But they looked like two lovebirds. His voice was soft, and he stood very near her, the busy crowd looked so distant from them even though they were surrounded by the noise of the night. Tahir lifted his hand and caressed her neck, stroking a few wisps of her hair which hung there loosely like lost strands. His caresses seemed gentle, but I noticed his rough hands. They were strong hands.

I don't know why I observed them like that, but I was enamoured by the idea of love. To see couples be like this, mesmerised me. I had that tinge of heartache, that this is the kind of romance I dreamed of having, and here I am forced to see other people having what I only wished could be mine. It still felt so out of reach for me, made me feel both happy and sad at the same time. And it shouldn't have. I should just have been happy for them.

The streetlights glimmered over their faces. It gave some definition to their silhouettes. He gripped her head in his hands and moved his face toward hers. He slanted his head slightly and pressed his lips against her lips. He kissed her. It was severe and passionate. She kissed him back.

The crowd behind them exploded with a loud cheer. The noise overwhelmed me. It startled me back to myself. Everyone went wild. Tahir released Nadia from his grip. We turned our heads to see what happened.

“Winner!!” the crowd screamed. “Winner!”

We stood on tiptoes to see over the crowd, to see what the commotion was. It was Trigger, he was being hauled up by the crowd onto their shoulders and everyone was cheering for him. The first round of the races was over. Trigger won.

“WOOHOO!” Tahir said. His excitement was boisterous and loud.

“Didn’t you bet on that guy,” Nadia said.

“Looks like we’re winners tonight,” Tahir smiled, teeth showing. He grabbed Nadia by the hand and drew her into the crowd.

“Let’s go! It’s time to celebrate. This is going to be our night.”

## Chapter 17

### Sunday Drives and Family Lunch

Two hours later I was sitting in Aunty Hasiena's kitchen. Fiekie had offered to drive me there, the police car came up behind us. They had to deliver the news to Aunty Hasiena and they wanted to do it in person.

I remember the yellow and white kitchen. I remember the melamine. She had a porcelain rooster on the counter, just like my mother's at our house. They bought it together at a sale. But hers didn't store butter biscuits, she kept hers full of teabags.

"You better go get some sleep," I heard someone say to me.

It was Nawaal, in her pyjamas, out of bed, trying to console her mother. The policeman had left. Fiekie was still there, he said he'd take me home. It happened like a movie. The way Tahir decided at the last minute that he wanted to race that night anyway. How Nadia begged him not to. How he flicked his cigarette to the ground, the tip bright and red in the night. He stepped on it like it was a dirty bug, extinguished it hard with his foot. Exhaled his cigarette smoke and said, "Just once up till Old Oak Road and then I turn around. Back in no time. I wanna beat this *moffie*," he turned his head to Trigger and let out a loud laugh.

They lined their cars up against each other. Nadia and I closed our eyes, opened it, half looking, half hiding. The robots went green. He sped off into the night.

Back in the kitchen, Fiekie turned to go and I walked behind him, following him to the front door. At the front door, he fidgeted, rummaged around in his pockets for his keys. I looked out the front door and saw the police car pulling away. I heard Aunty Hasiena in the bedroom, her tears, her sobbing, her pain, it was so audible. There was no getting away from it. It drifted up over the house and enveloped us, tragedy.

Nawaal's father was calm, so calm it was unnerving. Uncle Shabier was always laughing. His silence was brutal. He was on the phone with the hospital. He said he needed the death certificate for the *janaazah*. His son must be buried within 24 hours, according to Islamic law.

I stepped out of the house following Fiekie. In the car we were quiet. I lived very near, and he took me home. My mother was awake, she heard the news by telephone. She was waiting for me.

"There was no way of knowing," Fiekie said, "freak accident. He just lost control of the car. He was going at 320km an hour, and when he knocked into the centre median on Sable Road."

He didn't finish his sentence.

I hadn't cried yet. I was in too much shock. It was too much. Here I was sitting in a warm car with Tahir's friend, and Tahir was in a hospital, in a morgue, and they are going to put his body into a dark hole in the earth the next day. I couldn't wrap my head around that, that he was sole alone. There were no friends, no parents, no one at all. He wasn't going to have a warm bed like I was going to have that night, ever again. The idea of that,

that he wasn't going to do regular things like wake up the next morning. Brush his teeth. That he didn't have soft blankets and pillows to sleep on, but that he had to sleep unprotected, near naked, in the dirt, alone.

Alone. That was the word that got me. He was alone. More alone than I ever thought I had been. It was a stupid thing to think, but the idea of him without a warm bed and a familiar, comforting smile to soothe him, it left me distraught. That he was alone in a place that we didn't know what he was going through and we couldn't get to him to make him feel better. It felt so alone.

I looked at Fiekie. He was driving, quiet, and numbed. I thought about my life. Everything I thought I wanted.

"What do you want out of life Fiekie?" I asked him absent-mindedly. I was sure that he could hear my heart was on mute. "I'm so selfish to be asking this now. Forgive me." He looked at me, reached out his hand and touched my shoulder lightly.

"It's ok." Then he looked away again in an instant.

"Me?" he said, sounding breathless, "I dunno hey. Grow old. Get married. Have a family. What else?"

"Tahir wanted those things too."

He sighed deep and sad.

"I know he did. But *Allah* is in charge."

I looked at Fiekie and I could picture him with someone like Shamiela sitting beside him, going out to the beach on a Sunday drive to buy ice cream, a rowdy kid squealing in his wife's arms. They'd go home and she'd put a roast chicken in the oven and maybe even use

her granny's recipe for sweet pumpkin and glazed carrots, a real traditional meal. Or make him something else that was his favourite. Like *breyani* or *dhal curry*. And they'd just go on doing life. And maybe someday they'd stop and reminisce and he'd say, "Do you remember Tahir, that guy we were friends with back then. How long since he *maniegald*. He wouldn't've been how old now? Nadia used to be his girl, but she married that other *ou*. *Yoh*, time flies." And that conversation would last five minutes and then they would go on forgetting again, just like before. Because that was life, Sunday drives and eating family lunches, marriage and babies. And sometimes, for a quick moment, it was remembering the people we used to love, who we lost along the way.

But tonight there were tears.

"I'm sorry," he said, and he started to cry as he spoke.

"You didn't do anything," my voice was bland.

"I'm sorry he didn't live. I'm sorry for my friend."

I didn't say anything. I had pulled my foot out of my sandal and was pushing my toes against the frame of the car door. I watched my henna painted toenails.

The *janaazah* was the next day. There were so many people there. My mother said it was a big *kifayt*. Such a young child they said, he had his whole life ahead of him. I felt empty. I didn't cry in front of anyone. When I bathed me that night I let my tears fall into the bathwater. I didn't want to keep touch with Fiekie or any of the others. They were Tahir's friends. And now that he was not there, I had nothing in common with them anymore. The one person who made this world ok for me was taken away. It wasn't fair. And all I could do for him, was make *dua*, that he was in a better place.

## Chapter 18

### Garden on a Grave

After the Janaazah, Aunty Hasiena went into mourning. She hardly visited us anymore. We went there, but we felt she didn't want company, so it made it difficult. She spent most of her days at Tahir's *kabr*, where he was buried in Johnstone Road, reciting *kitab*s, and talking to him like he was still alive. My mother said it was dangerous to go sit there all day, a woman alone, in this country you'll get robbed and raped.

Uncle Shabier said she just needed some time and space. We respected that. My mother said we should show support but not impose. Aunty Hasiena did not touch Tahir's room or change anything. She didn't give away any of his clothes or his shoes. My mother said it was *haraam* to mourn like that. You should cry for three days, and not hysterically, and then try to move on. But she showed no signs of moving on from the life of her son.

My mother phoned her every day, but she hardly wanted to talk. We kept touch with Nawaal, and checked in with her. Nawaal had taken over the running of that household, giving her mother space to fall apart.

Because of Tahir's sudden passing, Aunty Hasiena faded into her own cocoon. She wasn't interested in people anymore. It wasn't our choice, but we began to see less and less of her.

As she slowly stepped back from the front row of our lives, my mother began to spend more time with Aunty Fawzi. My father was still living at his mother's house, I heard his mother loved that, and without a husband, my mother needed to get around. Aunty Hasiena had never finished her driving lessons.

Aunty Fawzi could also drive, so she became my mother's new designated taxi. She didn't mind. She was a single woman, and often it gave her something to do. My mother had always been friends with her, but had charmed her well enough now for her to always be available for lifts. "Just until Siena is feeling better," my mother said.

Today Aunty Fawzi was in our kitchen visiting. She was the loud talking type. And her voice was distinctively raspy. My mother said it was because of all the cigarettes she smoked. She smoked Rothmans, a pack a day and claimed that she'd been doing that her whole life. They were talking about Aunty Hasiena and I heard my mother tell her that Aunty Siena had just had a nervous breakdown, but they were trying to keep it quiet so that people didn't *skinder*. Uncle Shabier had booked her into Valkenberg, and Nawaal was looking after her father.

She was taking medication for depression and she didn't want to interact. She planted a garden over Tahir's *kabr*, started growing little plants and flowers so that it looked like something botanical and very pretty. Aunty Fawzi asked my mother if Aunty Siena had lost it.

"Lost what?" my mother said.

"You know, her grip on reality."

"I dunnnnoo," my mother really drew out the last word like she was at a loss for an explanation.



She told Aunty Fawzi that Aunty Siena hired a caretaker to keep the grave neat and blossoming.

“She must rather stay at home and recite for him, that will do him more good,” my mother said, “She must try to accept,” Aunty Fawzi said, “or she will go mad.”

“She loved him too much,” my mother said back, “That’s why she can’t let go. I’ve told these children of mine a hundred times, you must never love anyone too much. It’s not good.”

My father had been gone for 6 weeks already and still we weren’t sure if he would come back. He was at our house every weekend since he left though, to mend things. The long list of things my mother asked him to fix while he was still living with us, that he ignored her about, was slowly getting done now. I suppose like he had done at the Dirty Dozen’s house, he was now doing it for us.

“He’s another one,” my mother said, “Never wanted to be here when he lived here. But now he wants to be here all the time, phoned me in the week too.” My mother still gave him dirty looks when he came over. But she made sure she looked sexy when she knew he was going to be here, she dressed up for the occasion.

“Are you two getting back together or what?” Aunty Fawzi asked, sitting in the kitchen in Aunty Hasiena’s old chair.

“Me, with that rude man, I’m not interested in waiting for a man my girl.”

“But you need him, otherwise how you going to live. It’s too expensive on the pocket. And you must *ma* learn to drive.”

“Now he wants to come and creep in my arse and fix broken stuff. What does he take me for? I must first see what I’m going to do,” my mother said. “Don’t you go think I’m Hasiena. I’m a old bitch. I’m not scared of letting go. Cross me and I’ll flush you like yesterday’s toilet paper,” she said, and she snapped her fingers to show how fast she’d drop someone who crossed her. “I’ll show him I don’t need him,” she said, “I’ll prove it to him, how irrelevant he is.” Smoke billowed from the cigarette between her red painted lips, “just watch this space.”

## Chapter 19

### A Visitor

I was in my bedroom pretending to be asleep. I had just come from visiting Aunty Hasiena. She was on sedatives to help her with her anxiety, which had been out of control. She was still in a bad way, so I made a habit of going as much as I could, just to show my face. Aunty Fawzi was in the lounge with my mother, and Amara was there with them too. They'd just been sitting around all afternoon, and Aunty Fawzi brought a fresh batch of *koesisters* that she made for us.

From my room, my eyes half closed, I heard a car pull up outside. I could always hear what was happening in the driveway and just outside, right from my bed, because of how close in proximity everything was, and because of Mr Palekar's thin walls.

I heard the car and I peeked through the curtains. I saw a brand new shiny BMW parking in front our house, a very nice car. Nothing like the beat up mint green rusted Toyota my father drove. My mother and Aunty Fawzi were standing in the doorway and I heard Aunty Fawzi say, "You must take us for a spin." And I didn't know who she was speaking to, but minutes later, the man, who looked to be about their age, was in our lounge, and my mother was serving him tea.

My mother seemed to be on her best behaviour. I could tell because she allowed her guest to do things she didn't really like people to do. Like come inside without taking off his shoes. Like let him sit on her expensive lounge suite instead of telling him to sit in the kitchen. Cups tinkered like an orchestral performance, as she served the guest *samoosas* and tea.

"So glad you came," my mother said. My mother and Aunt Fawzi were speaking good English, they were not peppering their sentences with *kombuis* Afrikaans, like they usually did. That could only mean they wanted to impress.

I eavesdropped. Who was this man, and what was he doing here? The first crazy idea that popped into my head was that my mother had started dating and I nearly had a brain seizure just thinking that. That couldn't be. My mother was many things, but she was not a loose woman. She was still married to my father. Whatever problems they had, she was utterly loyal. Never even let another man flirt with her.

But there had been many changes happening in our lives. I thought my father would never leave. But he had left. I never imagined Tahir would *maniengal*. But he did. He passed away. There had been too many changes for me to assume that my mother would never do something just because I didn't expect her to. And I was scared. At least when my father was here life had an order, a familiarity. I missed that. I wanted my father to come back so that everything could make sense again.

I'd been really scared about my fees getting paid, about money, if my father left he could stop paying for me, and what job would I get? I was so shy I didn't know how I would get hired anywhere, I couldn't even talk on the phone like Amara. I couldn't even be a secretary like her, I didn't have the skills. And I didn't want to do a job that was just

regular anyway. I wanted a profession. Something I had to read books for to learn, so that I could make good wages, be independent.

Lying on my bed I heard them say the guests name, his name was Dr Zayed. I could hear him talk. He was well spoken and he told Aunty Fawzi and my mother a string of impressive things about himself that made them *ooh* and *aah* before he even finished his sentences. Amara was not in the lounge with them. She must have been alone in the kitchen.

Apparently, Dr Zayed had a medical practice back in Durban and was scouting for opportunities to open one here in Cape Town as well, and using a *locum* to man it when he was away. So he was looking at travelling between Durban and Cape Town and living and working in both cities.

“But then you will have to buy a house in both cities,” my mother said, practical thinking person that she was.

“Yes I’m well aware,” he said, I thought a little pompously.

“Imagine living between two cities, how grand that would be.” Aunty Fawzi was charmed.

And then this Dr Zayed described his house to them, he said it had a heated swimming pool. And he said he had two domestic workers. If my mother had said that, she would have said maids. But he was outwardly more genteel than them. He said the two ladies he hired made sure everything was kept tidy, since he didn’t have a wife and he spent most of his time at his doctor’s surgery. That really made an impression on my mother and Aunty Fawzi, because I heard more gasps.

I was dying to know what this was about, I know Aunty Fawzi was single and I was hoping that he was here for her, but he was clearly not interested in her. I couldn't sit still and I had to get up and find an excuse just to walk through to see what was happening.

I got up and shyly slithered out of my room, softly closing my door so that it didn't make a sound. I skulked across the hallway, in eyeshot of the guests who were sitting in the lounge just off the passage I had to cross to get to the toilet.

Then I saw him properly for the first time. The face of the man who had a brand new BMW, who owned a heating swimming pool and had two domestic workers (not maids), seeing to all his housekeeping needs, the man who was maybe dating my mother and could be my next father, I didn't know.

Physically he was not astounding, and the first thing I thought was, "that car doesn't suit him." Of course I was being superficial. It was just that he was old, at least in his fifties. It seemed really old to me back then, although I don't think it's old anymore now. He was a dark skinned man with barely any hair on his head. There were a few long, oily strands, some grey, some black, brushed back against his shiny scalp in such a way that it looked like it was glued down. He was a little heavy looking. Not fat. But lumpy somehow and irregular shaped in the hips and stomach. I just thought, "a doctor should take better care of his own body. Consulting him would be like consulting a hairdresser with a bad hairdo."

His clothes were neat though, and he was well dressed. In fact, I would say, his dress was immaculate. I couldn't fault it. His skin glowed. It made me think that he must have oiled it the same way he oiled his hair. Somehow, all of this glossiness, or oiliness, together made him look rich. Like he had money enough to waste on lotions and creams that were

unnecessary to buy but that made you look pampered. He looked up and saw me. His eyes fixed on mine.

“And this one?” he said, eyeing me with a careful gaze.

My mother nearly choked on her tea, and said, “No, no. Not her. That one is her father’s. My youngest, she studies.” She said this definitively closing the subject, and then she took a sip of her tea and pursed her lips, her cheeks flushed on her olive complexion. She shoed me out of their way.

“Rania. This is grown up business. Go find yourself something to do”, my mother said looking at me. I wanted to scream at her, “What are you doing you’re still married, we are a family still.”

But I didn’t have the guts to say anything. I didn’t dare. I looked around the room at their faces, all of them sitting on the couch, me, the only one standing in the middle of the passage. I didn’t know what was going on but the energy in the room displeased me. The air was thick and tense. I felt it in my bones, that this was not good.

The man looked me right in the eyes, deeply now, and I felt awkward. I shifted my pupils away from his stare, shook him off. Somehow the way he looked at me made me feel violated.

“She has a very unusual face,” he said to my mother.

“You think so, her head is so very small,” my mother said examining me, “Get’s it from her father’s side of the family. In my family we don’t have heads like that. The Stone’s are beautiful women.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant but I thought that it had to mean that I was ugly.

“Rania, take this cup to the back”, my mother told me and held out her hand with the empty teacup.”

I went to the kitchen and forgot about the toilet. Amara was sitting there flipping through one of her glossy fashion magazines.

“What’s this man doing here?” I said, “is he mummy’s boyfriend.”

“You asking me,” she said, “she didn’t tell me anything.”

I heard them talking.

“I’m in town for a week or two,” Dr Zayed said. “We must talk some more, get to know each other better before we decide.”

“You know you can never really know someone,” my mother said, “ask me. You can be married to someone for twenty years and they can wake up one morning and shock you. Then you can know someone else for one week, but if they are honest and they want you to know who they are, you’ll know them better than the back of your hand. If a person wants to hide themselves, they can do it. No amount of time of getting to know them will help you.”

“That’s true,” Dr Zayed said, “I don’t believe in this dating for years and years. You meet someone, you check out a few things, you make up your mind. No wasting people’s time.”

“But while you here in Cape Town, let us make a plan to get together,” my mother said.

“And my thanks to Fawzi for introducing me and bringing me here to your home,” Dr Zayed said.

I listened hard. Aunty Fawzi had brought him here to our house.



“Did you hear that,” I told Amara, “Aunty Fawzi brought him here.”

Amara whispered, “*Ja*, I heard.”

“But why?” I said.

“It’s my pleasure,” I heard Fawzi say. “Shazia is forever setting me up with someone, so when you contacted me to tell me you were looking for a wife, and saw someone sitting with me at that wedding that you’d like to meet, I was too happy to introduce you to each other.”

Fawzi sounded like she was so proud of herself for doing a good deed. Her chance to pay my mother back for all the setups my mother tried to send her on.

My heart stopped. I nearly choked. Amara and I looked at each other. Our jaws dropped open, our mouths wide like vacuum cleaners, sucking up an insane idea. Did this man see my mother with Aunty Fawzi at that wedding they went to last month, and he asked to meet my mother? Was my mother going to divorce my father and marry him? My eyes shot out of my head like poison arrows. My pulse dropped right through the base of gravity. I took a big silent gulp of air and counted my slow breaths. “

And then we heard my mother call out to Amara, “Mara,” she said as sweet as a butterfly sipping on a honeycomb, “Mara come out here a minute, bring some cool drink.”

“You better go,” I said, “she’s lost her marbles this time for real.”

Amara went, with a fake smile plastered over a bewildered expression on her creamy coloured face.

“She is my eldest,” my mother beamed.

“She is such a beauty,” Dr Zayed said.

“*Shukran*. She has all my genes.” She paused. “*Tramakasi* Amara, go wash the dishes *kanalla* my girl, mummy’s so tired.”

I wanted to laugh at the niceness.

“She’s so helpful,” my mother said, “works around the house, cooks, pleasant pleasant girl.”

“Nice to see you raised her well. People today don’t raise their children with values anymore.”

“You’re right, they don’t,” my mother said, “The problem with our community is they are becoming too westernized. It’s a tragedy, because our culture is so beautiful.”

“I agree. Culture and good moral values are so important,” Dr Zayed said, “the young people today throw it away too easy.”

“My younger one is also lovely. But she’s very clever. Her father doesn’t want her to worry with boyfriends and so on. He says it’s *haraam*, especially the courting. But I’m sending her with you two, to chaperone her sister. We must do things right after all. I can’t send my daughter with you alone, you understand I’m sure.”

“Of course, and I respect that, you’re obviously doing a good job with your daughters.” Dr Zayed said.

“*Shukran*,” my mother said, “we try our best with them.”

Then I heard Dr Zayed say, “Ok then, I’ll pick the two of them up tomorrow.”

I heard a glass drop behind me. It was Amara, she was back in the kitchen, standing at the sink washing dishes. At the same time, she and I realised that this man was not here to meet

my mother, he was here to meet her. And that I was going to have to go on their date with them. It was not what I expected, but I was right, it was not good.

I don't know what I felt that moment, but looking at Amara's face was like watching an Alfred Hitchcock movie. She was a gorgeous, perfect vision of unutterable, silent, horror. I had always suspected that my mother was crazy. I knew she wanted permanent financial independence from my father, and that Amara was the ticket. I never imagined that my mother would go to such cruel absurdity to achieve her intended goals. That she would find some rich old man to set Amara up with just to show my father she didn't need him ever again. Was it to punish him by moving on in grand style, with a more comfortable life than he could ever give her? I don't know.

But Amara stood beside me ashen faced, and in pain.

Dr Zayed was getting up to leave. I walked back to my room. My mother and Aunt Fawzi were standing in the doorway seeing him off. Between their bodies, in the open door, I saw the Doctor drive off down the road in his brand new shiny BMW, with my mother, all smiles, waving behind him.

"I must hose this lawn," she said as his car disappeared. "And when your father comes to fix his little things this weekend, he can spray something over the plants. Look." She pointed to our little garden jungle. "This place is full of lizards."

## Chapter 20

### You Get Used To It

“Well what did you think of *that* man?” my mother said as she closed the door behind Dr Zayed. Her high heels tinkered on the tiles as she moved. Her voice was excited, like it was *labarang* morning.

“He was quite a piece of work mind you, *mhm, mhm, mhm*”. She sang out the last three sounds like the chorus of a song. “So that’s what money looks like.” Cups and saucers clinked as my mother tidied up the lounge and carried all the dirty dishes back into the kitchen.

“Rania and Amara come help tidy up here.”

Amara had started toward her, and their bodies stopped, facing each other like two stone pillars, in the kitchen doorway.

“What was that man talking about, *picking me up*. I’m not going anywhere with him, why did he say that?” She didn’t say it like a question. It was a declaration of war. Her voice was coarse and raw.

My mother sighed and moved past her, edging around her to put the cups she was carrying in the sink. We heard her inhale deep as the cups rattled on the metal surface. She

turned around to face Amara, who hadn't moved from that spot where she was, a look on her face, a mixture of confusion and anger. She turned to face my mother's glare, still standing in the same place, not moving.

"Now Amara," my mother said as politely as I ever heard her speak, "you must listen to me very nicely. That man is an educated man. He's got I don't know how many degrees, and ask Fawzi here about his family, they own businesses in Durban. They very well to do people. *La de dah.*"

Aunty Fawzi nodded like a puppet. "It's true. He comes from a good family."

"A man like that is exactly what you need to give you the life you deserve my child," my mother said with a soft, sympathetic, commanding tone.

"I don't need to be set up with some old *torpie*. There are hundreds of boys interested in me."

"Yes I know, you're such a beautiful girl, but you not meeting the right people. That Sameer was a nice boy, but his family is snotty. You said yourself they didn't want him to take you. Now what do you want to end up with, a *skollie* or some no good loafer like the other men I've seen you dating. And what if I get divorced? What's going to happen to us? I can't afford us on my pay cheque, all this," she stretched her hands out around the room, showing what she couldn't afford on her own. You must think about your future my child."

"I'm not going out with that ugly old man," Amara said in a subdued scream. She sounded like she was swallowing knives.

"I'm doing what's best for you. I only ever do what's best for my children." Amara moved toward her where she stood at the sink. Her movement was swift, fast and quiet, I stepped back out of their way, I could sense I had to. They stood shoulder to

shoulder, staring defiantly into each other's eyes, Amara's pupils dilated like a cat about to pounce.

"Just because you've been desperate your whole life doesn't mean I am."

"You bladdy rude child," my mother said. She took a breath, then lifted her hand, and smacked Amara on her left cheek. "Don't be disrespectful to me. I'm your mother."

Amara let out a little yelp, lifted the palm of her hand to the spot where she'd been hit, held it, nursing the hurt, which I don't think was physical.

The sound of pain in her voice was palpable, her words were strained, "Mummy can't force me." It sounded like she was swallowing tears as she spoke.

"THEN LEAVE," my mother said with clear and distinct precision.

Amara darted her a wounded look.

My mother walked away from the sink, past Amara, and at the kitchen doorway she turned around to face Amara, and said, "Who reared you? Huh? Tell me that. Do you know how I had to struggle to keep a roof over your head and make sure you're taken care of girlie. Do you have any idea everything I've done for you? You don't know the half of it. You think you just woke up and got big by yourself. Well it didn't happen like that. Let me tell you, you will fall to your knees and kiss the soles of my feet if you knew everything I've done for you. Muneer *se kind*." And she spat to the ground to show disrespect at Amara's disobedience. That was the first time I saw her mention Muneer to Amara in a way that didn't sound like he was revered. "Don't you tell me what I can and can't do. You have no idea." My mother had pain in her eyes when she said that.

Amara was pale.

“You are going. Finished. And you put a smile on your face too. That man can give you a good life. You say you will never be like me. Well here’s your chance to have better than I ever did.”

“But Mummy,” Amara said in a soft pleading voice.

“*This man likes you,*” she said, softening her voice and trying to reason with Amara.

“He saw you at that wedding last month we went to with Fawzi. Remember that wedding. He asked about you. He wanted to meet you. He can give you a nice life.”

“How can he like me, he doesn’t even know me.”

“He knows what he needs to know. You just talk to him now. Show him how sweet and lovely you are.” My mother walked back toward Amara, still standing at the sink. She lifted her hand gracefully, and with the tips of her fingers, she stroked Amara’s cheek lovingly in the place where she had smacked her. “Rania will go with you, but she’s just going to sit there, you do the talking. He will like you enough to want to marry you. And then we don’t have to worry so much about the future. It’s a worry for a parent if their child isn’t settled.”

“Remember the wedding you and your mother came to with me, when my second cousin Kashiefa got married, it’s some family of his too, and he saw you that day, and then he said he saw you again in the wedding video, sitting next to me. His family knows my family, so he got my number and phoned me to ask me who you are. I told your mother and she said we must wait before we tell you. Check him out first. That’s how it happened.”

“You see, I told you. I didn’t do anything. He’s just another man that fell in love with you. Love at first sight,” my mother said, and she beamed as she said it.

“Your mother gave me a photo of you as well that I sent to him. That’s what happened lovey. It’s not our setup. He said you so stunning. He wanted to meet you.”

“You just caught his eye. I didn’t do anything,” my mother said. “But he did it the proper way. He went through the parents.”

Amara pulled away from my mother her face still knotted.

“I’m just saying, go out with the man, talk to him first. He can be better for you than those youngsters that waste your time. I know he’s not handsome but there’s more important qualities a man needs. You know a woman can be beautiful but a man must provide.”

“I’ll have nothing in common with him,” Amara said, “I won’t know what to talk about?”

“Amara don’t be silly now, don’t you know how to keep conversation. Talk to him about classy things, he’s a classy guy. Read the newspaper, then you’ll sound intelligent. Show him what a nice well rounded girl you are.”

“Didn’t you say you had a dream about this Shazia?” Aunty Fawzi said. She was of course talking about my mother’s psychic foretelling dreams.

“Oh yes, last night I dreamt of Amara at a funeral. And you know what that means. A funeral means a wedding.”

My mother wiped her hands together in glee and smiled from the one end of her ear to the other. “You know my dreams are always on point. There is a wedding coming up for you Amara.”

“When you go out with him, just don’t sit there like a dead duck like that Rania does, that’s all. Ask him questions and act interested in what he says. Laugh when he says



something funny. Nod to agree with him on his opinions. Men don't like women who contradict them too much. Just enough to show you can think for yourself, but that you not a difficult person. And smile. They like pretty girls that are happy."

There was a moment's awkward silence. And then Amara said.

"But I'm not interested in him, I don't want to get married to that man."

It was like a silent hammer dropped in the room.

"You don't know how lucky you are. He saw you in such a random way and he went out of his way to meet you. He wouldn't do that for just any girl. Now what's not to like about a man who treats you so special. I'm just scared you going to mess it up like you messed it up with Sameer. Now he would've been perfect for you. But he's gone and he's not coming back. And you're also not getting any younger. You don't meet men like this, with so many prospects, everyday. The women chase after men like this. You saw with this one's father. He's got nothing but women are always after him. A man who can provide, they chase my girlie. They fight for it. And here you are getting asked. Count yourself lucky."

Amara sighed hard. My mother stroked her hair.

"He's interested in you because he's got good taste, give him that. Did you see how he's dressed and that car he drives? He's first class all the way."

"But I can't just marry him?" Amara said. "And he looks like a grandfather. Imagine letting him touch me. I couldn't." She physically shuddered as she said it.

"You get used to it," my mother said. "Before you know it you'll have children, and that gives your life a new meaning. No matter how much you love them in the beginning,

you get tired of them anyway. Afterwards, they all make you *naar*. And the handsome ones get bald and fat. They don't stay handsome forever. In the old end they all look the same."

"I just don't know," Amara breathed out, conflicted.

My mother sounded exasperated from trying to persuade her.

"You must do what makes you happy. But I'm telling you, you don't want to spend your whole life struggling for a roof over your head like I did. You don't know the world yet my girlie because you've had it too easy. I made it too easy for you. If you don't want a queen's life, that's your baby. Just don't come crying to me when you struggle, I wipe my hands of you. I did my best."

It seemed the sound of all these realisms made Amara sad and she began to sob.

"She's young and foolish," Fawzi said.

"If I've told them once I've told them a thousand times. Don't worship love. Love falls apart, and then what have you got left?"

My mother went into a long speech about how children today are too spoiled to know the value of things. My mother said that when she got married nobody gave her as much as a washcloth or a toothbrush. I had to start my life with nothing. And she's talking to me about love, like it's bread.

And so that day, as I recall, Amara had to prepare herself to be cured from having a life that was too good. To make herself ready to be chosen for marriage to a man she wasn't attracted to, wasn't interested in, and had already decided she could never love, a man much older than her, a man she didn't want, but a man who she had been told would give her a good life. And that apparently was the purpose of it all, to have a good life, whatever that was.

## Chapter 21

### Go Read to Your Fish

I was supposed to go with Amara on these series of dates of getting to know Dr Zayed, so that he could see that Amara was not just some loose free girl, she came from a decent family and he could only date her with a chaperone.

I didn't want to go. Aunty Fawzi volunteered but my mother said no, she didn't want to crowd him with adults like they were interrogating him. She thought that might scare him off.

I refused to go. I said that I had too much homework to do. My mother was beside me in moments. She grabbed me by my arm and pulled me across the corridor where I stood all the way into my bedroom.

“Get out of that pyjamas right now, do you hear me,” she said. “It's two o' clock in the afternoon and you're lying around in pyjamas like an invalid in the intensive care unit.” She opened my cupboard and started shifting my clothes hangers from right to left on the rail with her free hand while the other hand held my arm in a tight twist. She flipped through the hangers, quite savagely, flinging them from one side of the cupboard to the

other. There were mostly t-shirts and a few jeans. On the inside of cupboard door was a poster of my favourite movie, Casablanca.

“What did I tell you about this?” I didn’t answer. I knew what she meant. She didn’t want posters up because it ruined paintwork on her furniture. She reached out with her fingernails and ripped the poster off the door. “I told you I don’t want shit on my walls or in my cupboards. It messes up the wood, fuckin hell.”

“It’s my room.”

“Do you work for me? Nothing here belongs to you.”

She had the poster in her hands and she threw it to the ground and dug a hole in it with the edge of her stilleto.

“Get dressed!” Unwillingly and moody, I submitted and put on my jeans. “Now go for a walk around the block, or go read to your fish like a mad person, and when you’re done you can tell me that you decided to go with Amara tomorrow. You do things for other people. You make me *rop* in that pyjamas whole day. You are bad luck.”

My mother was angry. I was ruining her love connection between the 50 year old bachelor and my 23 year old unwilling stepsister. And I was doing it because I had plans to sleep. Under my breath I whispered to my mother, “I hate you.”

When she heard me she fixed her eyes on me dead straight, and with the deepest seriousness I’ve ever seen in another human being’s face, she said “I hate you too.” She dropped the hangers she had in her hand onto the floor and walked away. My heart dropped like a mineshaft that came off its hinges.

Aunty Fawzi called out, “*Ai* you Shazia, you know, your mother has such a temper.” My mother puffed up her hair, and in the gentlest sweetest voice called back, “But she must

listen when I say a thing.” And in an instant, she transformed from being a monster to me to being charming to her friend.

I put on my takkies and went to the kitchen, where they were. I was holding back tears that would have flowed like a waterfall if I wasn't trying so hard to block it. Amara was sulking on the high stool. She had been quiet and today we were both battling our mother. I wanted to kill her and I think for once, Amara felt the same. My mother looked at me and said, “She will go. These children don't know how much pressure I'm under. I can barely afford cigarettes.”

She paused and said, “and stop looking so miserable.” She was right. I was miserable, and I had to smile through it.

“Oh good you're smiling”, my mother said.

Then I didn't even see it coming. But I felt a light brushing against my arm, and a dirty dishrag fell to the ground at my feet. My mother had picked up a dishrag off the table and flung it at me. It didn't hurt, and I was glad she didn't have anything sharper near her. Once before she had thrown a stainless steel soup ladle right at me but I ducked and it cracked the kitchen window instead. That window was still cracked because there was no money to fix it, yet there was money to go to a *doekoem* and put black magic spells on my father.

This time when she threw there was no window behind me to hit. It was just me that would get cracked that's all, so there was nothing too expensive to break.

## Chapter 22

### Toothpaste and False Teeth

Next day at 130pm Dr Zayed pulled up at our house in his new car and picked up two sulky young girls who were young enough to be his daughters, and who had fought with all their will against going with him. But I suppose he didn't know that. Or maybe he did and he just didn't care.

I was irritated and if eyes could be a weapon, I would have used it to commit mass murder that day. But there were little looks in Amara's eyes, and soft tones to her voice now and then, that made me think that there were things about Dr Zayed that impressed her as much as they impressed our mother.

She sat in front and I was in the backseat. Dr Zayed put on the radio and a soft song played that made me almost forget the circumstances.

"What kind of music do you like?" he asked, looking to the side at Amara. She told him she liked pop songs. Stuff you can dance to.

"Do you dance," he asked her.

She told him that she did and I gasped at the back, because the house rules my father had laid down were very clear and strict regarding that. We were not allowed to go to clubs because dancing was *haraam*.

“I’ve gone with boyfriends, and sometimes my friends,” she said. And then she told him about all the best clubs in town, the posh clubs you wanted to be seen at and the *skurkie* clubs you wanted to avoid. But according to her all clubs were selling drugs in some corner of it, and people were always trying to sell you shit to get high, if you had the money buy.

“I never get the real experience of it because I have a midnight curfew, it only *klops* after midnight and by that time I’m gone, but my ex Sameer took me a lot, just now the other night I told my mother we went to a birthday function, but we went clubbing.”

I gasped again. I used to think she told my mother everything. Clearly, she didn’t. Dr Zayed must have heard me because he asked me next, “And you, you go too?”

Amara didn’t give me a chance to answer.

“She doesn’t go out. She’s a nerd.”

I shot her a dirty look. No matter where we were, she was always obsessed with being the centre of attention and pushing me to the side. That’s why I thought she was a nightmare to be around. She was one of those people it was always all about her.

I propped myself up against the seat, leather, and looked out the window. We were beachside, the same places my father drove past on Sunday drives, but in my father’s car I’d always slink down so no one could see me. Here I was sitting in the kind of car you wanted to be noticed in. I fell in love with that feeling. And he was taking us to a nice place to eat too, he said.

The restaurant had booths around wooden tables and lamps that hung from the ceiling. In one end there was a big TV with sports on. I don't think it was really a restaurant, it was a steakhouse.

I was shy to tell the waiter what I wanted, I didn't know what the prices of everything was, and if he was just going to pay because everything was expensive.

Amara had been out with boyfriends. But I was like some country bumpkin and I knew it too. When the waiter came to the table I was nervous to order. But Dr Zayed spoke for us. He asked us if it was ok to order the steak with cheese sauce and we said yes. The waiter asked if we wanted anything to drink and I hesitated. My mother told me the night before not to be greedy, or he would think we're the type who "eats people out. And that's not classy."

"Nothing for me," I said.

Dr Zayed looked at me and ordered on my behalf, "Have a coldrink." And he told the waiter to bring one for me and for Amara.

"So that's 3 New York Sirloin, all well done and 2 Cokes for your daughters," the waiter said, confirming the order. Dr Zayed smiled and handed back his menu and politely said, "Yes please." He didn't correct the waiter or explain or anything. Amara and I sat silently and watched the waiter take the menus and walk away.

He asked us questions, like he had before in the car. I was mostly quiet.

When the food came, I couldn't use the utensils. At home we ate with our right hand, according to the Islamic *sunnah*. I didn't know how to use a knife and a fork, Dr Zayed noticed, which made me feel embarrassed. He showed me how.

Amara got irritated that Dr Zayed was putting his attention on me.



“Just hold the knife in your right hand,” she said, then she added, “don’t look for attention Rania.”

“I don’t know how to,” I said.

“You don’t know how to hold a knife in your right hand?” I think she really couldn’t stand it that Dr Zayed was now not looking at her, even if he was looking at me out of pity.

Amara gave me one long dirty look that might have sliced my face in two so piercing it was. Then she kicked my ankles under the table and I looked down at my plate and swallowed little swear words, “ouch you fuckin bitch.” She was still kicking my shins secretly, when I looked slowly up from my plate and caught her eye and we were staring each other down in such a way that we were trying to be clear, send each other a message, and be confidential about the whole event so that Dr Zayed wouldn’t see any of it.

Then Amara said loud, “You’re a real idiot you know that.”

“Now now girls,” Dr Zayed said.

And for a minute he did sound just like our father.

He resumed all his questions. So many questions he asked. Maybe like a job interview or maybe like he was inspecting horses at a racecourse for any possible disease before he decided to place his bet. I was just there for support, this wasn’t about me, but he asked me stuff too. I thought maybe just to see what kind of family Amara comes from.

He asked Amara about school. What class she was in and what subjects she liked. And of course she told him that she dropped out of school halfway through matric.

“I got sick, a little pneumonia, had to spend some time at Groote Schuur and I missed a lot. After that I just didn’t want to go back again, even though I’d passed midyear exams,” she said, “I got a job, and so I could help my mother with money a bit.”

“And you,” he asked me. “what grade did you finish school?”

I sensed condescension, a wave of superiority pushing us down.

“I’m studying,” I said, “Library Science.”

“Oh,” Dr Zayed said, curling the corners of his mouth, like it was a better answer than he expected.

“Rania’s lazy,” Amara said, “she hides her laziness behind books.” She stole that accusation straight out of my mother’s mouth, but Dr Zayed was nice to me again. And he liked the answers I gave. And he didn’t mind that I hadn’t been out much, that I didn’t have worldly experience like Amara did.

He smiled at me, looked at me very deeply, “She’s innocent,” he said, “pure.” Then he said, “And you’re beautiful, but you don’t know it. Or you don’t act it.”

I blushed. For the first time, I wondered, if maybe my mother was wrong. Maybe I wasn’t as ugly as she made me feel all the time. At school I hadn’t had boyfriends, I never got asked for my phone number, but maybe that was because I was so quiet, and because I didn’t have any confidence. And maybe confidence was something that could be cultivated. It was such a stupid superficial compliment, and it was coming from a questionable source, I know it shouldn’t have meant anything to a smart girl, but it did. It made me feel special.

“I work at a dentist office now,” Amara said.

I think she was trying to get Dr Zayed to look away from me and to look at her, focus on her. Of course she didn't want to be there, she didn't want him, but even so, she wanted to be the one he noticed, just because.

She started what I was sure was flirting. I had read an article on it in one of her Cosmopolitan magazines, and she was doing everything on the checklist. She was laughing wildly at his jokes and throwing her hair around, touching her hair when she talked, I even saw her reach over and touch Dr Zayed on his arm as she spoke, and her voice lowered into something more sensual and low than her usual tone. She looked deep into his eyes, moved physically closer to him.

“What do you do there?” Dr Zayed asked, turning to her.

“Answer phones, take appointments. You have to have a friendly personality, Rania is too miserable to work in reception. She doesn't like talking to people.”

She took a bite of her food.

“That's important,” she said, “being able to talk to people, smiling.”

“Yes it is,” Dr Zayed said, turning to his plate.

“Weekdays and Saturday mornings I work. Sundays I have off. And I get an hour lunch every day. Not bad. The dentist is a nice boss.”

“It's good that you enjoy your work.”

“I work with nice girls too, except for one. There was this one girl I worked with, got caught stealing toothpaste, tubes of it kept going missing and then our boss installed a security camera without telling any of us, caught her red handed pocketing people's false teeth that he made to order, especially for them. It was crazy. What could she do with that,

you couldn't use it? Maybe she just had an addiction to taking what wasn't hers. Like a klepto."

"Kleptomaniac," I said.

"*Ja*, she's a kleptomaniac."

"It's a psychological condition," Dr Zayed said. "Psychiatric."

"Yes, she was psychiatric. He phoned the police, laid a charge against her."

And so it went on, asking questions, assessing answers, Amara randomly rambling. It was a thorough interview, conversation, or examination. Call it what you will. I even ended up telling Dr Zayed about Tahir, and how much I missed him.

He told us about himself too, about his life. About halfway through I forgot that Dr Zayed was an unattractive old man who dared to smile at young girls. If you listened to him you would easily be intimidated, impressed. He was very sophisticated to talk to, he had a lot of worldly knowledge. I had read about the world a lot, and had dreamed of travelling, things I dreamed of he had all done.

But I suspect he liked to be intimidating, or surely he could have gone to find a wife who had the same level of education and life experience he had. But he wasn't looking for that. He didn't seem to mind that Amara had left school before she finished it, or that she had never travelled anywhere further than just up the coast. He had done all those things. And that was enough for him. That he had done it. And he didn't need or want a wife who would show him that she was just as clever and just as experienced as he was. He had noticed her at the wedding, seen her on the wedding video because she was pretty. And she was young. And to an older, unattractive man, youthful beauty was more valuable than

education and conversation and culture. Because those were things he already had. And as my mother always said, people want what they don't have.

Amara was pleasant enough to make being around her easy, and she would look up to him enough to make him feel powerful.

"All of those things made a girl like me, even though he had said I was beautiful, perhaps too ambitious, and more clever than necessary. Perhaps I was also too sullen to be comforting to the spirit of a man who needed nothing from anyone anymore, except for his wishes to be met to his convenience.

"I need to go to the loo," Amara said, "freshen up," very unoriginally repeating stuff she heard on TV. Dr Zayed nodded and Amara looked at me and said, "Come with me." I followed her, and as soon as we were out of earshot, she started giggling and pinching me on my waist, "Did you see how he trained you to eat with a fork, you made us look like *gham* or something. I'm telling mummy about you. Learn how to act."

"Me? Must I keep me *kwaai* like you keeping you? When did you all of a sudden get a posh accent, you putting on?"

"That's what mummy told me to do. But *yoh*, did you hear how he brags about all his stuff, and he's been here and he's been there. Soooo pretentious," She said "soooo pretentious" in a fake white accent.

"Is he actually going to pay for all this food we ordered," I asked her in naïve disbelief.

"Well he better," she said, putting on lipstick in the bathroom mirror. "I've got R 5 on me, and I wash enough dishes at home. And I've been listening to his *kak* all night so he owes me. You'll catch me climbing through this toilet window and running from this

restaurant in heels and all if he doesn't," she laughed. And I laughed too, knowing this to be the utter truth. We would get a taxi home. Goodbye Dr Zayed.

But when we got back to the table and Dr Zayed paid the bill before we even got there. I looked over at Amara and caught her in a smile. And she can't lie. Feeling taken care of like that, feeling spoiled. That felt nice.

On the way back home I was quiet, sat in the backseat listening to Amara and Dr Zayed have more ear numbing conversation. While they spoke, my eyes met Dr Zayed's in the rear view mirror. He was staring at me in secret while he was driving. I diverted my glance. Suddenly I felt queasy. I could feel the steak churning in my stomach and then I couldn't keep it down.

I fixed my eyes on the buttons along the radio, they were brightly lit up, and suddenly the car felt very smooth and not rickety rickety like my father's car, and in a moment so fast I couldn't stop it, I threw up in the back seat of Dr Zayed's BMW.

Amara turned around and saw me puking. I even got vomit on my hair that was framing my face.

"Oh sis," Amara said. "Can't you hold it in? Trust you." There was vomit all over the seat and on the floor and some on the driver's seat too. The stench of puke started to fill up the air in the car, the smell was all over my clothes and Amara's too, our nice dresses ruined for now and Dr Zayed, unsure of what to do, pulled over by the side of the road.

Cars were whizzing past us on the highway, and we were in the emergency lane, standing by the side of the road with car doors open to get the smell of fresh air back in. I couldn't stop apologizing, I was so embarrassed that I messed up this man's nice car, but Dr Zayed was polite. He didn't seem too upset.

“It’s leather,” he said, “I’ll just wipe it up. If it was material I would have had to have it professionally cleaned. Lucky it’s not,” and he smiled.

I fumbled in my bag for tissues to clean his seats with, and when I wiped it all up Dr Zayed helped me while Amara got out of the car to escape the smell, standing by the roadside with her purse and her lipstick and her nice dress.

“I’m not cleaning up her mess,” she said looking at Dr Zayed. He was so nice to me. He got out of the front seat and crouched in at the back, taking some of my tissues and we wiped the seats together until they were dry and there was no vomit left. He had a bottle of water in the car and he wet the tissues and a cloth he had in the cubby hole, and wiped the floor and the seats with that too.

He opened all the car windows right to the bottom and we drove like that, with our hair blowing wild in the wind and that puke smell in our nostrils all the way home. The music played again. He played Bollywood songs that I didn’t know, but I listened because the beat was nice. Sometimes my father brought Bollywood movies home for us to watch, it was the kind of music they played when the leading man and lady were dancing around on the hills, blowing shy kisses between trees.

My hair fluttered from the breeze through the open windows, and I ignored the smell. Some things were like that I thought, like vomit, no matter how you scrubbed the stain and cleaned it up and tried to make it look nice, once it is there, you just can’t get the dirty of it out, the stench of it you know. It just smells bad, no matter what you do to try and cover it up.

## Chapter 23

### Air Freshener

It was late and my mother was asleep. Amara was flipping over in her bed from side to side. I was awake too. A lot was happening. Since my father left everything was even more crazy than before. If Amara married this man, he would set my mother up. He already knew the plan was that she would live with them. Wait for grandbabies to cement her financial security, a forever tie to the well off Dr Zayed.

What would happen to me, I wondered? My mother had been threatened to leave me with my father in every fight they had, and when my father was over on the weekend fixing things, I heard him tell her that she would never get me, that I was his child. *I was his.* But I didn't want to live with my father. We didn't talk. He may as well have spoken French and I, Mandarin. It would be so awkward. He was this person who I had always been told loved me more than anything in the world, but I just didn't feel it. It was hard to reconcile the abstract idea of him loving me, to how disconnected I felt to him emotionally. It was a paradox of feelings that only served to confuse my self-worth. I mean, what value did words have if it didn't translate into something real?



I needed him though. He took care of all my upkeep. He had frequently told me that I didn't have the confidence to make it on my own in this life. He said that was why he babied me, because I was too innocent for this world. It would eat someone like me up alive. I believed him. I hated that I needed him, my mother, all of them. But I did need them.

My father told my mother the last weekend he had been there, that he was sick. He told her that he had a heart condition, that the doctor at Groote Schuur put him on medication. The doctor said that if his blood pressure didn't go down, then he was at risk of having a heart attack. When she told us what he said, she laughed.

"That man is such a liar," she said, "World's Biggest Liar."

"What if he's telling the truth?" I said, worried.

Thinking he might be sick made me feel sorry for him. I remembered how he paid for all my books without complaint, even though he didn't have much money, and how he played music in the car on Sundays, even though western music went against his religious inclination. I thought of how he brought a bag of mangoes for me every Saturday when he came over to do his chores. And he brought coconuts and jack fruit too. He said it reminded him of being a little boy in India, where he used to climb trees to collect them, and he wanted me to have a taste of his childhood.

He normally didn't speak to me. He came in (he kept his key,) and I heard him tell my mother to tell me that there was fruit for me in the kitchen. He never came empty handed.

"Never brings me anything," my mother said. I saw the expression on her face. It bothered her, she knew, that to him, she would never be me.

“He’s not sick,” she said. “You’re a fool if you believe that.”

“So why lie now?” I said.

“Because he wants me to take him back and his ego is too big to ask. He wants it to be my idea. You think I’m an idiot. I know him too well.”

“Shame,” I said.

“Not shame. No shame for him. It’s all good and well for him to run around with all kinds of dirty women, then I must just swallow and forgive. Those filthy *jintoos* he’s busy with won’t do his dirty washing and ironing, they won’t cook for him and clean house. Do you think they will clean a house? He wants to keep me here and use me for all his dirty work, but then he wants to run around and do whatever he wants.”

So right now I didn’t know what would become of me. I was scared. And with Amara leaving with Dr Zayed, even though we fought, I was scared of losing her too. She was my family. She, and my mother, and my father, they were all I had. I know I never showed it. Maybe because I didn’t know it, but I realised it now, that I loved them. It wasn’t just about needing them or money or support, but without them, I would be unfixably sad. I would be really and truly alone in this world. I complained about my family so much. And now that we were coming apart at the seams, it hurt. I’d lost Tahir too. Why was I like this? Why didn’t I know what I had, when I had it?

I looked over at Amara, my heart pierced like a sieve. Even though we were an imperfect family, we still had love there. One by one, 20 Jane Avenue, Rylands, was spitting us out. We were losing each other, and it made me ache.

“Are you asleep?” Amara whispered. I got a fright, for a second I almost imagined she had heard my loud thoughts or felt me staring into her back.

“No,” I whispered back.

“I want to tell you something,” she said.

“What?”

“But I don’t know if I can tell you.”

My interest was piqued.

“You can tell me anything.” The way I felt that moment, I really meant it.

She sighed hard.

“I don’t want to marry Dr Zayed.”

“I know that already.”

Amara got up out of bed, and in her summer nightie walked across to the cabinet across our room. She opened the fourth drawer, and rummaged underneath a pile of her panties. Then closed our bedroom door, came back to bed and sat up against the wall facing me.

In her hand she had a box of cigarettes and a lighter.

“If I light this will mummy smell it?”

She got up went to the bathroom, came back with Haze air freshener and closed our bedroom door again softly, resumed her earlier position. She lit a cigarette and inhaled and exhaled, imitating my mother. As she exhaled, she sprayed the air freshener around her in a circular whizz, and then went on smoking.

“Mommy’s going to kill you if she knows.”

“She won’t know.”

“Not even with her superhuman foretelling radar?” We laughed a muffled quiet laugh.

“Since when do you smoke anyway?”

She didn’t answer, just said, “You want some?”

The last time I tried I coughed, this time I was sure I’d get it right. I don’t know why, she already thought I was a huge nerd, but I just wanted to say yes, impress her a little. I got up and leaned over and she gave me her cigarette, lit another one for herself. I sat against my wall she sat against hers, on our beds, facing each other, smoking cigarettes. Every now and then she’d spray the air freshener, so it smelled like we were in a country meadow somewhere where a farmer grew lemons.

She was different. Opening up parts of her she had hid from me up until that moment. Out of the blue, she said, “Have you ever drunk wine?” I was surprised, not by the question, but by the fact that we were talking about things that were kind of personal, instead of just superficial small talk or arguing. It felt like she was reaching out, like maybe this was going to be a real conversation, and we were going to confide in each other.

“No, and where would I get the chance.”

“I did,” she said. “Don’t tell mummy.”

I was shocked. That she did and that she told me she did.

“You’ll go to hell for doing that. We’re not supposed to. We’re Moslem. That’s not what we do.”

Amara laughed a little chuckle, and blew out her cigarette smoke.

“Well we are a lot of things. And at anytime, anybody can decide to be anything they want to be. One day you can be one thing, and the next day you can be something completely different, isn’t it?” she said, and I didn’t quite know what she meant so I said nothing.

“Faizal showed me, he bought beer for me once and I liked it”.

“Faizal?”

“He’s my boyfriend.”

Again I reeled.

“You don’t have a boyfriend. We know all your boys. Sameer was the last one.”

“Sameer was a *doos*,” she said, “a pretentious prick, just like Dr Zayed. I didn’t let Faizal come to the house because I know mummy. She wouldn’t like him. He’s not posh enough. But I love him.”

I smoked the cigarette and swallowed a cough and then another, trying to look like a professional cool nicotine swallower.

“So what are you going to do, tell mummy you have someone. She wants you to marry the creepy doctor.”

“I’m not telling her anything.”

“So what you going to do, you can’t just get married to someone else. You need permission, a *wakeel* or a *wali*. What do they call it now again? Something like that? But you need it.”

“What do you think I’m going to do? Allow our crazy mother to force me into marrying a fifty year old fat man, so that she can afford to get divorced, just to spite your

father because he brings you mangoes on Saturdays and not her. And because I'm her golden child and it's my job to save her life?"

"Maybe if you talk to her she'll back off. Reason with her."

Amara laughed, and I knew what she wanted to say. To say reason next to my mother in a sentence was an anomaly.

"If I do anything to stuff this up she'll kill me. Actually kill me."

"I just realised that we say that a lot, that if we do something, somebody else in the family's going to kill us."

She laughed and stubbed out her cigarette against the box of cigarettes, leaving a burn hole in the top of the cardboard. The plastic over it in that spit fizzled away like acid was poured onto it and I watched the smoke rise from the box.

"Maybe she won't know it's your fault he doesn't want to marry you, if you just put him off," I said. "She'd just think *he* didn't want to go through with it."

"She's going to speak to him. Unless he genuinely gets a better offer than me, trust me, I'm trapped."

She put her head down on her pillow and crawled back under the covers.

"Do you really think he'll marry you", I said, "I'm really sure if you talked to mummy about it, she'd listen to what you want. You've always been her favourite. She loves you the most."

I said that, but while I said it, I replayed in my head the slurred words my mother said to me that day when she took the sleeping tablets, when she had the potatoes on her head. I never quite knew what to make of that. What truth there might have been in it? I had no way of knowing.

Amara was silent. Then she said.

“Mummy doesn’t love me. I make her look good and she loves looking good. She loves herself. That’s who she loves.”

“I’m sorry”, I said, and I didn’t know if an apology even made sense in the circumstances, but I just didn’t know what else to say.

“Me too,” she said, then she whispered, “Rania?”

“Yes,” I whispered back.

“Will you sleep here by me tonight?”

“You mean in your bed?”

She opened up her covers and moved up making space for me. Then she patted the spot where I should lay beside her. I clambered out of my bed and scooted over to her bed, fitting next to her neatly, our backs arched my tummy spooned into the curve of her back, our heads both facing the same wall, trying to fall asleep, we pulled the duvet up to our chins.

“Come with me tomorrow,” she said.

“Come with to where?”

I lifted my head in the dark, pricked my ears up toward her voice and said, “Where are you going, you have work tomorrow.”

“Fuck work. Fuck all of it.”

“Ok,” I said.

That night Amara and I slept beside each other in her single bed. We lay falling asleep and there is something about a dark quiet room, late at night that makes me into many things

that I am not during the daytime when the sun is bright. It makes me things like vulnerable, scared, soft, worried, empathetic, and if it is even possible, a little more quietly sad. But for the first time in my life I realised that I wasn't the only person in the world who became those things in the quiet of the night. I wasn't even the only person in our house who did. All these years, the beautiful, popular, most loved Amara, was just as scared and alone as I ever was. And if she was, I wondered if my mother and father were too.



## Chapter 24

### Blood-sisters

Next morning Amara feigned illness so she didn't go to the train station with my mother for work. She stayed home with me.

My routine now was almost the same as before my father left. It had been a good few weeks that he was gone. When my father was home he woke us up to make *fajr* every morning. With my father gone, my mother got up to make *salaah* alone, she let me and Amara decide for ourselves what we wanted to do.

"It's your sins," she said, "you're are big women. I don't need to tell you what you must do. You should know what's right by now."

I made *salaah* this morning when I woke up, late *fajr*. I asked Amara to join me, and she did. We made *salaah* together. I usually made *salaah* when I felt scared. And I was very scared now. I was afraid of losing my family, now that I'd figured out how much I loved them.

I found a list of chores on the fridge, the work my mother wanted me to finish that day.

I checked my list of chores. I had a new list every day. Then I did the cooking, then my studies.

I started thinking that I should look for a job, so that I could rely on my father less, stand on my own. I needed to overcome my insecurity. I didn't what kind of job I might do, maybe a job at the library or reading books to old people at an old age home. There had to be something I could do to earn money. I was shy yes, but I was not a block of cement. I was thinking about this as I ripped the post it off the fridge door. It read:

1. Clean out fridge - defrost.
2. Polish up brass - especially the front doorknob.
3. Make frikkadel, *lus* for that - tired of curry.

I sat down to breakfast. Amara was in the bathroom. She came into the kitchen as I poured milk over my Rice Krispies, sat beside me, unpeeling a banana she picked up from the fruit basket.

I swallowed spoonfuls of my cereal and it felt thick in my mouth. Like I was chewing big clumps of cardboard and my tongue felt all swollen and numb. What I mean is, I was awkward. Somehow in the morning light, the emotional intimacy Amara and I shared the night before made me feel shy, and today, we couldn't talk as easily as we did the night before.

"I can trust you right, you'll keep it a secret," she said.

"I said you can." I swallowed my Rice Krispies.

She was talking about what she told me last night. She told me that she was leaving us.

Actually, she didn't say she was leaving us. She said she was "leaving this house." Leaving

this house, she said, running away from 20 Jane Avenue, Rylands. As if she was leaving the address, instead of the people in it.

She put the banana peel in her left hand and reached her right hand out to me.

“Toss in.” She meant pinkie swear.

I reached out my pinkie and we locked our pinkies into each other like five year olds.

Amara opened the kitchen drawer. She pulled out a paring knife and said “Let’s make it official.”

“What are you doing?”

“Sealed with blood,” she said. I squirmed as she held the knife up to my face.

She made an incision across her palm with the knife. She handed the knife to me, “your turn,” she said.

“This is how they do it in the gangs, the *Americans* and the *Hard Livings*. Faizal told me.”

“Is he in a gang?” I shuddered.

I took it, closed my eyes and bit on my front teeth, ready to cut myself. But I couldn’t. I dropped the knife on the table and opened my eyes.

She took my hand and pulled it out toward her. I let her. I outstretched my arm, pulled my palm taut, while she held my hand, but I turned my face in the opposite direction, as far away from my arm as I could get it, and I closed my eyes. She cut me.

I felt a sharp little burn and bit my tongue, muffling a scream.

Then she took our palms and smooshed them together, mixing our blood into one red blob.

“Blood-sisters,” she said.

I squirmed, thinking that mixing blood was dangerous.

“We were blood before. And you know what we just mixed don’t you,” I said, remembering Ms Rawoot from biology class in high school.

“We mixed our DNA, mixed our mitochondria, mixed our chromosomes, and if either of us has any infectious diseases, we just mixed our diseases too.”

“We were half blood before. No more of that watered down shit. Now it’s sealed in the way that counts. Your win is my win. Your pain is my pain.”

I turned my head to her, my eyes open, and gripped tighter.

I felt what she meant. I’d been feeling it more and more lately, and now it was formal. Blood is the thing that pumps life into our hearts you know. And you don’t just spill it, and you don’t just share it, and you don’t just give it up. Blood isn’t just, nothing. Blood is something. Blood is life force. Blood is forever. *Blood is blood.*

## Chapter 25

### 9 Carat Gold Signet Ring

In our bedroom, Amara pulled a haversack out of the cupboard. She started packing. She was flinging things from her cupboard into her bag.

I didn't agree with this. But I understood her emotions. I mean I didn't, but I could put myself in her place and see that it couldn't be easy. I wouldn't want to marry some rich old man I didn't even know. And we knew our mother. She was a domineering woman, just as controlling as my father in some ways.

“So this is it, *this is goodbye*,” I said sarcastically, hoping she would see that I didn't want her to go.

“I have a right to make decisions about my life.”

“I know, but to just up and leave like this?”

She threw something into her bag hard and released her hands from it in a mixture of anger and exasperation.

“Well mummy didn't really leave me any other choice, now did she?”

“So how long am I supposed to keep a secret like this? This is big.”

“Just till I get where I’m going, I’ll contact her when I’m settled in, let her know.”

“She’ll worry.”

“No she won’t”

“Yes she will.”

“Maybe she deserves to worry.” She exhaled hard. “I’ll let her know ok. I’ll phone. I promise.”

“Why did you even tell me?”

“I didn’t want to just go without saying goodbye to anyone. Feels *kak* you know, to do it like that. That’s why I asked you to come with me. I dunno, see me off. At least I want someone to say goodbye to. Am I *dur* to want that?”

My heart dipped into darkness like a sunset in a horizon far away.

“You could have told Nawaal.”

“She’s not my sister.”

“If something feels *kak* then don’t do it.”

She looked at me for what felt like long time, long seconds. Her eyes were moist and watery.

“I can’t.”

“You fucking can.”

“You don’t know the whole story.”

“Then tell me.”

“I’m pregnant, ok.” She sat down on the bed after she said it.

My heart dropped further this time. I sat next to her. Put my hand on her kneecap. It was so awkward, but I rubbed her kneecap, tried to comfort her. I had nothing to say. Now she was telling me about a baby. Just like when she was telling Dr Zayed about how she went clubbing, and told me last night about the drinking. Even though I'd shared a room with her my whole life, sometimes I felt like I didn't know her at all.

*"Tell mummy. She'll help you."*

She shook her head indicating no.

She got up and started going through her drawers, pulling out more panties, stuffing it into her bag.

"I haven't got place for all this stuff. I'm just taking what I can. I need a razor, can I take yours. You've always got nice razors."

I breathed.

*"Ja. Take the Gillette ones. I have some unopened."*

I got off the bed and went to get them. She stuffed them in her bag.

*"Shukran. Faizal, he'll let me use those cheap disposable plastic razors, just to save money. It leaves brown patches under my armpits, I can't stand it."*

"Glad I can make your running way more convenient," I said, leaning against our cupboards.

She smiled. Then dug into an old jewellery box she kept in her drawer. It was made of sucker sticks and seashells glued together. She pulled out something and placed it into my palm. I opened my hand and looked. It was an old 9carat gold signet ring that used to be mine. My mother bought it for me when I was six years old. It had a little heart insignia in

the corner, with a cupid's arrow through it. The band was broken, clipped into half, so you could adjust the fit of the ring to a bigger finger than it was meant for.

"I remember this," I said.

"It was yours, and mummy didn't have enough money to buy me one too. So I cried and cried until you let me wear it."

"You mean you stole it every morning and didn't care if I cried about it. You broke the band so that it could fit your fat, older, finger. You know you broke my heart when you broke my ring, just claimed it for yourself. And mummy didn't even say anything about that. She just let you."

"I was so jealous because she bought one for you and not me," Amara said.

"Jealous? You're the one she favours so much. Ms Popularity, gets all the guys. Remember. I'm the loser with a capital L."

"Then why did she buy you the gold ring with the last of her pay cheque and not for me? Ms I'm so clever and I'm going to get a degree and be a somebody."

"Because I don't talk and she felt sorry for me."

"She only ever favoured me because my father's not here. Do you think I never knew that?"

"That's not true," I said.

She smirked.

"Well now you've got your ring back so we have no reason to fight each other over her anymore, ok?"

"Ok."



“I’m going to get a wedding ring to replace it,” she said smiling, “Faizal said he can get me one that doesn’t cost too much. His friend works at a jewellery store, so he can get him an employee discount.”

I looked down at the ring and gripped it in my hand. I felt sad.

“What must I say tonight when she sees you’re not here.”

“Nothing, don’t get involved. She’ll blame you for not stopping me. You’ll get into trouble.” She flung more things into her haversack. “I told you, I’ll phone her.”

I threw on a sweater and my nice jeans, the one I didn’t do housework in. I tried not to look at Amara because I knew if I did I would cry.

We walked out of the room and closed our bedroom door behind us. The house felt different. It felt quiet without my father and now it felt so quiet it was like even the walls were numb. At the front door, Amara stopped for a second and looked back.

“Did you forget something?”

I could hear her breathing very deep into her lungs.

“You can change your mind,” I said, “You don’t have to go.”

She gripped her bag tight around her shoulder and jolted herself back into reality.

“Lock up *kanalla*,” she said. “I won’t need this anymore,” and she tossed the keys of our house to me, those spare keys that my mother had cut for us for days when my father locked us in. It flew mid-air and I reached out and caught it. When I opened my hand with the keys in it, I saw that the blood on my palm had already dried.

## Chapter 26

### Small World

We walked to the main road and we hailed down a taxi. They came past Belgravia Road from the taxi rank in Hanover Park on the way to the city centre, every ten minutes or so. The taxi guard leered out of the half open door as the taxi came to a stop before us. He was screaming, Athlone, Mowbray, Cape Town. I got in with her, scooted in next to the taxi guard and we exchanged smiles. Something else my father didn't want us to do. Take a taxi at random times. The music was really loud, and it was really bad quality. It hurt my ears and my heart thumped erratically out of beat with it.

We didn't go far. We got off just past the robots at the Caltex garage, and walked a few roads down and turned into Belgravia, the area, just past Belgravia High school. I walked with her down the street until she stopped in front of the gate of a beige painted house with a low chain link fence and a matching small gate. I didn't know if that was as far as she wanted me to go before she left, but I waited for her to say goodbye every time she opened her lips to speak. At the gate she unhitched the flimsy lock by putting her hand over the low fence and catching the clasp on the inside of it. "This is Faizal's place," she said, "I'd like you to meet him. Before we go I mean, and get married and stuff."

I looked at her when she said that and maybe it was just the sun hitting her irises or maybe it was something inside her, but her face glowed, like a sunbeam lit over her. Maybe that was how people looked before they let go of everything in life they didn't want to hold onto anymore, and just went and did what their heart asked of them. Maybe that was happiness.

Faizal lived in the separate entrance of that house, and as Amara opened the gate he came strolling down the driveway toward us. He had heard the metal clanging against metal as Amara fiddled to open it. Amara threw her arms around him as soon as she got in the driveway, and kissed him so severely I worried her lips might come off. An old dog came walking out, as slowly as Faizal had come walking out and dawdled around his ankles.

"Is she coming with us?" He said that sounding concerned that the answer might be yes.

I took the bag off my back and held it in my hand, gripping the backslings like a handle.

"No this isn't my bag, I just carried it for Amara."

Amara smiled.

"This is my sister Rania I told you about. My chaperone as far as Dr Zayed is concerned. I wanted her to see me off. You don't mind do you baby?"

He winked amicably, and they walked inside. I followed behind.

"Come boy", Faizal said, and the dog followed too, to the back, and he locked it behind another gate.

We went into the garden cottage. It was small, with a kitchenette, a dining room, looked like one bedroom and a bathroom attached.

“He lives here alone,” Amara said, taking her bag from me and putting it down on Faizal’s old couch. An ugly velvet monstrosity of a thing that was much too big for the room. My mother would have hated it. My mother had been so busy suspecting my father of illicit dealings, she never even saw that Amara was the one who was doing her own thing on the side.

“So, what’s the plans” he said.

“You tell me.”

“I bought bus tickets for us, headed out of town. We’re leaving this afternoon after 2.”

He threw himself down on the couch.

“We’ve got some time before then.”

She sat down beside him.

“Want a smoke?” he said to me, as he fished something out of his pocket and started rolling it like a cigarette.

“She doesn’t smoke,” Amara said, “she’s the good sister.”

“The good one, I guess not everyone is like you and me babe, made for the hell fire.”

He chuckled.

“The good ones are the ones the world feeds off.”

I didn’t tell them that I had smoked, with Tahir. I wasn’t ready to use his name randomly, in vain. Not yet. I was still raw that he wasn’t around anymore.

“So you are the one who went with Amara when she went with that doctor. That old prune that thought he could get his hands into my girlfriend’s pants. He thinks he can roll

into town with some shit BMW, and his hair all smoothed over with coconut oil, and just take my girl. What does he take me for? Does he think I'm a *poes*?"

Amara had clearly left out no details in describing Dr Zayed.

Faizal reached his arm out and pulled at Amara. He drew her in close and I saw their tongues interlock and it was mixed with smoke fumes from their cigarettes. It looked sloppy and disgusting. I was embarrassed and tried to look away but there was really nowhere to look. The room was pretty small so I stared at the kitchen sink and counting the number of times the tap dripped water into the basin. I counted 6, before they finally pulled their faces away from each other.

"Do you know where we going?" he asked me. "Did you tell her?" he turned to Amara.

"All she knows is that I'm out of this shithole. I'm not going to be forced to marry some old *torpie* just because my mother thinks it's going to save my life or something. As if she's an expert on what a life should look like."

"Your mother's going to love me for this," Faizal said blowing his smoke. He was so calm.

Amara was about to speak but Faizal shooshed her.

"Don't tell her. It's better if nobody knows. I mean, better for her too, if she's not coming with us, the less anyone knows, the better."

I was standing watching them on the couch, limbs entwined into each other, a haze of smoke around their bodies, like dew rising in the morning. I realised I was uncomfortable. Suddenly didn't really know what to do with my body, it was like my limbs were in the

way of me. I was just trying to figure out how to stand natural and look casual, when we heard the metal gate outside.

Faizal got up and pulled the curtain aside to peer out through the window. "It's Rafiek," he said, then pulled the curtain closed again, and went out to let him in.

I heard their voices approaching the door.

"I got your movies," the voice said as he walked in and sat down on the couch next to Amara. I only saw the top and sides of his head as he came in, because he was walking in behind Faizal and Faizal's tall body blocked my view. They sat down on the couch next to each other, and now I saw his head from the side. I looked twice. I hadn't seen him properly yet, but his face, his voice, it seemed familiar.

"*Kwaai* man, thanks, I'll take this with me. You still going to drop us at the bus station in town right," Faizal said.

"Sorted," the voice said.

"*Kwaai*," Faizal said.

"What time do you guys want to go?"

I had been stretching my head, to see his face and Faizal's head was blocking him from my view the whole time. I stepped forward. And my heart flipped a little cartwheel.

"Fiekie!" I said loud. "It's me, Rania."

Rafiek pushed his head forward past Faizal's, and saw me.

"*Ah-we!* I know this *kinn*, this is my *brah*, Tahir's, cousin."

The last time I had seen him was at Tahir's *janaazah*.

"Didn't you know," I said. "Amara's his cousin too."

“Small world,” he said. “*Naai*, I only met Amara, *when now again?*” he turned his head to look at her.

“Just recently,” she said, “and we never really talked much.”

“*Ja*, I’m not important enough to know all this *brah’skinners*.” Faizal and Fiekie laughed.

Amara was surprised that I knew him. She was friends with Nawaal, and Nawaal was Tahir’s sister, but Tahir and Nawaal had a different group of friends. Nawaal had her modeling crowd and friends from university. Tahir had his racing crew.

“*Who do you know?*” Amara said sounding mean and sarcastic, “You don’t know anyone, you never go out. You’re just at home always.”

I was embarrassed.

“I go out sometimes. I know Fiekie, he was Tahir’s friend.”

“I think about Tahir a lot. That was my *brah* that.”

“Are you talking about that boy who died in the dicing accident?” Faizal asked.

“*Ja*, he was closest *chommie*. Ripped me up when he *maniegald*. I’m still not over it. Makes a man think, you know, about life and stuff.”

“I heard about that. That was a tragedy,” Faizal said. “They say he didn’t have *lekker* wheels on his car, that’s what caused him to lose control.”

Fiekie exhaled hard.

“*Ja*, but it’s in *Allah’s* hands. Death is put out.”

He thought deep a minute and came back to the conversation a few seconds later.

“Are you going with them?” Fiekie asked looking shocked at the idea that I might be running away.

“No. no. Amara’s going. I’m just here for moral support, that’s all.”

“I wanted to say. I never pegged you for a runaway. You the nicest girl I ever met.”

I blushed, and I remembered the looks he had given me back when I spent time with the whole group. He was artful about making eye contact. It had always made my little hairs on my arms stand up like goose-bumps.

“How’s Aunty Hasiena,” he said.

“She hasn’t been good. She had a nervous breakdown. Hardly comes to us anymore. But I visit her, keep in touch.”

“*Yoh*, shame man, that’s serious. I must go visit her. I haven’t been good about that.”

He ran his fingers through his hair.

“But *yoh* that was a shock to the system about Tahir. He was one of my best friends. A person needs time to recover from something like that, I mean ‘*n man*’ don’t just get over it. Not *somma* just like that.”

“I don’t even think you ever get over it,” I said. “You just adjust to a different type of normal, until you have a new routine where that person isn’t part of your day anymore.”

“*Ja*, but sometimes you still forget to forget. You still pick up the phone to tell them something, then you remember, they not here to talk to anymore.”

“It takes time,” I said.

“You people are really making ‘*n man*’, think deep. *Yoh*, you making me sad, but life goes on also *ne*. What else can we do?”

“True brother,” Fiekie said, changing the energy of his voice, like cracking ice on water, he pulled himself into another zone.



“So what time you guys wanna go *brah*?”

“Our bus leaves this afternoon. I was thinking maybe we can go grab a *gatsby* or something in the meantime, what do you say, you free? Amara wants to say bye to her sister. Let’s give them a chance to do it properly. Plus, I don’t want to get on that bus with a hungry stomach. It’s a long drive.”

And that was the day I re-met Fiekie. Today, Fiekie and I were all Faizal and Amara had to say goodbye to. We were their boundary, the final memory between this old world and their new life somewhere else, that they were about to begin.

And so I ended up sitting in the back seat of Fiekie’s Golf, next to Amara, and he drove us to a *takeaway* in Wynberg. We bought a *gatsby* and Coke at Aneesa’s and then we drove out to Clifton Fourth beach to eat it.

Amara wanted to go to Hout Bay, “once last time before I leave”, she said, but Faizal said no, in case we got back too late for them to make their bus. “Traffic and all,” he said. They were taking the bus from Town, so after we had our *gatsby* we drove back down past Sea Point from Clifton. We strolled around there, got ice cream and milled around the Promenade watching people walk their dogs and cyclists go by on the pavement.

I had money on me. My father had given me for stationery. I fished it out of my jeans pocket to pay for my own food.

Sea Point was full, even though it was a weekday it was still summer and there were lots of tourists in town. There were paragliders that could be seen against the clouds like little black un-soaked falooda pips on a blue bubblegum milkshake from Wembley

roadhouse in Belgravia road. And the sun was out and it occurred to me that I may have been out more these past few months, than I had been out in the whole year before it.

We sat down on a bench overlooking the sea. We looked down across the stretch of beach and sand, dotted with sunbathers here and there, the seagulls dipping into the waves and then back out again like eager fishermen, and me, feeling like a lost soul in a mix of events I didn't quite understand.

Amara and Faizal were cuddling. It was like those two couldn't keep their hands off each other. They were constantly touching and kissing and playing with each other's hair. "That's disgusting," I heard Fiekie say, and when I turned to look Amara had two of her fingers in Faizal's face and she was trying to pop a zit he had.

"Love is intimacy," Fiekie said, joking.

And they just went on, it was like they were magnets that were chemically drawn to each other.

I had never been intimate with someone like that. I don't mean physically. I mean emotionally. To do that you needed to be a different kind of smart. The kind you didn't get in my books. In that area, I think Amara was the clever one. And I was no more than an overeducated dumb-dumb.

I felt unhappy about having to keep a secret from my mother. It sat in me uncomfortably. But I made a promise to Amara. And we were blood-sisters. I was learning anyway, that everyone had secrets. My father did. We never knew what he was doing at the teacher's house or at the Dirty Dozen's, or at any of the countless other women's places that we had heard from people he was at.

My mother had secrets too, secrets about Muneer. I believed it now. Everything she whispered in her half sleep that day, that Muneer was not dead. But that he had abandoned her and Amara. He was not better than my father at all, perhaps he was not even half the man my father was. Did my father know the truth? Amara didn't.

Amara was like them now, she had her share of secrets, and I was part of keeping it, for now at least. I justified it by reasoning that sometimes secrets are necessary. Secrets hide the truth. But there are times we need that, because the truth can be something too painful, for our stupid, fragile, flawed little human hearts to bear.

## Chapter 27

### Rose from Titanic

Amara and Faizal were walking along the beach promenade. Even from a distance you could see them tucked into each other. They were all tongue, laughing, and playful. They didn't even care that they left me alone with Fiekie, which made me so nervous, because I could feel him looking at me when he thought I couldn't see.

“Do you want to go for a walk too?” Fiekie asked me.

“No I said. Why would I want to do that? Let's just sit here and wait for the lovebirds to come back.”

“You say it so sarcastically. Aren't girls supposed to be into the lovey dovey stuff?”

“Not me. I don't want someone all over me like that.”

“Of course, I remember the day at the pool. *Yoh*, I'm sorry about that, I shouldn't have offered to put baby oil on you to help you tan. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.”

I blushed.

“What makes you think I was uncomfortable,” I said defensively.

“Because you pulled away, and Haroon and his *kinn* were all over each other that day. You must have thought we were perverts.”

I smiled.

“Yes, maybe only you,” I said with a playful smile, but there was a concern there.

“What?” He looked at me, a grin on his face.

“You had Shamiela. Why did you wait for her to leave before you offered to rub suntan lotion on my back?”

He gave a little naughty chuckle.

“Hey, I’m a nice guy, but I see a pretty girl all alone, what do you want from me?”

I blushed again.

“How is Shamiela?” I said.

“I don’t want to talk about that *kinn*. She’s out of the picture.”

He looked toward the sea.

“But we gave you a hard time that day, calling you a virgin and whatnot. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not as innocent as you think,” I said.

And I don’t know what possessed me to say that. I was probably even more innocent than he thought. I caught my words immediately.

“I mean, I’m not fragile and breakable. I can handle a joke.”

He laughed.

“I like the way you are. It’s nice.”

“Don’t tell my father that. He’ll think he’s justified in locking me up.”

“I remember Tahir said he’s very overprotective. He said you just stayed home all the time. Have you ever had a boyfriend?”

I got nervous. He didn't know that I had never had a boyfriend. I had never even been kissed, and I was embarrassed about it because at my age I should have done it by now. I felt so backward, and I couldn't answer without being embarrassed. I wasn't going to have this conversation. And I really was no good at lying. I was much better at being sarcastic. So I got defensive and spoke to him with a rude tone.

“That's personal and none of your business.”

“It's not really that personal, it's not like I asked you if you did stuff.”

“Did stuff? What stuff?”

I supposed he meant *vrying*. And as he said it, I for the first time found myself thinking that if Amara was pregnant, it meant that she and Faizal had gone all the way and had sex.

“Well it's personal to me,” I said, barking it at him.

“Sorry if I offended you. I didn't mean it like that. You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to.”

He was looking at me now, and I couldn't hold eye contact out of awkwardness. I looked away, at the beach, the seagulls, anywhere.

I realised that I was doing it right now and I knew it. I was doing that thing, that thing where when people tried to get close to me. I pushed them away, that thing where I wouldn't open up because I didn't know how to be vulnerable. I tried to cover up my insecurities with pride or anger. *I was becoming my mother*. And it scared me, because I wanted to connect, and I could feel me blocking myself.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

Fiekie looked at me, and his eyes looked wounded, like I had hurt his feelings by thinking bad of him. He was really just asking an innocent question and I just went off. I looked toward the ocean.

“There’s something inside me,” I said, “it pushes people away, even when I want them close.”

He was quiet a moment and I could feel him staring at me, but I didn’t look back. I looked out, over at Amara and Faizal. They were walking on the beach, and I felt jealous, because they were in love. And they were free. I felt Fiekie’s finger stroke a piece of hair from my face.

“It’s ok,” he said, “sometimes you have to learn how.”

“Learn what?” I said.

“Learn how to love and let someone love you back.” When he said that, it struck something inside me. He paused. “You need someone who takes their time.”

“How do we do it?” I said, my mind drifting deep beyond the ocean.

“Love you mean?”

“No, I mean become experts at hurting ourselves. Losing what we love.”

He was quiet a moment, and then said, “Mistakes are all part of it.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Come,” he said, trying to read me, “let’s go get another ice cream.”

The ice cream caravan was parked just up the walk way, I could see it from where we sat so I walked with him.

“You don’t still dice, do you?”

He made a shy face.

“You do, still?” I said, “I thought after Tahir you’d have more sense than to keep doing that.”

“Honestly,” he said, “that shook me. But I love it you know. Tell me, if you not living doing what you love then what are you living for anyway. What kind of a life is that?”

I didn’t like that.

“It’s too dangerous.”

“I don’t do the illegal dicing anymore,” he said.

“So what then, tell me?”

“They have this event up in Saldanha Bay, race wars. It’s legal. My buddies and I we drive up for the weekend, book into a nice bed and breakfast. Stay a couple days. And at night, we race. But it’s legit.”

“Still dangerous,” I said. “You know what happened to my cousin. It just doesn’t make sense to me.”

He shrugged his shoulders, “The thrill of it I guess.”

“Well that’s a dumb thrill if you ask me.”

“Ok Rania, I’ll give it up, just for you,” he teased me.

“You shouldn’t do anything for me. I’m just some nobody. Do it for yourself.”

“Don’t say you’re nobody. Who told you that? Whoever told you that, you go phone them right now and tell them I told them to fuck off.”

I was so shy around him. I couldn’t hold eye contact. I kept diverting my glance every time our eyes met. I was such a nerd.



“What do you do for fun then? I’m giving up cars and following you into your hobbies. Painting or something, I recall.”

“Good memory. I read,” I said. “I write and I draw. Poetry, right now, someday novels. I like the dead artists most of all. I’m slightly obsessed with dead writers and poets and painters. I’m crazy like that. I love Van Gogh,” I laughed. “Don’t tell anyone, but sometimes I read poetry to my goldfish.”

“To a goldfish, are you for real? Ok, that’s pretty fucked up,” he laughed sweetly. I play poked him right in the ribs.

“My fish listen to me.” He laughed.

“Seriously though, don’t put yourself down like that. You’re not crazy. You’re intense and passionate and deep. Rare these days, when most people you meet are superficial and plastic.”

“So you’re going to give up cars and read poetry with me then?”

“Now that would kill me a lot faster than dicing, if I had to read poetry to your fish,” he said with a laugh.

When we got to the ice cream van I realised I didn’t have any money left so I said, “I’m not going to have one, no money left,” and I turned my pocket inside out as I said it.

“On me,” Fiekie said.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t. I just want to.”

Fiekie was a nice guy. Nice looking too. Well dressed. But not the kind of guy I had always pictured myself with. In my fantasies, I mean. I always thought I’d get someone more

intellectual. I mean I was bookish. So I thought I'd date someone maybe like me, someone who was studying something quite serious at university, or someone who liked dead poets and art like I did. Fiekie worked at his father's auto mechanic shop. He was planning to take it over someday, but right now he was a mechanic there, learning the industry.

I let him pay for my ice cream because he insisted, but I swore I'd pay him back. And he said if that made me feel better then I should do it, but that that would mean that I would have to see him again, because Faizal was going to be gone after today. And I had no other contact with him other than through Faizal.

"Here," he said, and wrote his phone number on the ice cream serviette he had. He put the pen back in his pocket, "I always have a pen to give client's quotes", he said, and handed me the serviette.

His handwriting was small and scrawny, and I thought it suited him. It was very plain, simple, ordinary, no long curves and dawdles like I put in mine, not artistic or theatrical at all, just straight, like the skeleton of an alphabet.

"So do you like movies?" he said, "I like movies."

"I doubt we like the same movies," I said, being kind of snooty.

"Oh yea, try me. What's your favourite?"

"I like old movies, black and white classics. Like Casablanca. You know it?"

Fiekie smiled.

"I copy movies all the time, pirate copy's, sell it on the side. Yeah, I know it, I've watched it three times. I know a lot of movies."

I can't lie. I was surprised he watched it let alone knew it. Surprised and impressed. Like there was more to him than you could tell by just the obvious stuff. Like an unexpected present inside a desk drawer. Something happened to me then that I couldn't stop. It was a titillating flutter in my belly, dancing all the way up to the corners of my mouth. But I didn't want to let him see it impressed me. So I hid my smile, and I don't know why, but instead of showing I liked it, I was kind of mean to him.

"You pirate movies? That's illegal," I said.

"I do it on the side for extra money. You know, you gotta hustle."

"But that's breaking the law. You could get arrested?"

"Well it's not murder or dealing drugs. What are you, the South African Police Services secret agent? You not going to tell on me are you."

I didn't say anything.

"Then what do you care?"

He laughed.

"There are worse ways of breaking the law you know."

"You didn't tell me your favourite movie?"

"It's the Godfather, especially the first one. You know it?"

"Classic," I said, "LOVE IT."

"So aside from racing and the Godfather," I said, "anything else that makes your heart beat faster?"

"Love, I guess," he said.

When he said that my heart rate spiked up, and I couldn't explain why.

"See, I'm a cheese-ball under all the dangerous stuff," he said, and smiled.

I recalled the last conversation we had. The night he took me home from Aunty Hasiena's house. I'd asked him something similar. He said he wanted to get married. Have a family. And I remembered the impression I had of Fiekie, with his regular family and his regular life. That night I had pictured him with Shamiela. And I remembered her now.

"So you don't want to tell me what happened to Shamiela?" I said. "I thought you guys would get married or something."

"That's a story. She came to work for my father. She needed a job and I gave her one, but gosh. She ended up making personal phone calls all day, ran up a phone bill double her salary, started a huge fight between my father and I. My father said she was no good. Fired her, and said I can't take a woman like that seriously. She doesn't have her head screwed on straight. She sms'd my father telling him how he broke us up and it was all his fault. My father went mad. Said she is too disrespectful. And then I found out she'd been talking to other boys."

"Sorry," I said, not really meaning it. "I mean you liked her?" I was fishing. He shook his lightly from side to side, like he was uncertain, saying, "mhm."

"I thought you liked her."

"I did. But I guess what you like changes sometimes. And you get to know people, and sometimes they're not who you thought they were at first. I guess you can fall out of love just as unexpectedly as you can fall in love."

I licked my ice-cream.

"You're studying? Because we're actually looking for a replacement receptionist right now," he said, "If you weren't studying you could *lekka* work by us. Then I'd see you."

“I’m not going to be your receptionist,” I said. Even though, with my father gone, I’d been thinking about getting myself a job, earning some money of my own, being independent. And I didn’t even think I had the social skills it took to be a receptionist. But I was irritated that he would think that I would have that job in relation to him. “Would I have to wear lipstick for you too?” I said rudely, “I just don’t have the lips for it.”

He looked at me.

“What do you mean now?!”

“I’m studying because I want a career,” I said as snottily as I could manage.

“Money is money. As long as you’ve earned it fair and square. Just have respect for whatever work it is that you do, you know. That’s the important thing.”

We were standing at the railing on the promenade, overlooking the waves break into the sea. Amara and Faizal were still on the beach and we could see them, they were sitting on a rock looking out into the distance, running hand in hand, kissing. They could have gone into the Guinness book of records for longest kissing marathon.

Fiekie bent down to pick up a pebble from the ground and pelted it into the water. The stone disappeared into the air and we didn’t even see it fall. And I imagined that Fiekie was like that. He was like that with his regular job, and his regular girl, and his regular marriage, and his regular kids, and his regular love. And heaven forbid the woman should run up a telephone bill twice her salary then she was too screwed up to fit into his regular expectations. That was Fiekie, I sulked. The kind of normal pebble that disappeared into life and nobody ever really saw or nothing ever really happened to it. I didn’t want a life like that, even though I was trapped in that life now, even though I felt like a nobody,

especially because I felt like a nobody, I wanted the exact opposite, an immeasurable greatness.

Could I adapt to a guy like Fiekie? Maybe I could. But did I want to? Speaking to him reminded me of Tahir, and I remembered Tah-Rani. And I remembered cities of gold and cliff-side mansions writing novels and being known by the world. All those dreams could they fit in Fiekie's hands like they fit into my heart? But I guess the truth is that I never really wanted to be a famous artist. Not famous. No. I just wanted to be visible. And I had so much nothing inside, and the more nothing I had, the more I needed the whole world to tell me that I was something after all. The bigger the emptiness, the greater the hunger to be seen, and my hunger was so deep, so very deep. This hunger borne of the goings on at 20 Jane Avenue, Rylands, in the house inhabited by Ismail Ahmed, his wife Shazia, their daughters Amara and Rania, this house rented from Mr Palekar, this house of living ghosts.

"Listen," Fiekie said, "show me this visual diary of yours. This book of drawings you keep bragging about. Let me read your poems."

"You really want to see?"

"Your sketches? Your art? *JA*. If it's important to you. And if you're any good I'll even let you draw me. I'll pose for you like Rose in Titanic posed for Leonardo Di Caprio. Huh? *Howsaboutthat?*" He laughed. Then he picked up another stone from the ground and flipped it over the railing. It disappeared into the air. Just like the first one, it was invisible, an invisible drop in an invisible life. But I was the one trapped right in the heart of life's invisibility. A person is invisible, I thought, right up until that moment, when somebody says to them, "show me your art," which is the same thing as saying, "show me your pain."

And I promised myself right then, that if I ever did anything, I had to get out, out of invisibility. Could normal, regular, ordinary, Fiekie, give me what I wanted? What did I want? I wanted a great seeing of me. With a little bit of patience and a little bit of learning to love, maybe he could. Maybe if you just opened yourself up and gave someone a chance, they could make you happier than you ever imagined.

## Chapter 28

### Home

“Do you have everything?” I handed Amara her bag and she put it on the step of the bus.

“This is it”, she said, “Good bye old life. Goodbye wicked witch of the West.”

And she sighed a heavy sigh and I could tell she didn't mean it because her eyes were moist again, glassy like marbles. For that moment, I think we both felt that there was something about this old place that you couldn't leave without missing. Fuck it. It was home. It wasn't mountain bikes and Colgate smiles on the back of a Rice Krispies box but it was what we knew. And how do you rip yourself away from that to search for something else that you don't even know might exist?

I guess you get pregnant and life gives you no other choice than to be brave.

“Give me a hug,” she said and pulled me near. I put my arms around her and patted her back. I think it was the first time we ever hugged.

“You don't have to go”, I said. “Even if the situation feels impossible, there's always a way.”

“I have to get on this bus. I love Faizal. And I'm going to have my own baby.”

She rubbed her tummy and looked down at it and smiled.



“I’m going to be a mother,” she smiled.

I had never been in love. How could I tell her not to go? I didn’t know anything.

“Are you going to keep in touch?”

She just kissed me. Said nothing at first then looked at me, “this thing with Dr Zayed, how do I forgive her. I mean, I’m not a piece of wood or stone that you just give away because it makes sense. I’ve also got a heart. And I’m not there anymore, but I hope one day you tell Shazia Stone that, you tell her that it’s not all common sense, and putting a roof over someone’s head and giving them a plate of food. She did that for me, I’ll give her that. But we’re not just flesh and bone. We got a heart inside us.” She thumped against her chest with her fist, right where her heart ought to be, when she said that. “A wanting, we supposed to have. It’s part of being human.”

Her eyes moistened up even more. And she turned away to look at the bus.

The bus’s engine growled and Faizal tugged at Amara’s shoulder.

“They’re leaving.”

And she was a bit frantic between kissing me goodbye and getting on the bus. But it lasted only seconds and she got on and followed Faizal, with not much possession to their names. It wasn’t going to be a heated swimming pool and two maids like Dr Zayed’s establishment. But fuck it, it was going to be passion and warmth, and love. And that’s more real than any security or material shit that money can buy.

She was still blowing kisses when the bus pulled away and I watched until the end of the bus disappeared out of sight. And as it did, I felt an emptiness crawling up inside me, like a rising tide, from my belly making its way up to my heart.

“You ok?” it was Fiekie, standing beside me still. I barely shrugged. The world felt even emptier than before. I guess I had loved Amara all along, even those times she tormented me, even those times I thought I hated her.

“Let me take you home.” Fiekie touched my arm.

“It seems like you’re always taking me home from somewhere sad.”

I was thinking about the night he took me home from Aunty Hasiena’s, the woman now almost reduced to a social vegetable due to extreme heartache.

“Maybe I’m your guardian angel.”

“What a nice thought to think we even have one.” I sighed. “I don’t even know what I’m going to tell my mother.”

“Nothing, remember, they told you. Just say she told you she was going to visit her friend and she’d be back later and then she didn’t come back. Anything that happens in between is not your issue. Let them handle it. It’s their baby, literally.”

We smiled. My guardian angel got a smile out of me.

I was quiet on the drive back, preoccupied. But Fiekie was nice. And he wasn’t the quiet type so he tried to keep me talking.

“Are they going to use the same names?” I asked. “Or is that a stupid question.” I had no real idea to what extent Amara was determined to get away from the life she had here. The life she thought she didn’t have the power to steer the way she wanted to without disappearing.

“I don’t think they need to. She just wants to get away from our mother, and controlling as she is, she’s not exactly as sophisticated as the FBI. Just being gone is enough.”

“Well, unless she appoints a tracing agent. Like the lawyers use. She could.”

“You think your mother would? *CSI: Cape Town!*” I was seeing that he always knew how to make me laugh.

“I can’t imagine it. I mean. I have problems with her too. But to just up and run away.” I sighed hard, “But I’ve got to say, I envy her a little. I mean a clean break. Imagine going someplace where nobody knows you. You could just be whoever you decided, reinvent yourself.”

“I suppose you could probably do that without leaving your home.”

“It’s not the same. You’re tied to people in a place, to things, expectations. You know. Leaving like that. It’s total freedom.”

“Home is still home though.”

“Yeah but that’s the thing. Home isn’t really a place is it? Home is what? Is it people? I think it’s a feeling maybe. Home should be, I think, where you feel, where you really-really feel, that you belong there more than anything.”

I turned my head away from Fiekie and I looked out the window. We drove past the sea and we drove past the waves and the salty air and the bright blue sky and even though I didn’t know Faizal too well, I understood why Amara had to go. I wanted to be in love with someone who kissed me like a wild summer breeze and I wanted to drive and drive and drive through deserts and cities and foreign places until nobody knew me and I could wake

up somewhere a million miles away and open my eyes and just be anyone I felt like. To be tied to nothing, like the sky.

“You ok. You’re a million miles away.”

And we were back in the poor end of town, the gorgeous coastline morphed into the Cape Flats too soon and I always tried to trace how it happened, how the scenery just changed so that one minute you saw something beautiful and the next moment without fully seeing how it changed, all of a sudden, the view was different and the world didn’t look the same anymore.

He dropped me at home; home. Amara had given me her key. She didn’t need it anymore. I said good bye to Fiekie and before I got out of the car he asked if he could phone me. I said, “I don’t know. I’ve got to get inside before my mother gets home.”

“I’m sorry, bad timing huh?” he said, “But just you watch, I think you’re going to phone me.” And he smiled.

“And why would I do that?”

“I think because I bought you an ice cream. And I don’t think you’re the kind of girl who knows how to let someone just be kind to her, without thinking you had to pay them back.”

His words stung and I didn’t know why it felt like an insult, but it made me want to get out of his car. I just wanted to get indoors, home. And I didn’t even like home and I didn’t know how anything was going to be now that Amara wasn’t there anymore, even though it had been terrible with her there, it felt worse now. Like when my father left. It was different. And different was scary.

I knew my mother was going to ask me all kinds of questions about Amara being gone, but I had absolutely no idea, what being involved meant. And what Amara had just gotten me into.

## Chapter 29

### Doodles

As I had rehearsed in the car with Fiekie, I told my mother that Amara left the afternoon to visit a friend. Told me she didn't know when she'd be back, but not to worry.

At first my mother was angry, scolding her, thinking that she went out to have fun when she was supposed to be home sick.

Later that night when Amara still hadn't gotten back my mother began to worry. I was overwhelmed with the fear of being involved, and the weight of my secret started to bear on me. I kept making secret *duas* that Amara should phone anytime now, to tell my mother what happened. Every time the phone rang, I jumped, hoping this time it was her.

But it wasn't.

I began to wish that she hadn't told me anything at all, that she had left without saying goodbye.

When she didn't come home, my mother sat up the whole night, waiting, and making phone calls to aunts and friends. She went over to Auntie Sadia to ask if she saw or heard anything. But no one could help. It was too early to phone the police. But my mother was scared. I could see.

She came into our room, late that night, opened Amara's cupboards. Most of her clothes were there. She had only taken a few things she could carry, nothing noticeably gone.

My mother paced, made more phone calls. After midnight she was crying on the phone to Aunt Fawzi. She was waking everyone up, looking for Amara. She even phoned Aunt Hasiena. She spoke to Nawaal and asked Nawaal for the phone numbers of her friends from university. Maybe Amara went with them? Like she had on the previous New Year's Eve, when she disappeared all night and came rolling home at 4am. My father was so angry, she got into big trouble that time.

My mother made all the calls, but got no news.

The middle of the night, at around 1am, she phoned the police, and reported a missing person. They told her to wait 24 hours. If Amara wasn't back by then, they would get involved.

My mother couldn't sit still and do nothing. She phoned my father and told him. He hadn't seen her. And I think he asked if I was ok and said that he'd be there over the weekend to bring my groceries. Then I heard her say, "If you want your child you can come and fetch her. I'm not turning her against you."

And then I heard her crying, she said, "I'm worried about my fuckin child, she's missing, and all you worried about is Rania. You sick man, you in love with your own daughter. You the one that ruined her like that, by never allowing her to be independent. You sick. One day she's going to find out about you."

And then my mother threw the phone down and she lay on the couch whole night, crying, waiting for the police or someone to phone.

By the morning Aunty Hasiena, Aunty Fawzi, and Aunty Sadia from next door were all there with her to comfort her. They had their own problems too. Aunty Sadia had sons, both on *tik*. Aunty Hasiena was going for regular visits to Valkenberg. Aunty Fawzi took off from work. Dr Zayed was phoning her, he was concerned about Amara's disappearance too. In our house, it was like when Tahir died, it was like a *kifayt*. The women were all sitting with *kitaabs*, making *dua* for Amara's safe return. The only thing missing was the smell of *Watson's* green camphor.

You could tell that she wasn't doing well. Amara, I thought, should be at her destination, wherever it was. She would call now. Surely she would call soon. I couldn't stand to see my mother suffer like this. She must have loved Amara, she was struggling so much, Shazia Stone Ahmed, in tears. Who would have thought it? Amara didn't have to see this, but I had to witness the pain and how it ate at her.

My mother questioned me constantly. Where did she say she was going, what was she wearing, was I sure I got all the facts right? I screamed at her that I didn't know anything and started to cry. I felt like a criminal and pictured Amara and Faizal at City Hall kissing each other and glued to each other's bodies and calling each other Mr and Mrs, starting a new life, while people here were worried sick. She could have left a note without mentioning a destination. She said nothing. The more I lived in the aftermath of her disappearance, the more I understood how cruel her decision was. How selfish. Obviously, she wanted to make our mother suffer, but this was too much, even for her.



Aunty Fawzi went to the police station in person, with my mother, and they said they'd open a docket and let us know what they found out.

I tried to throw myself into my work but I couldn't concentrate on studying. I was strung as tight as an electric wire on a telephone line. Yet, in the middle of the angst, I was thinking about Fiekie. Every word he said replayed in my head, every look he gave me I tried to read the meaning into. I thought back to the day we met, when he waited for Shamiela to leave before speaking to me. That was kind of suspect behaviour. He should've done it while she was there. But he was a guy, and we had just met that day, maybe he didn't want to be obvious. I could overlook it. Maybe he was still a nice guy anyway. When I looked down at my books, I noticed that I had been doodling. And instead of drawing subconscious conspiracy plots and runaways on buses, I had unwittingly doodled little hearts and little flowers everywhere. And in between it all, I had written Fiekie's name. And that wasn't the worst of it. Stupidly, I had written,

Rania

loves

Fiekie.

And in brackets I wrote his full name as he told it to me back when Tahir was still alive:

(Rafiek Abrahams and Rania Ahmed Abrahams)

xxx

## Chapter 30

### The Dirty Dozens

Fiekie was the only person besides me, who knew about Amara. Not even Nawaal knew. She came by the house with Aunty Hasiena, to sit with my mother and show support. Amara's call didn't come that day. My mother did not go to work. People were coming to commiserate, coming to hear what happened, coming because they cared, coming just because they were busybody. People like Aunty Sadia had spread the news fast.

It was the day after Amara left. It was around mid afternoon, pressure was mounting, neighbours and family and friends were showing up at our house in numbers. They brought food, casseroles, *breyani*, *samoosas*.

I couldn't tell my mother the truth now, even if I wanted to. It was beyond that point. It had accelerated out of control fast. I didn't realize it could get worse. But it did.

That afternoon, people from our area somehow came to the conclusion that Amara's disappearance was linked to the missing nine year old, Mariam Mia. The Dirty Dozens were informal suspects in that disappearance, and gossipmongers had likewise, connected them to Amara's disappearance.

Amara had now been missing almost 24 hours and the police reported no news on their open case. They showed no urgency. People were angry. They had had enough.

Somehow, and I don't know how, but that afternoon, people began a walk around the neighbourhood, searching illicit hotspots like the *Vlei*, looking for Amara's body, and screaming out loud chants, like "Leave our children alone." It seemed like just the local neighbours, but when the community newspaper, *The Athlone News*, reported on it the next week, their reporter said it was "a vigilante group."

I recall myself standing alongside Auntie Fawzi and my mother, and Auntie Sadia, and Auntie Hasiena, in a crowd of people with three men around us, one of them, the father of the Mariam Mia, who was still missing. These three men emerged as the self appointed ringleaders of the rescue mission group.

There were already different rumours of what might have happened to Amara. Some people said that Amara was attacked on her way to see a friend. Some people speculated that she was robbed. Some said that she was abducted. Some people said that she was raped and murdered. There were lots of stories circulating. But in most of them, the Dirty Dozens were the presumed culprits. Somebody said that they saw her talking to one of them around the last time she was seen. And so, the Dirty Dozens, who were the neighbourhood outcasts, and the suspected base of my father's last affair, were blamed for the disappearance under mysterious circumstances of my stepsister Amara.

"Such a beautiful girl she was," people were whispering around us.

I was petrified, standing in the middle of the crowd, about how out of control this had become, so fast. It was like I was in a dream and nothing around me was really happening.

Amara still had not phoned my mother. Her old phone number was off. I couldn't phone her. I had the power to be the truth bearer. But I could not speak. I was saving my own skin.

The men were banging on the front door of the run down old house that belonged to the Dirty Dozens, two streets away from us, while the crowd looked on. They banged and they screamed, "Get out of there you filthy criminals," and they didn't let up until finally one of the Dirty Dozens opened the door, peeked out, and then stepped outside, clearly shaken.

And of course my mother and I both knew that these were the same people who had caused her separation, her *fasag* from my father. He had been involved with one of these women, maybe one of them who prostituted herself on the *Vlei*.

The humiliation was too much for my mother to process. That's why she kicked him out. That's what people were saying. People talked. And since yesterday, somehow a rumour had begun circulating that they took Amara to get back at my mother, because my father didn't go around there, visiting them anymore. They blamed my mother, said that it was her fault. We knew my father's habits. He picked up women, dropped them, and then picked up new ones. It had nothing to do with my mother. But they said the Dirty Dozens acted out of jealousy, out of vengefulness. And without mentioning any specific person, as if the Dirty Dozen's acted only in a clan, people said that they harmed Amara to make my mother pay. They said that they had hurt her prize daughter, to teach her a lesson.

The truth was ironic, that it was in fact Amara who wanted to make my mother pay for trying to barter her off to Dr Zayed, that brought us here.

But the Dirty Dozen's had no business receiving my father as their women's guest, he was a married man. And somehow, it had all come together in this moment, a bizarre kind

of karma, where the Dirty Dozens were suffering, my mother was suffering, and I was suffering, everyone was suffering, being punished for emotional crimes against someone, and only Amara seemed to get off scot free. This must have been what my mother meant, I thought, when she said that love ruins you.

The Dirty Dozen that came outside was talking to the mob's ringleader. I recognized the suspect's face, I'd seen him walking around in the area. He was the same guy who had stopped me not too long ago to try and sell me spices. He was the one who sketched the pictures for me, who tried to bring my book back, Sanjay Patel.

"What do you think they're going to do to them?" I whispered to someone standing beside me. I hoped she would say, "Nothing."

"Heavens knows," she whispered back, "but whatever they did to that girl, they've got it coming to them."

"But they might have had nothing to do with this." I tried to push the idea. "It's all guessing, there's no evidence."

"Everyone knows the Dirty Dozen's are a bad bunch," Aunty Sadia said. "Their hands are always dirty, contaminating the area with their filth. This place should be chopped down."

I looked out over the crowd. I tried to see what was happening but I didn't really want to see anything over the noise of my guilt. I never felt more out of control and more condemned in the eyes of the Almighty than I did that day. I rationalized away my guilt. On the one hand I was keeping a promise of loyalty to Amara, we sealed it with our blood, bloodsisters, it was a pact. On the other hand this secret bore on my conscience and I became convinced I was sinning against my own decency and I was going straight to hell.

And the Dirty Dozens were taking the blame for it now, and it was me, I was the monster who had to be lynched.

“Just see the state of *that* house”, someone said, gawking. She pulled her nose and lips up, appalled. “This place should be condemned. How can human beings live like this? *Sis.*”

It was true. Their house was a nasty looking. It was set amongst a row of houses in the dead end, dirty pastel blue in the *cul de sac*.

“This place should be set up in flames”, another person said, “it messes up the whole area to have people like this living here.”

The walls were grimy, smeared with stains and blackened with filth. The concrete on their front wall was chipped off in places and the wooden gates across their driveway looked hand-made, like they had hammered it together amateurishly themselves. There were oil stains which made rainbow streaks all over their driveway floor. If you peeked inside the open front door everything was pitch dark and no light filtered in. There was a rusted, upside-down, frame of a car on what should have been their front lawn and rubble was strewn across it. It looked like a garbage dump. Whatever else they may have been guilty of, they weren't guilty of this, and I didn't know how to stop it without feeling like I was ruining myself too.

“How many of them do you think live inside this place,” the man standing next to my mother leaned in to ask.

“There are lots of them,” someone said. “You can't even count. Heaven knows where they come from too. They never mix with anyone but themselves.”

“But they work as prostitutes on the *Vlei*, maybe from there, the new children, maybe.”

“I knew they’re up to no good”, someone said. “The other day they tried to con money out of me but I didn’t let them get away with it. I gave that one a good hiding.”

That was the other thing the Dirty Dozens were known for, conning people. Everywhere you went you’d see them in the road, their rusted, different-coloured, patched-up car stuck somewhere, them standing alongside it with an empty canister, flagging down passers-by, begging for money for petrol. They’d wave you down and then come over to you and politely say that they just stuck and were now in an unexpected pinch and needed some petrol money to get somewhere quickly. They did this everywhere they went.

Everyone was adding on bits of incriminating evidence as to why they were bad people. I couldn’t breathe, but I stood in silence.

I heard a loud cry. I looked up to the doorway where the ringleaders were questioning Sanjay. Someone had struck him. Physically hit him across his face with the flat of his hand. And he let out a scream and hid his head behind his hands.

“It wasn’t us. Please. We didn’t do anything.”

I had never before seen a grown man begging like a small child.

The crowd was screaming at the ringleaders, “Hit him. Hit him. Those dirty bastards, a nuisance to society.” And the more he cried and he pleaded the more the crowd got angry and they started cheering, “Guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty.”

I could see the ringleader pushing the Dirty Dozen man up against his dirty pastel blue wall and pin him down against it. He was crying and tears ran down his dirty face.

“I don’t feel sorry for those rubbishes,” a woman in the crowd said, “they playing you for sympathy. Hit him.”

Aunty Fawzi was standing beside my mother and tears streamed down her face, “What have they done to our Amara, scoundrels.”

“We want our child back,” people who didn’t even know Amara called out.

“These are the dirty good for nothings that broke up that woman’s family, broke up her marriage, and then they took her child too.”

Someone in the crowd said, “This world isn’t what it used to be.”

The voices around me were loud. The ringleader threw the Dirty Dozen man to the ground.

He landed hard and I could hear him drop like a bag of bricks. Then he turned to the crowd and pointed to a few men standing in front of the mob.

“You, you, you, and you”, he pointed at them and called them out. “We’re going to search the place for the girl.”

I could see the faces of other Dirty Dozen’s pressed up against a window inside the house, peering out from broken cracked glass and shabby curtains drawn slightly open. I wondered, which one had my father gone to visit?

The mob’s ringleader pushed the front door, which had been slightly ajar, wide open. When he went inside a stream of the Dirty Dozens, men, women, and children, came running out of the house. They crouched around the man the ringleader had thrown to the ground and they bundled together in a circle, kneeling over him. The men from our mob were now storming their house.

“Shoot them down. That’s what you must do with them,” a man from the crowd shouted out loud.



“Yes kill them, bastards. Don’t still play with them. Hurting other people’s children,” someone else shouted.

“*Gemors*,” someone else shouted from the crowd.

I started to make *dua*. I just kept telling myself that of course they were going to find no evidence inside and then they would leave these poor people alone. I just had to be patient and wait it out. But what if they really hurt them? I couldn’t live with that on my conscience for the rest of my life? I had no inkling that it would grow so out of control and right then I hated Amara. *I hated her*. I wished she’d never told me anything at all.

“We didn’t take the girl,” one of the Dirty Dozens called out, her voice cracking. “We are innocent people,” she said, screaming it out into the indifferent air.

“They didn’t take her,” I said out loud, turning my head between the crowd. I was trying to reason with people. “They said they didn’t. We should wait for the police.” But people were ignoring me like they were ignoring the Dirty Dozens. There was a momentum in the crowd, and it was building up.

“Kill them,” the crowd shouted. They hurled stones from the mob at the house, at the Dirty Dozens. The men were inside ransacking the place. I could hear them throwing things upside down. They were ripping the place up while the Dirty Dozens, hid near the rusted frame of the car on their dirty lawn.

“Teach them a lesson,” people said, screaming.

A few minutes later the men came back outside.

“There’s nothing here,” they shouted to the crowd.

“They hid her,” someone said out loud.

“We didn’t take her,” the Dirty Dozens said, pleading their case.

“They buried her. Check their yard,” someone else called out.

It was mayhem. Next thing I knew the men had a shovel they found somewhere and they used it to break down the gate at the top end of the driveway, which led around the house into the dirt yard. They forced their way through into the backyard and started digging holes into the ground, randomly, like moles coming from the outside in. They worked fast and hard in the small yard and made mounds of dirt everywhere. The crowd waited. I was out of my body. Those moments felt like a long eternity. When they finally came out and announced that there was nothing there, I exhaled soft and deep.

“They buried her somewhere else,” someone shouted out.

Then, I don’t know from where, but I saw a flame shoot up in the Dirty Dozen’s yard, and people in the crowd started applauding, someone had set the place alight. The Dirty Dozen’s scrambled for cover, afraid, under attack, they ran for buckets of water. The ringleaders came running from the house and the crowd followed them down the street, away from the Dirty Dozen’s house, while the Dirty Dozen’s brought themselves to their feet, and tried to put out the fire to save their little house. They were crying, squealing, from anguish.

I was in anguish too. I was trapped in the middle of this hell. People were suffering and I could stop it, but selfish little monster that I was becoming, I was choosing my reputation as a good girl, over their pain, even if it meant smothering the truth with a silent lie. Maybe Amara was just like her father, a runaway coward, and I was just like mine, a holier than thou fraud.

I followed the crowd out, as they dispersed, I was uncertain who their next target would be, uncertain if they would return to the Dirty Dozen’s house to finish the job they

started. I softly settled into panic. These people were not supposed to get caught up in our pain, and in our suffering. Our misery was leaking out and hurting innocent people. I had to tell my mother the truth. I had to get hold of Fiekie. Aside from me, he was the only other person who knew. Before it was too late, I was going to phone him, and I was going to ask him to save me.

## Chapter 31

### Coming clean

I phoned Fiekie to tell him things were out of control and I couldn't handle it on my own. Told him that it was too late for me to admit I knew that Amara simply ran away, eloped with some boy. If I said anything now, the amount of trouble I would be in was unthinkable. My reputation in the area would be damaged forever. I would always be *that girl*. People talk, people judge.

He panicked too when I told him over the phone. It was a lot to wrap our heads around. But he was very mature, he calmed me down and he said we'd work it out. He kind of talked me off a ledge I was on for a minute there. I felt better when I put the phone down, less alone. It was nice having someone to confide a problem in, someone who understood where you were coming from, without judging you.

He told me everything I needed to hear. "I'll make sure you're going to be ok." It relieved me.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it," must be the most romantic thing I ever heard a man say. I'd been a zombie since Amara left, trying to extricate myself gracefully from this unexpected drama, her phone being off.

What was she doing? She had to set things straight.

Fiekie said he had Faizal's new number. He knew they'd changed numbers. Amara didn't even tell me that. That he'd get hold of them, tell them to come clean. Keep our names out of it.

I waited.

At exactly 8:30 am the next morning our house phone rang. My mother ran for it, she'd been sitting by the phone half the time, crying the other half, hadn't been to work. For a woman suspected of having no feelings, she was a mess.

It was Amara.

My mother said her name in exhilarated tearful relief.

"My baby, my baby, where are you?" she was crying as she spoke. Her pain and happiness mingled into each other, it was palpable.

I came out to listen, stood near my mother. I exhaled and looked up to the sky to thank the Almighty. I watched my mother's face as she talked to Amara. All I ever heard was my mother's end of conversations.

"What do you mean you not coming home?" I heard her say.

"Married?"

"Who did you marry?"

"But when did that happen?"

"What do you mean a baby?"

*"Astagafirullah."*

“Where are you? Are you out of Cape Town?”

“What do you mean you won’t tell me where?”

“I ruined your life? How can you say I ruined your life?”

My mother wiped wet, teary pools, appearing in her pupils, like mounds of dew on a Cape Flats morning in autumn. They disappeared when she wiped, and then more showed up. They silently streamed down her high cheekbones like a quiet thunderstorm as she quietly listened to whatever Amara was saying.

“You can come home.”

That was the last thing I heard he say, then she put the phone down in slow motion, like she was in a freeze frame in a movie, her eyes glassy and distant.

“Was that Amara?” I said, relieved that she finally called.

She seemed to have told my mother everything she should have told her before she disappeared, but I suppose she could only do it with a safe amount of distance between them.

“Where is she?” I said, my mother standing there, puffed up her hair and went into the kitchen.

“She’s not coming back. She’s gone.” She wiped tears away. Permanently, I think. She turned around, and said “I better phone the police and tell them she’s found.” She took a breath and picked up the phone, and then hesitated, and put it down again. “I’ll phone them now now.” Then she went into her room and said, “Let me rather go to work before I lose my job.” She opened her cupboard and starting getting dressed.

I stood in her bedroom doorway, “Are you sure you ready for work,” I said.

She didn’t answer me. Instead she said, “Don’t forget to wash out those AMC classic pots today. I paid a lot of money for that. It took months to pay off. When I come home tonight I want to see it shining. It must glow like a mirror.”

“Yes mummy,” I whispered sweetly. Not rudely and miserably, like I normally spoke to her.

“Your father’s still supporting you like a queen, so you’ve got nothing to complain about. He told me he’s coming back home, so I want this place spick and span. These floors must also shine. Polish it with wax polish. Don’t put Mr Min on the stone tiles, it messes it up.”

“Ok, mummy.”

She grabbed her bag, and in her high heels, walked all the way from 20 Jane Avenue Rylands, up to Crawford station, to catch a late train to work. It was a 5km distance if you drove with a car. And when she walked back tonight, no doubt, she’d have her luxuries packet with her, the one she bought daily at Pick n Pay, her cashew nuts, her glazed pineapples, her pan peanuts. And no doubt, she’d have bought enough to share it with me too. She always made sure there was enough for Amara and I. Now there only needed to be enough for me.

She said my father was coming home again, so everything was going back to normal. It was going to be exactly the same as before, but just from now onwards, the same, without Amara, Muneer *se kind*.

## Chapter 32

### Bonnie and Clyde

I met Fiekie one afternoon. He came to pick me up at home. He'd been calling me, chatting. I let him. At first I was nervous I wouldn't have anything to talk about, but he made it so comfortable with all his jokes. My parents were at work, my father was set to come back to live with us again. He'd been staying at his mother's all these weeks, but his bed was coming back at the weekend, and he was coming with it. Lately when he had been coming to the house, he had been all dressed up, wearing Levi jeans and white t-shirts. It irritated my mother. But this time, she was the *goos* he was trying to impress. So she let it slide. It was embarrassing for me, because that was how Fiekie dressed. I didn't want my father dressing like my boyfriend.

Fiekie picked me up wearing pale blue G-star jeans with a leather jacket and he was smoking a cigarette, leaning against his car outside my house. He saw me come out, lock up the front door, and threw his stub to the ground and snuffed it out with his Nike takkie.

"You made it," he said, exhaling a puff of smoke.



“Yip, just about. But I’m in a rush to get back home. I have chores, housecleaning. My mother goes nuts if the place is a mess when she gets home from work, plus my studies. I have an assignment due.”

“The usual you mean.”

“*Ja*, I mean the usual.”

“What happened last night? After I phoned you? You ok? Tell me if you not?”

He was talking about the fact that our neighbour Aunty Sadia, saw Fiekie’s car showing up at our house during the week, regularly. He ran away from work during his lunch time and came to sit by me at home everyday. Sometimes we went out. She saw Fiekie and I going out. She sat by her window and watched. Nothing else to do I suppose. She told my mother, and my mother confronted me. I got into trouble about it. My mother knew I had a boyfriend and she was angry.

“But you’re the one who told me to get a life,” I said, “I thought you’d be happy.”

“I didn’t say sneak around. Who is the man? Where did you meet him? Do you even know him? You can’t open your mouth to talk but you’ve got a man. I hope you don’t think you special my girlie.”

“No,” I said. And then I stopped. “Yes actually. I am special.”

“Well, Ms Special, I hope you know your father’s going to kill you if he finds out. He better not blame me. You better make sure he doesn’t find out. I’m not stupid enough to tell him. He’ll turn this house into a warzone. I’m not going to be punished for your shit that you catch on.”

As she spoke she knotted her face up into an awkward little twist, like one of Aunty Fawzi's plaited *koesisters*.

"You're jealous," I said.

"For what must I be jealous of you? You must be mad."

"You should be happy."

"I should be happy because you've got a man, old maid that you are."

"No, you should be happy because Daddy's coming back to live with us. Now you can be miserable again, just like you like to be. Isn't that what you want, to be the most miserable person in the world with no one else but him."

"*Jou bek is te slim,*" she said.

"I'm glad you standing up for yourself," Fiekie said. "But you need to get out of there. You can't be healthy around people breaking you down all the time."

"You won't believe it, but she means well," I said. "Besides, Amara, my father, and everyone, they already hurt her so much."

"Speaking of Amara, did you see today's paper," he said. "Check the backseat, there's an Argus there, page 5."

I reached over to grab the paper and flipped through it. It was an article about Sanjay Patel. I read it. It said that a father, Shuaib Mia, of a girl who had gone missing, Mariam Mia, had been arrested for assaulting Sanjay Patel a day earlier. Shuaib Mia went to Mr Patel's house to attack him, accusing him of murdering his daughter, Mariam, after her body was found, decaying, at Vygieskraal Stadium, near an area called the *Vlei*, in Athlone. The vicious

attack, left Mr Patel, unconscious, and he is currently under observation at Groote Schuur hospital.

“What have they done to him?” I said.

“You mean to the Dirty Dozen man?”

“Don’t call him that. He’s not a Dirty Dozen. His name is Sanjay Patel.” I sighed hard. “I feel so bad, responsible, you know.”

“It’s not your fault,” Fiekie said, “that man who assaulted him had his own issues. It had nothing to do with you.”

“We made it worse.”

“Rania, the man who assaulted him did it because his own daughter went missing. And he blamed them, the Dirty Dozens, I mean him, Sanjay Patel, whatever his name is. It wasn’t because of Amara or you. It happened after everyone knew the Dirty Dozen’s had nothing to do with Amara’s disappearance. Besides, you don’t know if this Sanjay Patel is innocent. Just because he was innocent with Amara, doesn’t mean he is innocent of Mariam Mia.”

“It doesn’t mean that he’s guilty either. You can’t just condemn people because they live different to you, because you don’t understand them. It’s not right.” I was silent a moment, hurting. “I wanna go to the hospital, I want to know if he’s going to be ok.”

“Maybe it’s best if you don’t get involved.”

I was silent again.

“The newspapers will report on it,” Fiekie said. “You’ll know.”

But I wanted more than to just to know. Sanjay Patel, the artist who sketched my portrait, deserved more. He was my fellow sufferer too, like Van Gogh or Modigliani.

“If anyone’s to blame it’s Faizal and Amara. They’re not losing any sleep.”

“How are they? I mean, I know you speak to Faizal.”

“They’re looking for work, before the baby comes. He said they staying with his aunty in a small upcountry town. I think they’ll be ok, some good news at least. They’ll make a life for themselves you know.”

“Did she say if she’s coming to visit or show us the baby? She doesn’t talk to my mother. She doesn’t even talk to me for that matter, never calls us, and we don’t call her.

“You don’t want to phone her first?”

“My mother told me not to phone. I wanted to. But my mother forbids it. She said if she wants to come, she can come, but we not going to run after her.”

Fiekie turned his head to face me. He adjusted the music playing on the radio, made it softer and just stared at me, his hands holding the steering wheel at a distance. Stared me dead straight in the eyes, a naughty twinkle dancing in his jet black pupils.

“STOP, what are you doing? You going to make an accident, don’t look at me. Look at the road!”

He laughed. He could be very playful. Like a kitten when he wanted to be. He took his hands off the steering wheel and drove zig-zag across the road.

“Stop it,” I screamed. “You know I’m a nervous person.”

“No,” he said, “Your guardian angel wants you to laugh.”

And I did. I laughed a Kellogg's, back of the box photo, girl on a mountain bike, Colgate smile, laugh.

And then he stared at me some more with his oval shaped eyes, made deep eye contact, penetrating my gaze. I saw his small scar above his forehead.

"Where'd you get that scar?" I asked. He told me he got that when he fell off a bike he was riding when he was a kid. His family originally came from Bo-Kaap and there are a lot of hills there. "I've got a lot of battle scars," he said smiling, and he showed me all the marks from places he fell growing up. "How about you, got any old wounds?"

"Oh, I'm damaged," I said, "bruised like you can't believe."

"Ouch," he said.

"I know right, but still alive, still breathing. I'll show you my stitches sometime."

"Only if you want to," he said with a soft smile. "Here," he said. He took something out of the cubby hole and handed me a batch of cd's in a case.

"It's for you," he nodded his head, encouraging me to take it from him. I reached out and flipped through it.

"Are these movies?"

"Not just movies, classics."

And I remembered that I had told him that that day in Sea Point, but barely just remembered telling him, I mentioned it so fleetingly, in passing just. But I guess *he* remembered. That was the thing.

"It's for you," he said. "All your favourites, I copied it."

"Did you do it illegally? You broke the law for me."

“We’re like Bonnie and Clyde baby.”

We laughed.

As I flipped through it I read out loud, everything I told him I loved was there. They were illegal copies of Casablanca, some Alfred Hitchcock movies. His favourite too, The Godfather, both number 1 and number 2, and Dirty Dancing with Patrick Swayze. And some Al Pacino stuff. Everything I loved, right there, in one place, for me.

I fished in my jeans pocket to pretend I want to pay him for it.

“That old dilemma,” I said. “It’s the ice cream all over again. I can’t take this. No money on me.”

“Jeez will you let someone do something nice for you.”

“No one does anything in this life without wanting something in return.”

He smiled.

“Sometimes people do.”

He turned the window down and he turned the music up, just as we were passing Mr Allie’s shop.

“Let’s stop to buy a Coke,” he said, “Or do you rather want a sucker. I can get you a Magnum?”

“I’m thinking,” I said, in a way that was much more flirtatious than I knew I was capable of.

“I actually want to buy a box of chocolates too. I thought we’d take it to Aunty Hasiena. Go visit her a bit.”

“She’d like that. She misses Tahir a lot.”

And I thought to myself, that Fiekie was right that day in Sea Point. That mistakes are part of it you know, understanding that everything is full of mistakes. It's never going to be perfect, but it isn't supposed to be. People ran away, and people screamed at you, and people had affair's, and people *maniengald* unexpectedly, and had nervous breakdowns, and some got pregnant when they weren't married yet, and people sometimes even got assaulted when they weren't guilty of anything, and it wasn't fair. None of it was. Heck, everything was fucked up and people hurt you, but you made the best of everything anyway. You tried to find whatever little bit of happiness you could and you just held onto it for as long as you could grip. And it was love that made it worthwhile. At the end of all the shit, all you needed was one person to make you a cd of all your favourite movies, or buy you an ice cream, just because, bring you a box of chocolates on an unexpected visit, for no reason whatsoever, but just because they were thinking of you, just to be kind. And those were the little things that kept us breathing, through all the heartache. That was all the reason we needed, to keep surviving.

THE END

## **Glossary**

### Alphabetical

*a-ah* - no

*ah-we* – colloquial way of greeting someone hello in a friendly way

*ai* – expression of dismay

*abdās* – ablution taken before one of 5 muslim daily prayers.

*agh-* oh (dismal tone)

*Allah* - God

*al fresco* – outdoor

*alhamdulillah* – thank you God

*altawfiq bayn alhabi waltafahum bayn qulubihim* - reconcile love and understanding between their hearts

*ameen* - amen

*astagfirullah* – expression of calling to God in surprise

*atchaar* – pickled condiment eaten with food, especially with curry

*baie lief vir haar* – loves her very much

*basmati* – a type of rice

*bis* – busybody

*blatte* – rectangular wooden tables that fold out , tressles

*blom* – hang out in a place looking good, doing nothing (literally, flower)

*bly baas speel-* keeps playing boss

*bolla* – hairstyle / a bun on hair

*boytjie* – run around gofer



*braaing* - barbecuing

*brasse* – friends, plural

*brah* – friend, singular

*breek ie goed. Is mos my goed, ek het betaal, nie jy nie* – break the stuff because it's mine. I paid for it, not you.

*breyani* – traditional meal of rice and lentils in a curry sauce

*bru* – colloquial for brother (in friendship between males)

*chommie* – friend, colloquial

*daai vuil vark* – that dirty pig

*daala* – leave

*dagga* - cannabis

*dawah* – teaching islam to get new converts to the religion

*dhal* – lentil curry

*dhanya* - cilantro

*dhey*- buttermilk mixture to be eaten with spicy food, especially breyani

*doekoem* – spiritual workers, fortune tells, spell makers

*doopmal* – christening/name giving for moslems

*deen* – the religion/the faith

*doekie* - scarf

*dom* – stupid

*doos* – colloquial, vulgar for vagina – derogatory comment especially to a male

*dua* – asking God (prayers)

*dur* – uncool , phony

*fajr* – sunrise prayer /first prayer of day

*fasag* – seperation before divorce

*fokken* - fucking

*finish and klaar* – that’s the end of it

*gatsby* – fast food sold at *takeaway* (take – outs) , consists of a long roll with hot chips (fries) on it, but very large, large enough for a few people, also with polony on it (polony gatsby), or with steak on it (steak gatsby.)

*gewoond doekoems* – accustomed to fortune tellers/spiritual workers

*gepla met die maan* – bothered with the moon (literal), figurative , insane

*gham* – unsophisticated way of being

*ghasad* - jealous

*goos* – refers to a girlfriend , colloquial, such as bird or chick

*halal* - permissible

*hadith* – teachings of religion, like parables

*haraam*- a sin

*heebie jeebies* - creeps

*henna* – from plant to colour hair or nails reddish orange colour

*hulle’s sleg* – they are immoral

*hy’s mos ‘n ou* – he’s that guy (as in amazing) can be used sarcastically

*iblis het hom beet* – the devil has hold of him

*inshallah* – if God wills

*ja* – yes

*janaazah* - funeral

*jinns* - spirits

*jintoo* - prostitute

*jirre* – pronounced yirre. Expression of dismay

*jy's mal man* – you are mad man

*jy's vol iblis* – you are consumed by the devil

*jol* – run around/affair

*jolled* – ran around/ had affair

*jolling* – running around/having affair

*jou bek is te slim* – your mouth/trap is too clever (expressed in a rude way)

*jou nommer agt* – literal , you number eight , means a swine , a pig

*jumuah* – Friday, the muslim holy day

*kabr* - grave

*kanalla* - please

*kak* - shit

*khutba* – the Friday sermon

*kifayt* – funeral

*kind* – child in formal Afrikaans

*kinn* – colloquial for girlfriend (literally taken from *kind*, meaning child)

*kinnners* – colloquial for girlfriends, plural (literally taken from *kinders*, meaning children)

*kitab*s – religious books

*koesisters* – kind of doughnut

*kombuis* – literally means kitchen but “*kombuis afrikaans*” means colloquial afrikaans

*kwaai* – something nice, impressive

*labarang* - Eid

*lekka* – nice (colloquial)

*lekker* – nice in correct Afrikaans , (same as *lekka* , which is the colloquial)

*lui* – lazy

*lus* – a craving for

*locum* – doctor standing in at another doctor's medical practice

*malles* – mad / disrespectful eg nutjob

*magrib* – sunset prayer / fourth of the day

*maniegald* – passed away

*masala* – spices for curry

*masjid* - mosque

*miedourah* – traditional head covering for women, especially worn on wedding day

*moffie* – derogative , attributing female qualities to a male

*mos* – an expression reflecting that it is in fact

*motjie* – Indian for madam

*naai* - no

*naar* – nauseous

*nogal* – an expression reflecting oh, actually

'*n man* – a man

'*n mens is mos skaam* – a person is shy

*ons het swaar gekry* – we struggled

*Oros* – an orange mix drink

*ou* - guy

*ouens* – guys

*outyds* - old fashioned

*paaper* – crunchy accompaniment to curry

*pennyhaypenny* – very little money

*poes* – a swear word, meaning vagina, very crude (more crude than *doos*)

*Prophet (Saw)*- Prophet Sallallahu alayhi wassalam (peace be upon him)

*Qur'an* – the Word of God

*ramadan* – month of fast observed in Muslim calendar

*rop* – bad luck

*salaah* – muslim prayer, one of five daily

*salaamalaykum* – abbreviation of assalamualaykum – greeting meaning peace be upon you

*salieg* - religious

*salieg Imam*- holy religious cleric

*samoosas* – savoury pastry case in triangle shape, fried in oil, filled with chicken or mince

*se voet* – his foot, expression, disregard that

*sheikh* – religious cleric

*shukran* – thank you

*sien en kom klaar*- see to themselves

*sies* - sis

*sjambok* - whip

*sjoe* – expression of disbelief

*skelm* - dishonest

*skinder* – gossip

*skindering* – gossiping

*skinderbek* - gossipmonger

*skollie* – criminal , hoodlum

*skruf* – flaky skin

*slamse* - moslems

*slegtiheid* - immorality

*slowboat* – cannabis cigarette

*smyt hom neer* – throw him out, leave him

*somma* – suddenly, colloquial (taken from the correct Afrikaans, *sommer*)

*stervy* – prissy

*sunnah* – preferred practice according to tradition set by Prophets

*takeaway*- take-out food

*takkies* - sneakers

*Thur* – second prayer of day, at lunchtime

*toe* – closed, as in, don't get it

*twice-fy* – to dispute, to argue with

*uitgevat* – kitted out, dressed up

*uitgevind* – found out

*verkrampste* - racist

*vlei* – literally, canal , refers to an area of informal settlement where people live in

makeshift homes

*vrying* – crude way of saying making out

*vuilplak* – audacity, gall

*wagt* – prayer time

*wakeel* – representative for a woman

*wali* – representative for a woman

*wandel* – drift, float

*yoh* – expression of surprise