Onion Tears

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah Bibi Ballim did not like dirt.

She did not like it when the salt shaker was not in its place above the stove. She did not like it when visitors left fingerprints on the doors of her glass cabinet. She did not like it when rice grains fell into the carpet.

Most of all, Khadeejah detested the sight of long fingernails on a woman. She could not understand how a woman could bear to let her fingernails grow into potential dirt traps. She judged all women on the length of their fingernails; if they were long enough to puncture an apple then the woman was not worthy of her respect.

Khadeejah did not believe she was an obsessively clean woman, though. She thought it quite normal to wipe shelves every day, clean out freezers every week and repack cupboards every month. Sometimes twice a month just to be safe.

Today was no different.

She wiped the silver-edged frame that held the fading photo of her wedding day. She had worn a long white dress that made her thighs itch and he had worn a grey suit with a red carnation sitting in his breast pocket like a gunshot wound. He had an amused look on his face, a roguish smirk that made him almost look handsome. Almost. She on the other hand looked pale. Strained. Her lips were pursed tightly together and her face was too thin. Someone had put too much rouge on her cheeks. Khadeejah almost didn't recognise herself.

Then she wiped the frames that held the photos of her daughter and son. Each in a separate frame. Picture perfect smiles with oiled hair and the blue background of a photographer's studio. Next, Khadeejah dabbed her cloth over her collection of bath salts and cellophane-wrapped moulded chocolates bearing the words, *Thank you for sharing this happy day with us.* Finally she dusted the statuette of the Sydney Opera House that her son had sent her.

After she had carefully wiped out any remaining dust (mainly imaginary) in the fins of the statuette, she went to pack her *achar* into buckets. Her thumbs pads were still rough from cutting the green mangoes that morning. The mangoes had been uncommonly hard for this time of the year. She usually bought them from

Mahomedy's down the road, but the vegetable man who went house to house in his battered truck every Thursday, had offered her a particularly good deal for a kilo of green mangoes. He had taken off his worn fisherman's hat, rubbed his sweaty face with a handkerchief, smiled at her with his discoloured teeth, and promised that he was offering her 'the best of the best'. At the best price too. Now she realised why – they were too hard to cut and that probably meant that they were bitter.

She carefully packed the *achar* into empty *ghee* buckets and wrapped each one with masking tape to stop the oil from leaking. There had been an incident once where Mrs Salejee's bucket had leaked oil onto the carpeted floor of her Mercedes. Mrs Salejee had berated Khadeejah, left the messed bucket at her gate and never returned.

Khadeejah did not like being called 'irresponsible' and 'unprofessional' in a career that she had put so much effort into. So now she carefully wound layer after layer of brown masking tape around the lids, unconsciously repairing her bruised pride with each twist of the tape. She scribbled 'Hafeeza' in her small scratchy writing on a school label and stuck it on the lid. Hafeeza was a good customer. Her husband's fondness for *rai achar* ensured a steady income for Khadeejah. At the end of every month there was sure to be a call from Hafeeza kindly letting Khadeejah know that she was coming to her fetch her *rai achar*.

"And don't forget to put lots of garlic cloves. Baboo just loves them," she would add.

Sometimes Khadeejah wondered if what she was doing was right. Oil was an important ingredient in *achar* and Baboo had undergone at least one heart operation already. Didn't Hafeeza sometimes think that she was slowly poisoning her husband. Didn't she realise she was allowing the oil to drift in his arteries and lay itself in layer upon fatty layer so that the blood struggled to bubble through.

And didn't that make *Khadeejah* the poison's cook?

No, surely she was not responsible for creating the potential poison. It was Hafeezah's fault for buying it from her. It was Hafeezah's fault, not hers.

Khadeejah had always been a hardworking woman. She had been used to hard work from the time she realised that eight younger siblings could not rely on their mother alone.

They had lived in a bustling flat in Bronkhorstspruit, a *boere* farm town just outside of Pretoria. Ameer Rahim Mia and his fifteen year old wife had arrived on a ship from India and he had decided that Bronkhorstspruit was where he would build his home. No one actually knows why he chose that particular place. He could have been sitting with his wife between some dusty crates on the dock with an old map of South Africa on his lap and, after pausing a moment to take a sip of *chai* from a plastic cup, he could have suddenly poked a finger on the map and said: "There it is, my *jaan*! There is where we will build our home." And after they had removed the point of his finger and studied the long word BRONKHORSTSPRUIT, they had taken their horse and buggy and trotted off to find the dry town. And his young wife, who was used to his eccentricities (after he had announced one fine morning in India that he wanted to see the 'great Africa'), had shrugged her shoulders and agreed to live in a place with a name she couldn't pronounce.

Or he could have been sitting with his wife on the swaying ship and met four other Indians who had invited him to join them on their journey to the farm town where he could help them open a shop. "After all people alvays need the things to buy? And vee Indians must stick together." And then one of them might have clasped Ameer's hands and repeated, "Vee must stay together, otherwise vee will be alone." The last word whispered solemnly and accompanied with a quiet nod of the head.

Whatever the case was, Ameer Rahim Mia ended up in Bronkhorstspruit and in no time set up his house on an African continent in an Afrikaner town. He did fairly well for himself. He built a shop that sold everything from pots and candles to radios and frilly underwear. Black and white people entered his store, albeit from different entrances.

Ameer Rahim Mia had a big family and with so many children to feed, he was relieved to marry off his daughters to anyone who came knocking. He married them off two by two in the same ceremony. So Khadeejah was married at the same time as her older sister to a man she barely knew. The night before her wedding all her

mother had advised her was that she should always ensure that her hair was combed and that her husband's food was given to him on time.

Initially the newly wed Khadeejah had lived with her husband, Haroon, at his parents' house. But after a few months they moved to Kliptown, a coloured area with small houses and no gardens. Haroon had been a quiet man, but over time he grew moody and threw small temper tantrums. He worked as a part-time bookkeeper and used his spare time to sit at home with the curtains drawn while he listened to the radio. In the beginning Khadeejah enjoyed the fact that he was mainly at the flat with her, but she soon came to realise that he was more of a burden at home. He smoked up their flat, peered over her shoulder as she stirred her *kalya* and became irritated when she tried to open the curtains. She secretly held the opinion that Haroon would have been the worst type of alcoholic if alcohol wasn't *haraam*.

After a few years they realised that their house could not run itself on the money he earned, so she took a job at a clothing factory. She worked from eight to five in a dim factory where the thick hot air smothered her because there were no windows. She still had to come home to clean the house, cook, and later bring up the children. Since Bronkhorstspruit had no schools for Indian children, Khadeejah had to tend to her brothers and sisters who came to live at her house in the week. They slept on floors, sofas, on top of tables and beneath them. When she wasn't stitching, she was nursing a crying child. When she wasn't doing that, she was attending to her complaining husband. She took to smoking, although it was done secretly in the bathroom. (If people knew they might think she wasn't fit to run her household).

Sometimes she resented her husband for being the promise of a better life and for failing. She resented the grime that worked itself beneath her skin. She resented the ache that drummed itself within her skull. But most of all she resented the fatigue that knitted itself into her flesh. In time, it became a way of life and Khadeejah became used to hard work.

Her bones grew harder shells, her muscles grew thicker tendons, her body adapted, evolved to take the strain, to stop the fatigue from sinking through.

"*Nani*!" called Khadeejah's grand-daughter, Aneesa.

"Hey. When did you come?" Khadeejah said as she put down the masking tape and wiped her hands on her apron.
"Just now. Mummy's still by the car – she's bringing my bag in."

Khadeejah did not like it when her daughter wasted time by the car. It wasn't that dangerous during the day, but Nilaufa from number eleven had said that her son's car was stolen in broad daylight just two roads from here. Mayfair was not a particularly violent area, but incidents did occur now and then. And it seemed house burglaries seemed to be on the increase.

Summaya entered the house, dumped Aneesa's schoolbag on the floor and rushed into the bathroom. "Hi, ma. I gotta rush to the bank so I won't eat. Just make sure Aneesa reads her *sabaq* for you."
"You're not eating? Why you need to go to the bank? I'll make the food hot quickly," complained Khadeejah as she bent to pick up the bag and put it in the hall cupboard.
"No. It's okay. I don't have time. Just make sure Aneesa reads her *sabaq* for you," Summaya shouted through the bathroom door.
"I'll make it hot fast-fast. You have to eat something! *Jaldi kalo*."
"Ma, I don't have time! I'll be late for work as it is," Summaya cried as she washed her hands, and quickly rushed out the door. "Don't forget to read your *sabaq* and be ready for aunty Jamiela when she comes to pick you up. Bye sweetie, thanks ma," she yelled as she slammed the door behind her.
"Your mother rushes too much around."
"What's for lunch, *Nani*?"

While some people dedicated their lives to sadness or to love, or to their careers, Khadeejah threw herself into her cooking. The way the finger ran over a firm tomato, the way the tongue moved over a good *amli* sauce, the way someone exhaled after a hearty *biriyani* provided Khadeejah with a pleasure she never found anywhere else in her life. She put her heart and soul (mingled with sadness and lost love) into her meals. People tasted her food and looked at the hunched old woman in front of them with new eyes. They felt they *knew* her through the taste in her food. Her meals *touched* people.

If anyone visited her and could not be persuaded to stay for a meal, then a little silver tray with a bowl of *chevra*, a plate of *maska* biscuits and a brown teapot would miraculously appear. The neighbours often caught whiffs of crushed garlic, fresh chillies or roasting *jeera* from her open kitchen window. And if any of them looked into her window they would see the familiar sight of Khadeejah in her blue apron peeling big brown onions.

"You always smell like onions, *Nani*," Aneesa often giggled. Khadeejah didn't mind. Onions had a calming effect on her. She even enjoyed the quiet tears that ran down her face as she sliced them.

When she was ten she had cut an onion for the first time. She had cried so much that she couldn't continue cooking the meal and her sister, Amina, had teased her that no one would want to marry her if she couldn't cook. Over the years she had invented different styles to try and cope with the burning. She would try closing her eyes, but almost always ended up cutting a finger. Then she learnt how to cut onions under running water, but they became too wet to cook with. So she went through the painful experience every day. After a few years her eyes stopped burning, her nose stopped dripping and the dull ache in her head subsided. Her eyes had absorbed the onion's properties, blended them into her corneas and fused them to her pupils.

Maybe this was why her eyes held a watery gaze.

Braising onions, boiling tomatoes and chopping *dhania* kept Khadeejah at peace. She likened this feeling to the Buddhists she saw on television, who lit incense sticks to calm themselves. Khadeejah could think of nothing more calming than a cup of tea and the smell of simmering onions as she waited for the doughy middles of her *rotis* to fill with air. Khadeejah's kitchen was small, even smaller when one considered the fact that she was a cook. There were many times that Khadeejah felt frustrated with the narrowness of her kitchen and the size of her counters. Her house was still one of the few in Mayfair that hadn't been altered since it was built. However, she always insisted that her house was just right for her and that the narrow passage that passed two bedrooms and spilled itself into a sitting room and small kitchen was ideal for an old woman.

But she did complain from time to time about the lack of space for her ornaments.

Aneesa sat on the sinking couch with her Quran perched on a cushion on her lap. "*Nani*, it's *bah* not *beh*."

"Sorry, I keep forgetting."

"It's *bah*, *thah*, *sah*, not *beh*, *theh*, *seh*. How can you test me my *sabaq* when I have to keep teaching you?"

"It's hard to learn again. That's the way our *pagal appas* told us to say it in those days. I'm too old to learn again."

"*Nani*, puh-lease you're not old," Aneesa said holding a hand up to her forehead. "And you know – you could be changing the meanings in the Quran by reading it wrong."

"Too clever baba, too clever. Okay, okay, I'll try to remember. Now hurry and finish your *sabaq* before Aunty Jamiela comes."

Aneesa resumed her recitation. "*Bismillahirahmaaniraw heem…"* As her voice droned on, Khadeejah alternated between nodding asleep and jerking awake as she pretended to be interested. After a few minutes Khadeejah felt a small prod and looked up while hastily rearranging her features.

"You were sleeping again."

"No, no, I wasn't. It was just a second."

"You were snoring, *Nani*."

Khadeejah chuckled. "Okay, maybe I was. What to do, the nice sleep comes in the afternoon. But lucky you woke me up now otherwise I can't sleep at night. And then I don't know what to do with myself. Tsk! It's too quiet then."

"*Nani*… are you scared at night?"

"Me? Tsk! *Arre* how many years I'm living by myself. What I must be scared of?"

Aneesa smiled. "I'm finished reading. Where's Billee?"

"Sleeping under the curry leaf tree, I think. But if it's gone in my *nilicha* chase the damn thing out."

Billee was a black cat that frequented Khadeejah's garden. He had wandered into her backyard to catch the birds that came to peck at crumbs on her windowsill. Khadeejah hated cats and she threw water on the animal whenever she caught sight of

it in her garden. She could not understand why he kept coming back until one day she found her grand-daughter crouching beneath the washing trough with a saucer of milk, beckoning the cat with small fingers and whispering *swisss swisss swiss.*

"So, it's you! I wondered why that *bliksem* cat keeps coming back," Khadeejah had roared.

"*Nani,* please don't chase him away! I want… I – need him," the then eight year old Aneesa had whimpered.

"That cat eats my birds!"

"I can't cuddle the birds."

Both were stubborn people. Aneesa had a quiet defiance and Khadeejah had a loud obstinacy. In the end Aneesa won; she had turned her plump face to Khadeejah and said, "I need a friend, *Nani*. I *really* need one."

Khadeejah had melted. "Just make sure it doesn't come in the house and if I ever see it in my *nilicha,* one time, just one time, I will *donder hom, samje?*"

"Understood," smiled Aneesa.

"Aneeesa! *Gaari ayah*. Quickly, quickly," said Khadeejah as she heard a car hoot outside. "You're going to be late baba! *Jaaldi karo.* Why you don't put things back in their place? I always tell you! Don't I always tell you?" she frantically berated Aneesa as they searched for her elusive scarf.

"Found it! Found it!" yelled Aneesa as she raced out of the second bedroom with her scarf and *madressah* bag in tow. "*Slamlaikum*, love you," she yelled as she ran past the *ghee* buckets stacked along the passage, and out the door.

"*Wa'alaikumsalaam*," Khadeejah replied.

Khadeejah was fond of her grand-daughter. Aneesa was witty, bright and sincere. She was fair and had pretty brown eyes. But it seemed she was always destined to be on the chubby side. Khadeejah wanted her to become a doctor; her own daughter had never been fond of biology or physics but her grand-daughter showed promise. Khadeejah hoped that her subtle hints would encourage Aneesa in the right direction. (After all, everybody knew, doctors were set for life.) Summaya always reminded

Khadeejah that Aneesa was only eleven, but Khadeejah felt that it was never too early to drum in the fact that medicine was a good career to get into.

"If I had drilled it into your head early enough, you might have thought about it," was Khadeejah's constant argument.

"Ma, I never liked it. I was never interested in seeing inside people's bodies. I would have never enjoyed it," Summaya always replied.

"Oh, like you're enjoying your job now? Telling people to come to our *lovely* country. All *katchra*!"

"It's not *katchra*! And I don't hate it, okay! I would've *hated* medicine."

"You didn't even give it one chance, *not one chance*, but you saying you would've hated it. You knew – you knew I wanted you to study that! Not one chance, but you say you know."

"Ma I know ok! I just know. Please… stop this!"

That was where their argument usually ended, with Summaya becoming sullen and quiet, and Khadeejah going back into the kitchen.

SUMMAYA

Summaya did not like waiting.

She did not like waiting in queues to pay for vegetables that were too soft. Waiting in traffic behind drivers who braked suddenly. Waiting for computers to start. Waiting for a phone call, for a sign – for anything really.

But she especially hated waiting for a bank manager with whom she had made a two-thirty appointment. She had made it precisely at that time so that she could pick up her daughter from school, drop her at her mother's, come for the appointment and only arrive ten minutes late for work. At this rate she would be at least an hour late and she was sure that by then Mr Gupta would phone about his tickets.

Summaya worked at a travel agency that specialised in trips to the Middle East and India. It was called, 'The Queen Jewel of the East Travel and Tours'. She thought that perhaps her boss, Mr Maharaj, had felt particularly inspired on the day he named his travel agency. His obsession with all things dramatic became evident on inspection of his children's names – Madhubala, Mehboob and Raj Kumar. He took deep pleasure in contemplating the names of his next tour. He would sit in his office with his glasses perched upon his bulbous nose as he muttered to himself. "Should it be the 'Majestic Maharani Deluxe Tour' or the 'Glorious Grand Goan tour'?" If anyone disturbed him during these sessions he would fly into a rage and throw his various table ornaments at them. Summaya had heard that the miniature golden Buddha in the small of the back was particularly painful.

The Queen Jewel of the East Travel and Tours also comprised a small department which focused on travel packages within South Africa. Summaya hated it when she was given any assignment in that department. She could not muster any excitement for those clients. She felt it was hypocritical to tell Mr Kirran from Bangalore that South Africa was a country perched on the brink of greatness when *she* felt that it was failing its people miserably. When people were scrambling to get out of the country, why should she invite them in? Summaya knew she was a good liar. Yet she felt that she shouldn't have to lie to her clients. How could she entice them into a country where they could potentially be scarred for life by a mugging or a hijacking? Or

worse, shot dead by someone who merely wanted their camera. All this, so that Mr Maharaj could make some money. So that *she* could make a living out of it - *out of a potential death.*

But mostly she did not think of these things. Mostly she sat at her desk and booked tickets. And smiled at her clients.

She liked her job. When she had applied for it she never thought she would like it. When she sent her CV in, she wasn't even thinking or feeling. The world was black then. But fate was surprising like that. The brochures and huge posters filled with the icy mountains of Nepal and the dusty deserts of Dubai let her escape into another world, where money problems, looking after a daughter, answering to a bossy mother and forgetting a certain someone, could be pushed aside. Calls from frantic and excited honeymooners, families and business people kept her busy. She relished being able to book seats for people who needed last minute flights, last minute hotels and last minute vegetarian meals. It proved to her that she was good at what she did. That she fitted into her job. That her mother wasn't right. That she didn't need to give medicine a chance. That she hadn't made the mistake of being too arrogant to consider her mother's choice.

Summaya looked around inside the bank. People seemed to be constantly whispering until their voices became a constant hum, a part of the silence that hovered in a bank. She couldn't understand why people lowered their voices in a bank, almost as if it were a library and there were notices with 'Please be quiet!' pasted around each corner. Was it a sign of respect for the huge amounts of money in the vaults? Or was it merely because money matters always seemed so hush-hush and no one wanted anyone else to know how much money they were depositing or withdrawing.

The bank manager was taking too long and Summaya did not like waiting. Waiting made her think and she did not like having time to think. Sometimes she would think about the strangest things. She wondered, for instance, what the old man in the blue tie would do if she climbed up on the little deposit-slip table and started doing her rendition of Rani Muckerjee's *Kutch kutch hota hai* ? What would he do? Stare open-mouthed at her? Call the police? Or perhaps join her.

But then sometimes her thoughts would wander to other things. *Real* things that hurt. Real things that were so serious they almost became funny to think about. Things she pushed away into the crevices of her mind, like the cleaner in front of her who was using his broom to sweep up dust and bits of crumpled paper with soft strong strokes. But she couldn't throw those thoughts into a bin like him. She could only sweep them aside.

Because nothing ever really disappears. The word itself was suspect. *Disappear.* Too many syllables, with such a sharp pronunciation from those rounded letters.

Nothing disappears. Things mutate. Evolve. Grow. Even the dirt in the bin. Just because it's not visible, just because it's forgotten, doesn't mean it's *disappeared.* It's there. Lying at the bottom amongst apple cores and bits of thread. Waiting.

Sitting in the dark with its ears pricked.

"Mrs Ballim?"
"Hm? Oh yes," said Summaya shaking her head in an attempt to clearly understand what the woman behind the counter was saying.
"The bank manager will see you now."

The bank manager turned down her loan application. She hadn't expected that. They had made it seem like an easy procedure in the advertisement. But adverts, she realised, were a bit like life. Easily misleading - nothing at all like what it was supposed to be.

It was not as if she didn't like where she lived, but she would have preferred a better neighbourhood for Aneesa to grow up in. The flat itself was cosy. Two little rooms carpeted in cream, just right for a single mother and daughter. The area, however, was dangerous. It had very few trees and the only park available was a scavenger playground used by the local drug dealers who sat on the swings in their huge jackets and beanies while they smoked cigarettes to keep warm. Now and then someone (usually a teenager) would approach them and hands would exchange little brown paper packets.

It was odd when Summaya thought about it – how she and her daughter were contained in the warm little space of their flat and yet around them there was a wide, cold and cruel place. She imagined it to be like an egg. Their flat was the warm, golden yolk and outside were the cold realities. She didn't want to wait for the shell to break. She had to move soon. Summaya had heard stories about children who were stabbed for lunch money at the bus stop near the flats and about the man on the seventh floor who had beaten his wife with a tennis racquet.

After work, Summaya picked up her daughter from her mother's house and drove to their flat.

"How was *madressah*?"

"Okay. Boring." Aneesa paused and then added quickly, "Mummy?"

"*Ja*?" said Summaya distractedly while she added up figures in her head.

"Why don't we live with *Nani*?"

"Err…what did you say?" asked Summaya, taking a wide turn into their concrete driveway past the rust-stained gates.

"Why don't we live with *Nani*?"

"Oh. Well. You know how old people are. Especially *Nani*. They don't like us in their way."

"We won't be in her way."

Summaya parked and then turned to Aneesa, studying her in the dim light of the car.

"Why all these questions suddenly?"

"I don't know. I just think – I think sometimes she's lonely. And maybe she needs us."

"She can manage."

"Uncle Farook said it isn't right for us to be staying by ourselves."

"Oh and Uncle Farook thinks he knows everything? Uncle Farook is an idiot who think he knows more than everyone else in the world. Now listen, baby, *Nani* manages, doesn't she? We see her every day more or less, right? You stay over on weekends. *Nani* is okay. What does she say? She's as fit as a horse. *Nani* is as-fit-as-a-horse. She doesn't need us. Don't worry."

"You're lonely and she's lonely, mum," Aneesa muttered as she jumped out of the car.

"That's not true!" Summaya shouted after her, before catching her reflection in the rear-view mirror. She quickly wiped away the frown she saw there.

Summaya had not been considered a good looking girl at school. She had caramel skin and sharp features that were too pronounced for her face. "You would have thought that with her parents' colour she would have been fairer, no?" people said. "What strange coloured eyes. Pity they not green," they said about her yellow-brown eyes. She was what one termed 'gangly', with limbs that splayed out awkwardly, plus she was a head taller than most of the boys in class. She was not pretty. Yet neither was she unspectacular. She radiated some mysterious presence. Maybe it was her height or her arched eyebrows or her opinionated views, but when Summaya Ballim walked into a room people noticed her. If she was in a crowd, a person's eyes would automatically fall on her. She was netball captain, she was the school newspaper editor and even if she didn't have that many friends, people knew who she was. Boys knew who she was. She was *that* girl – the one they secretly lusted after but publicly ignored.

In primary school Summaya kept secret the fact that her mother sold *achar* and worked in a clothing factory for a living. She spun a tale about her father working as a chef on a ship that cruised around Mauritius. She said her mother didn't have to work because they earned so much money.

"Well, why don't you leave for a white school like Nazira Paruk, if you have so much money?" Raeesa Karim, the grade five bully, had once demanded.

"Because my mummy said it teaches me humility to be with people who are poorer than me," Summaya had quickly replied.

"You're stupid."

"And you're an ignoramus."

Raeesa was too embarrassed to ask what an ignoramus was, so she just walked away with a "hmph!" which was what Summaya had been hoping for. When Summaya grew older she learnt to use her fists and she became a formidable foe because of her talent at having both wit and brawn. Boys learnt that they couldn't use the word 'chick' with her and woe to the boy who called her 'dyke' because she refused to go

out with him. In her very first year on campus, Summaya made it clear that she wasn't interested in boys. However, in her third year she did have a couple of flings. Something slightly serious with a boy called Mark Green, but she knew it wouldn't last because he was white and her mother would not have understood. And no matter how much she loved aggravating her mother, she still didn't want to see her being ostracised by a community that would never accept it.

Mark was nice, gentle even. He bought her coffee on campus, played the guitar for her and even went to the secret ANC meetings on campus; the ones that were held behind the Science building at night. That's why Summaya had liked him. He had a quiet braveness; he hadn't needed to show it off like the other boys. The other Indian girls secretly admired and openly condemned her relationship. They said it was against her religion and her race and didn't she have any shame? Summaya didn't care. Actually she didn't care too much for Mark either. She found his gestures sweet, but she didn't feel any sincere love for him. She tried, she *really* tried, she even managed to squeeze out a tear once when he was singing for her in the park behind campus. He called her 'emotionless', but said he loved her anyway. He cried when she broke up with him. She told him he should have seen it coming. He was a lawyer now, living in Cape Town in some fancy beach area. Last she had heard he married someone called Pam and they had a son.

She didn't feel bad about it. She had always hated the beach.

"*Nani* sent *aloo gosht*," said Aneesa as her mother unlocked the gate and opened the door to their flat.

"Oh nice," Summaya said walking into the flat and switching on all the lights. "Heat it up, I want to have a quick shower."

"Why'd you go to the bank?" Aneesa shouted after her.

"Cash a cheque," Summaya said as she shut the bathroom door behind her.

ANEESA

Aneesa knew when her mother was lying.

Unlike other people who seemed to busy their hands, her mother would slow down. Her movements would become stiff and her voice would turn even. Almost too even. And her eyes briefly shone. A glimmer of wetness before a blink would wipe it away.

Aneesa knew when her mother was being sincere or insincere to anyone. (She was usually insincere). But Aneesa didn't mind too much, it was just her mother's Way. Like the Way *Nani* liked the colour white. Or the Way Mrs Chetty wrote the number eight; one small circle sitting on another. People just had Ways that you had to accept.

She was pretty sure her mother lied about most things: what she did at work, how she felt about others and what had really happened to Aneesa's father.

Yes, Aneesa was definitely sure that her mother lied about her father.

After supper Aneesa sat on a bar stool and pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the living room window. Although she was on the tenth floor she could still make out the shape of a cat lurking around an empty biscuit box near the bins. It climbed on a battered-looking racquet as it rummaged between the overflowing refuse. She wished she could go downstairs and stroke it, but her mother wouldn't let her leave the flat after five.

Once, she had forgotten to tell her mother that she was watching television at number nine with aunty Gulshira. She never found out exactly what happened, but Zaakira from number six said something about her mother going hysterical and calling the cops. When Aneesa had pushed her way into the flat past the policeman at the door she had seen her mother crying and frantically digging through an old black book in a box. Her mother had suddenly caught sight of her, sighed, scowled and then dismissed the policeman. She had not ranted or anything. All she had said was, "You are not allowed out of this flat after five." And then she had gone to lie down.

So Aneesa stayed in the flat longing to go out and play with Zaakira and Faizel. Her mother never budged, even when the duo came to her gate to plead for Aneesa's company. And so Aneesa lost her only excuse to escape from the flat.

Aneesa turned around to see her mother flipping channels on the television. She knew her mother forced herself to keep busy and she often wondered why.
"I'm going to sleep now, mummy. Night. *Slamlaikum*," she said as she bent to kiss her mother's hair.
"Ok. Night. *Wa'alaikumsalaam*," Summaya mumbled as she remained absorbed with the tanned person smiling on the screen. Aneesa climbed into their big double bed and the last words she heard before she fell asleep were, "And that's not all. If you call now you will receive this amazing…"

The early morning sun sliced across Aneesa's face through a gap in the curtains. It was Friday and Aneesa could smell the scent of *agarbathi*. That was the strange thing about her mother, Aneesa thought. Well, actually there were many strange things, she decided, but this was definitely one of them. Her mother read only a few *namaazes* and scoffed at many traditions. Yet every Friday morning, without fail, she could be found in the sitting room lighting *agarbathi.*

Aneesa walked into the sitting room and slumped onto a sofa to watch her mother, dressed in a black cloak, walking around the flat, wafting the fumes from her incense stick around the flat.
"Mum, it's too early for the smell of so much sandalwood!" Aneesa groaned. Then she screwed up her eyes and studied her mother. "And what are you wearing?"
"Sandalwood is good for the spirit. And today is Friday so it's *sunnat*."
"It is?"
"Well." She paused. "I think so."
"And your clothes?"
"Haven't you ever seen a cloak before?"
"Not on you, I haven't."
"Pfft! Don't be silly," Summaya said as she continued her walk. "I always wear cloaks."
"Mum, you only wear those cloaks for funerals."
"Well, today's Friday and I feel like wearing it. Now go get ready for school."

Sweaty kebab. An ill-proportioned sweaty kebab. That's what Aneesa thought whenever she saw her headmaster, Mr Abed. He was round in some places, but also long. This gave him the appearance of a lumpy man who looked like he was falling to one side. He had a constantly sweaty forehead and kept wiping it with the nearest piece of paper which often left ink marks behind. This led to bluish sweat drops running down his temples.

Mr Abed was standing in front of the assembly giving the school a talk about the importance of telling the truth. Summaya wondered why he bothered. The morning sun was baking everyone's heads and no one was absorbing a word he said. Nasmeera Dangor, the self-proclaimed queen of the class, yawned pointedly and whispered something to the girl behind her who was plaiting the ends of Nasmeera's long ponytail. Mrs Brown came to shush them. Everyone liked Mrs Brown. She was the only white teacher in the school and she was young. This somehow made her more special than the other Indian teachers. The female Indian teachers were strange – most of them wore shirts and stiff pants that made them look masculine, but on 'photo day' they would turn up with fluffed-out hair and garish-coloured saris that revealed glimpses of stomach fat. That day they would walk cautiously on their heels and seat themselves carefully on their chairs so as not to wrinkle their layers of Good Outfit. The Christian Indian teachers wore thin gold necklaces and came in shirts and skirts and looked nervous between their brightly-coloured Hindu colleagues. Mrs Brown wore pencil skirts and kitten heels and her eyes were blue like the shallow parts of tropical seas. She wore her normal clothes for 'photo day'. (The other teachers found it rather funny.)

Nani had once told Aneesa that white people had more beautiful legs than Indian people because theirs were thick and healthy. "These people have strong legs," *Nani* had said once when she had caught Aneesa staring in awe at the massive legs beneath the skirt of a white woman in Pick 'n Pay. "It's nice and thick. Makes them stand firm in the wind. We? The wind will blow us down in one puff." She paused and then added quietly, "That's why they ruled this country for so long. They're tough." And then she had nodded.

Aneesa studied Mrs Brown's calves and agreed to herself that *Nani* would have approved of them.

Aneesa did not have many friends at school. During break she usually sat by herself picking at the peanut butter and apricot jam sandwiches her mother persistently packed. She enjoyed staying over at *Nani's* house because that meant she would get sandwiches crammed with meat, spicy curry and *achar* for school lunch. And if she was lucky, maybe even a cling-wrapped *amli* sweet or a piece of *burfee*. Aneesa didn't mind the fact that she did not have friends. Well, most of the time anyway. It gave her space to observe the other children, read her books and contemplate things like why people who had curly hair kept straightening it. The more she thought about it the more Aneesa realised that *she* probably sabotaged her chances of making any friends. When Sameera Ali had shyly invited her to her sleepover, Aneesa had told her mother she was too sick to go. When Nasmeera Dangor had invited the whole class to her party at Zoo Lake, Aneesa had failed to mention it to her mother. At school the next day, Aneesa had heard all about the party. Nasmeera, who felt spited somehow because Aneesa was the only one who didn't turn up, announced to everyone at school that Aneesa was a 'nerdy-nerd' who didn't know how to have fun. Aneesa hadn't minded. She knew Nasmeera's type – loud, conceited and *very* insecure. So Aneesa had merely ignored her and continued reading her book. "You really are such a nerd! It's a good thing you didn't come – you would've just spoilt my party," Nasmeera had hissed before tossing her hair and walking out the door. Aneesa usually found herself alone at break after that. And she hadn't minded.

Not really anyway.

Today she was sitting trying to figure out if her mother had forgotten to add the apricot jam when Hoosen, the boy from six B, came to sit next to her. He sat down and began quietly un-wrapping the foil from his lunch. Aneesa wondered why he had chosen this bench since no one ever came to sit next to her. She remained quiet and took a quick glance at him from the corner of her eye. Just at that moment he was biting into a huge brown bread sandwich. All she could see was a big mop of curly

black hair. When he put the sandwich down she quickly looked back at the girls playing netball.

"Whha don foo pay?"

Aneesa thought those crude words could not be directed at her so she shifted away from him and focused more intently on the girls tossing the ball around.

"Why don foo pay?"

Aneesa turned to Hoosen who was facing her with bulging cheeks.

"If you're talking to me then you should know that you're not making any sense."

Hoosen blinked at her and swallowed suddenly. The piece he swallowed was so huge that Aneesa doubted it was going to make the journey down. The lump travelled to the top of his adam's apple where it hovered uncertainly. Hoosen's eyes watered a bit and he took a hard gulp. The lump moved up a bit and then suddenly was sucked down. Hoosen coughed for a bit and knocked his chest.

"You can talk," he exclaimed while slowly rubbing his chest and eyeing the rest of his lunch with suspicion.

"Well, obviously, or you wouldn't have asked me a question."

Hoosen screwed his eyes a bit as he thought about that. "Well yeah I did, but I didn't expect you to answer."

Aneesa looked at him incredulously. "That's stupid."

Hoosen pondered this, then said, "Yeah it is." He looked at his half-eaten sandwich in his lap. He seemed to think better of it because he picked it up again. "It's just that you don't usually talk, you ignore people and walk away."

Aneesa, at that very moment, was considering walking away. She didn't like this rude boy who was interfering in her space with his messy lunch and stupid questions.

"I – I don't walk away."

Aneesa didn't know what to do so she took a bite of her lunch and decided that her mother had used a little jam. They sat in silence for a while watching the girls circle each other.

"Well, why don't you?" said Hoosen.

"Why don't I what?"

"Play," he said, gesturing at the girls in front of them. "That's what I was asking you earlier."

She studied an especially tall girl as she caught the ball and twirled in her place looking for someone to throw to.

"It's silly. Just look at them. All running and jumping like monkeys for one ball."

"It looks like they're having fun."

"Why aren't you playing soccer with the boys?"

He looked hurt for a second. "They won't have me. Something about me being too slow for the team," he mumbled.

Aneesa looked at Hoosen and for a second she saw herself, sitting on her bathroom floor, feeling sorry for herself because she wasn't chosen to be on the netball team. She didn't tell him this though. She stopped watching the game and studied him. Behind his unruly hair he had lovely big black eyes that shone like glossy marbles. His body was shaped like a slim pawpaw – his middle extended slightly forward and then retracted smoothly back into his long legs. He was biting his nails now and staring at the game. Aneesa stood up as she crumpled her lunch wrap and watched Raeesa get knocked to the ground. The shrill noise of the referee's whistle cut through the air.

"Sports are stupid. Let's go inside."

That night while Summaya was trying to make *aknee*, Aneesa told her about Hoosen. "And he didn't even ask me if he could sit there."

Her mother was adding a cup of rice to a boiling pot of water.

"You're supposed to soak it first," Aneesa said.

"Oh… Well, never mind it's going to get washed while it cooks."

"*Nani* would kill you if she knew you did that."

"Well *Nani* doesn't know, does she? Anyway, what about this boy now? He's fighting with you?" Summaya inquired while she began adding *masala* to the chicken.

"It's two teaspoons of *dhana jeera*, not one. And no, not fighting. Just… he shouldn't have sat on my bench."

"Yes," said Summaya as she added too much chilli powder.

Once when Aneesa was little and still had friends, Nadia Simjee had invited her for supper. Aneesa loved Nadia's father because she thought he was everything a father should be. He was loud, funny and he had lots of hair on his chest. He used to pick her up and swing her around and called her 'Nees'. The little Aneesa had stared at his crinkly brown eyes and big hairy hands and she felt something inside her shift. Something small, but important. *So this is what it meant to have a father*. That day when she returned home from Nadia's house she had demanded an answer to the whereabouts of her own father.

Her mother had just stared at her with frozen eyes and then said, "You want to know? You *really* want to know?"

"Yes, yes!" the hysterical Aneesa had yelled.

"He's dead. Dead! He died trying to save someone drowning at the beach! That was your father – the heroic idiot! They didn't even find the body."

Aneesa had stared at her for a full minute with a quivering lip before speaking,

"You're lying! You're lying! I can see you're lying!"

"It's the truth! Why would I lie? Just accept it now," Summaya said lowering her voice.

"Then why didn't you tell me before?" She had yelled with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Because! Because – I didn't want to hurt you with the facts. That – that he's dead. That he died for nothing. Nothing! But every day, *every* day you keep nagging me, Aneesa, when I keep telling you *it doesn't matter*. All that matters is he's not here anymore and we only have each other… Now you know why. He's not coming back. He doesn't matter. Now I don't want to talk about it. Ever again."

So they didn't.

Aneesa lay in bed staring at the ceiling, thinking about that day. She remembered every detail and every word. The way her mother's lips slowly formed, *he's dead*. The way her mother's eyes flashed gold suddenly. The way the ceiling fan hummed dully above them. She remembered feeling shattered, absolutely shattered. And after

she had bawled her eyes out in the bathroom she remembered suddenly becoming very calm. Her mother was lying – she was sure of it. Even then she knew her mother well. She knew it in her heart. He was her father, and if he was dead she would have felt it. Felt a hollow in the place that felt full. Maybe she wanted to believe he wasn't dead. Maybe she *was* fantasising. Whatever it was, Aneesa Ballim nurtured the belief that she had a father somewhere in the city, walking around with a briefcase and tie and that one day he was going to come for her and swing her around like Nadia's father. She had spent that day searching all the photo albums in the house but she couldn't find a single photo of him. Not even a wedding photo. It was as if he had never existed.

She felt the bed shift with her mother's presence next to her.

"What are you thinking?" Summaya whispered.

"About cats."

"What about them?"

"About – about how soft they are."

"I like living on my own, Aneesa."

"I know."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah couldn't find her favourite green knife for cutting carrots and Cynthia had not turned up for work. Khadeejah managed most of the house-cleaning by herself, but she needed help once a week with things like washing the clothes, wiping the floors, vacuuming the carpets and cleaning the windows. She had been through a number of maids recently – mainly because she had never been satisfied with their work. She watched Cynthia like a hawk. If Cynthia forgot to move a sofa and vacuum underneath, Khadeejah would scold her. Sometimes she even grabbed the duster/vacuum/rag from Cynthia to show her exactly how it should be done.

"*Kyk hier*. *Boega mena*," Khadeejah would instruct in Afrikaans and Zulu (although Cynthia spoke Xhosa). "You must vacuum in the corners. *In* the corners. *Wenayaaz*?" And Cynthia would nod but not understand. Cynthia was not allowed to clean Khadeejah's ornaments – because she always forgot to wipe out the dust from the fins of the Opera House.

While cursing Cynthia mentally in Urdu, Khadeejah began viciously cutting carrots with an old brown knife. It was going to be a hectic day. Mrs Jassat from Benoni had phoned to say she was coming next Wednesday to fetch a bucket of carrot *achar*. That was all very fine and well, but how did she expect Khadeejah to have it ready at such short notice? The carrots would still be *katta.* This thought agitated Khadeejah and she began to cut the carrots faster, occasionally pausing to stir her *aloo bedha* curry on the stove.

She pushed the backdoor open with her rear and shooed the cat as she made her way to the trash can with a newspaper full of potato and carrot peels. She saw her neighbour, Colleen, hanging up clothes. Colleen was a big friendly coloured woman. She had a loud voice with a rich Cape accent. She lived with her small daughter and an ailing father. Her story was a sad if familiar one. She had married a Capetonian gangster and had convinced herself that he would change his ways. But he never did and by the time she realised she was pregnant, he was coming home with knife wounds. She left him a week after she gave birth. She quietly packed her things one morning, picked up her father and took a bus to Johannesburg. When people asked

her how she found the confidence to do it, she said her horoscope that week had said she should be spontaneous. She was a quiet, fierce woman who took no nonsense. Family said her husband was furious and was looking for them all over the country. Colleen said, let him come. And she had a strange look in her eyes that made people believe her.

"*More*, aunty K."

"*Ja,* ma. *Hoe gaan dit*?" asked Khadeejah as she opened the bin.

"I'm well, aunty K. We were just saying what lovely smells are coming from your kitchen. What you cooking today?"

"Agh, just some egg and potato curry. Nothing special. How's *oupa* doing?"

"So-so. He's still waiting for you, aunty," she chuckled.

It was Colleen's standing joke that her father and Khadeejah were meant for each other.

Khadeejah laughed. "No, no. Why you giving me such an old man? I told you, you must get me a young boy. Then I'll think about it."

"Ha! Aunty Kats, you getting naughty now! You watching too much of those Indian movies with the young boys and girls dancing around trees. You must watch programmes for your age."

"Hey, don't pick on my series. *Ja*. They do have young-young people *maar* it's better than all that nonsense they show on Friday nights on E."

"Aunty K! How do you know what they show on Friday nights?" Colleen asked in shock as she put her hands to her mouth.

"I'm not so old now, *neh*?" winked Khadeejah pushing open the door and going inside.

Khadeejah was still smiling to herself as she chopped chunks of green beans for the carrot *achar.* She washed the beans in a small metal colander and set it in the sink to drain. She had begun to make the *masala* for the *achar* when she realised she was out of white vinegar. She only used white vinegar. Her preference for white was not limited to vinegar only. She had white sugar in her tea and white toast in the morning. She refused brown sugar when she went visiting and was highly offended if anyone offered her brown bread. Once she had been given brown *rotis* at a relative's house.

Khadeejah had walked into the kitchen, rolled up her sleeves and half an hour later set down fresh white *rotis* on the table. Family knew that if Khadeejah was coming to visit they had to do two things – clean their houses and have white *rotis* ready. Khadeejah was always ready to extol the virtues of the colour white. Besides the fact that it signified cleanliness, it also ensured good looking children. She had once taken Aneesa aside and told her to marry a man so fair that if he stood next to a white wall you would not know where he was. "Do you think you get such a man?" a shocked Aneesa had whispered back to Khadeejah. Khadeejah had replied in the affirmative. Aneesa had spent the afternoon worrying why her grandmother wanted her to marry someone so terrifying.

Khadeejah decided reluctantly to use the small bottle of brown vinegar she kept in her pantry for washing meat. She sloshed the brown vinegar on the beans in mild disgust. She hated brown, but most of all she hated brown vinegar. It reminded her of the Worcester sauce her husband had loved pouring on his food. He would douse his food with so much of the stuff that his *dhal* and rice would be drowning in dark puddles. Then he would attack the meal with such zeal that he would flick little brown drops onto her white tablecloth, while she stood there and watched him with her lips pulled up at one corner as if a hook were caught in them. She detested the sight of his unclean plate with leftover pools of sauce that she would have to wash. She remembered clearly one Friday afternoon when she had purposely forgotten to buy a new bottle of Worcester sauce. Haroon had refused to eat. And she, suddenly remembering her mother's warning, had felt terrible for purposely starving her husband. She had run out to the nearest corner store to buy the biggest bottle of Worcester sauce she could find. When she returned home sweaty and panting, he was nowhere to be found. She found out he had gone to his friend's house and invited himself for lunch.

Oh, the shame Khadeejah had felt! For purposely not buying the sauce. For her husband who ate somewhere else without being invited! And she had also felt an extreme bitterness – there had been a pot full of food in the house. Why did he have to eat somewhere else? That day she had dumped the whole pot of food in the bin.

When her daughter came home from *madressah* and asked what was for lunch, Khadeejah had started to cry.

Khadeejah had hated him then. At night she stared at his sleeping face and could not imagine how she could ever have loved him. She observed his slightly protruding chin and ran her fingers over the whiskers above his top lip. She reached out and touched his hair. She felt nothing for him at that precise moment. No love, no fondness, nothing. She stared at this man who lay beside her and she felt as if she did not know him. How had he come to lie in her bed as if he belonged there? That was the first of many nights that she had stared at him in his sleep and wondered why she had been destined to marry him.

Every night now before Khadeejah went to sleep, she filled a glass of water and then checked all the windows and the doors. It was not a habit created out of fear - but rather a habit she had picked up from her dead husband. Every night he inspected the door locks and the windows (he did this to secure the safety of his possessions rather than his family). Khadeejah bolted the chain of her back door and went into her bedroom. It was a fairly large room but because it was crammed with so many cupboards and boxes it looked rather small. Like fat men who appear short. She had two dressing tables (one narrow one built between the cupboards), four dark wooden wardrobes, a rocking chair in the corner of the room, a large bed with flowery print and a narrow bed alongside one end of the room. The dim yellow of the lamp made everything in the room look stuffy and foggy. Numerous cardboard boxes lay under her dressing table and above her cupboards. They were all, however, packed in the neatest possible way. She couldn't help collecting things. If anything could be used again she would keep it. She knew many people thought she was a stupid old lady who collected too many ornaments. She knew they sometimes snickered behind her back. But Khadeejah knew she *knew* things. Things that those people would only learn much later in their lives.

She peered through her thick pink curtains at the cold, gloomy street. The street was defined by little pools of streetlights and glints of steel gates. On nights like these when the silence was broken only by a dog barking in the distance, she felt very alone.

She thought about what her grand-daughter had asked her that afternoon about being scared. She missed her daughter and grand-daughter. Sometimes she even thought about Haroon. She missed his distinctive smell of cigarette smoke and soap. She missed waking up at night and wondering why he was lying there. On nights like these she felt a crazy awareness build up inside her. She was an *old* woman. An old woman living alone. How long could she go on working? What if she fell sick? What if one morning she realised that she could not lift herself out of bed? She would just lie there. Still. Stiff. Only her eyeballs moving uncertainly in their sockets. She always told Summaya she didn't need them to live with her. But that answer rose from a mixture of pride and knowing that that was what her daughter wanted to hear. But didn't all mothers need their daughters? Despite the hatred between them?

Khadeejah shook herself out of her reverie and put down the glass on her bedside table. She plaited her hair roughly as she scolded herself for becoming so sentimental. At the end of the day she could look after herself, she thought. At the end of the day, Haroon was a lousy husband. She pulled out her false teeth, plopped them into the glass and switched off her bedside lamp.

SUMMAYA

Zohra cleaned her teeth in public.

That was Summaya's only gripe with her old friend. No matter how many times she told Zohra that it wasn't nice, Zohra kept forgetting.

Loud, coarse Zohra who pointed accidentally at the people she was talking about. She never meant to be rude, but she was the type of person who always *seemed* to be rude. She giggled when she saw people trip, she gasped when she saw someone get hurt (when the injured person would have rather pretended it hadn't happened), and she asked the most embarrassing questions. Like the time in grade five when she had asked *appa* Khairoon what 'adultery' meant. Or when she had asked her colleague, Rebecca Roy, why her boyfriend hadn't proposed yet.

Zohra was a curious person by nature, and this in turn made the people around her nervous. People walked in loops around her and wouldn't look her in the eye. Her questions were so blunt that people didn't know how to avoid answering. So they would have no choice but to answer the questions with a hurried sort of honesty: "It's-when-a-married-man-has-intercourse-with-another-woman" and "I-don't-tink-he-loves-me-enough-and-I'm-scared-I-won't-get-married". And they would then resent her for having forced them to answer. To form their fears into words. Similar to the helpless resentment one has for a salesman who has convinced one to buy something completely unnecessary. Zohra was oblivious to most of it and continued bumbling her way through life. This was perhaps why Summaya was fond of her – she was honest and simple.

They were having lunch at a trendy café. Somewhere smart and somewhere fashionable. They would never admit it to themselves but these places made them feel younger, more in touch and included in society. Something two older single women need occasionally. The terrace section of the café was full of people enjoying patches of sunlight that filtered through the jacaranda trees lining the pavement. Businessmen, housewives and university students sipped big cups of cappuccinos that left thin foam on their lips. A businessman with a purple jacaranda flower on his hair opened his laptop to type a letter to an important client. He, too felt like he belonged. Somewhere.

"So what are you going to do now that the loan hasn't come through?" Zohra asked as she opened her mouth and stuffed half her cheese roll into it. A bit of lettuce slipped down her collar and fell between her cleavage. She tried dusting it away inconspicuously, but merely ending up pushing it deeper into her dress.

"I don't know. I was so sure they would approve it," Summaya answered. "I wish my car was paid off fully, it would make things so much easier."

"But you know," Zohra said reaching for a toothpick, "You got it pretty good there – I mean, your rent is quite cheap right?" she asked while picking between her teeth.

Summaya sighed exasperatedly. "Cheap! Yeah, because I'm paying for cheap. Well, no, I mean the flat is nice, yeah, and I haven't had any problems with the electricity and plumbing. But the area! Zohra. C'mon! You've seen it. Plus the people in my building are going coo coo." She motioned circles around her temple. "Do you know Selvi from upstairs threw a frying pan – *a frying pan*! – down the stairs at her son? What if Aneesa was there? What if I had to take her to the hospital? They're acting like *junglees*." She took a sip of coffee from the wide rim of her cup.

"Why was she throwing a frying pan at him?" asked Zohra in astonishment, her toothpick poised in midair.

"That's another story. He came home high. *High!* If Selvi's son is coming home high, can you imagine how bad things are?"

"What? That quiet, skinny one? You used to say his mother dragged him temple all the time?"

"Same one. High! I was shocked when I heard. He's what – ? Only fourteen, fifteen. Tsk! These *stupid* children. They think they can run away from their problems."

"Well, *ja*, they are stupid. But please, Sum, stop acting like you were such a saint."

Summaya paused. It was true, she had had a rebellious streak. (Truth be told she *still* had a rebellious streak). She had taken the little white pill.

She wasn't stupid then.

She had heard of people having bad reactions and dying. She had heard the story of how Yaseen Valley had shaken as if someone had electrocuted him and fallen to the floor with froth at his lips. She had also heard of the Simjee girl who had died within seconds from choking on her own vomit. No one helped her.

And yet… Yet Summaya had still felt the compulsion to try it. To break away from barriers that dictated what was Right and Wrong. To stretch the limits of her reality. To experience life *differently*. People were allowed to do it all the time through video games and books, so why not like this?

She knew (yes, she knew) that the appeal also lay in its danger. Drugs were such a whispery word in her community. Such a dangerous word. As if the letters had barbed wires that pricked your tongue and filled your mouth with poisonous blood when you said it. *Moulanas* screamed about it from their pulpits. Little yellow pamphlets were passed around to children at school.

The scourge of society. *The devil's work.*

It had happened one afternoon at Amy's house. They were lying on her sofas in her huge house. She had a kitchen with granite topped counters, six deep carpeted bedrooms and a large swimming pool. And her street was tree-lined and pot hole free. They acknowledged it. That of course it wasn't fair that Amy's streets were tree-lined and wider than the bare narrow streets in Indian or black areas. Bloody apartheid government, they all agreed, as they lit up their cigarettes.

They had been lazing around when someone, Summaya couldn't remember who, had casually taken out a bank packet that contained small foil-wrapped parcels. They sat up. Their time had come to Live Life. Beyond rules and lists and other things that made people narrow-minded. The music was turned down and the foil was passed around. When it came to Summaya, a reckless feeling – one that comes with the strength of youth – overtook her. And she popped the little coloured pill in her mouth. Stone Temple Pilot's *Wicked Garden* was playing softly in the background.

The pill went down. Into the darkness. Down to the pit of her stomach where things like Food, Guilt, and Sorrow seemingly disappear.

(But all they do is change.)

But I'm alive

So alive now

I know the darkness blinds you

Some said Freddy, who sat at the back of the lecture halls, was an addict. A real addict. Not like them. He wore a black bomber jacket and had intense eyes that peered from below brooding eyebrows. He exuded a sexy confidence. No one knew exactly what he studied but sometimes they spotted him sitting at the back of lecture theatres listening with his legs propped up. He pitched up erratically at Amy's little gatherings.

Nothing seemed to happen at first, but then Summaya felt a little sick in her stomach. She wavered and quickly sat down. Calmed herself. Drugs just altered your senses for a while. They didn't change you.

Did they?

Oh God, what if they changed you?

Took your DNA and twisted it into something else. *Something bad.*

She had sat there for a while. Her hands were shaking. Then Freddy was next to her. He ran a finger down her back and into her waistband. She shivered. Mumbled something. He laughed at her. Deep laughter. "*Lightie*," he whispered before swaying toward Amy. No one had ever called Summaya *lightie* before. She felt mildly offended. Amy had gladly let him sit on her lap and she laughed when he tried to fondle her. The music had been turned up again and the beat pounded in Summaya's head.

Someone had taken out bottles. Summaya solemnly refused, saying she didn't drink. "But you can take drugs?" they asked, incredulous. "That's different," she returned. And laughed. There was a good feeling running through her now. Light and happy. She stood up and began dancing. Slow and languid and by herself at first. The people in the room watched her.

It was hot, too hot, but she felt like she could dance forever.

"*Shaytaan's friend! Katchra! What are you doing?"*

A nauseous clenching in her stomach.

"Is this how you thank your Lord for his favours?"

She put her hands to her head. Stopped dancing.

"*What if you die now? What if you die? Right. Now. How could you face your creator? Would you even die with faith in this state?*

She pushed past Freddy. Away from the crowd into the passage.

She wasn't sure what was happening. All she knew was that she suddenly wanted it out. She thumped her chest. The laughing in the other room was merging into one sound. A laughing bottle-clinking sound. The nausea overcame her and she ran to the bathroom. Empty, hollow belches overtook her. Nothing but a vile yellow liquid came up.

She remembered looking at her reflection in the mirror (a big oval edged with a protruding gold frame). She was panting, her eyes egg whites with brown yolks.

Egg whites with brown yolks surrounded by a big golden shell.

She cried as she sat on the tiles of the bathroom floor. Then she went home and vomited again. This time Guilt, Sorrow and Fear came up.

Later, she reasoned that the voices she heard were her own guilty subconscious. Other times she wasn't so sure.

Years afterward, when she went for a holiday with her husband to Port Elizabeth, she had seen a drunken man shuffling past them on the street. Just as she clutched her handbag tighter she caught a flash of an intense eye behind a brooding eyebrow. She had hurried on.

"That's completely different," Summaya said, dropping her tuna sandwich onto her plate.

"Haha," laughed Zohra. "Everyone says it's different."

"No really, I just… tried something. It was – stupid. I regret it. But I did it…for other reasons." For noble open-minded reasons, she wanted to say. "These kids do it because they're bored. And they're addicted. I mean that's where the actual problem comes in. Plus – " She glanced around at the businessmen, housewives and university students with foam on their lips, then scooted her chair closer to Zohra and lowered her head. "I heard Ismail Jeewa's sons drink behind the flat."

"Drink? As in *dharoo?*!"

"Yes. Selvi herself saw them coming from behind the broken shed in the back carrying brown paper packets. And you know what? She saw Faiza Valley from number sixteen with them."

"No! Ali's daughter?"

"Yes."

"*Ataghfirullah*! Summaya, you have to tell their parents something. Drugs are one thing, but *dharoo*. Tsk, tsk. No, no, you must say something. And especially about Faiza –she's a girl!" Zohra's voice dropped to a high-pitched whisper at the last part of her sentence.

"No, I don't need her and her husband calling me any more names. If they can't see their children are slurring and sideways, then they don't want to see. I'm not saying anything. All I want to do is leave that place."

"I'm shocked, man! Someone should tell them their *duas* won't be answered for forty days. I mean there's a reason why *dharoo* is *haraam*."

Summaya reached over for the bill. "I know… but everyone wants to see for themselves, right? It's just when you take it too far that everything goes wrong." She sighed.

"That's why we're not even supposed to go near it, Summaya. We don't know our limits." Zohra reached into her bag. "Here, let me pay."

"No, I got it," Summaya said as she pushed some notes into the little blue book and scribbled on the receipt.

"Thanks." Zohra stood up and swung her bag across her shoulders. She nearly hit the businessman behind her, who gave her an irritated look. Zohra didn't notice and Summaya smiled.

"You need to get out of there fast, Sum."

"I know!"

ANEESA

"I know," sighed Aneesa.

"Then why won't you ask her?" asked Hoosen exasperatedly.

"Because – because I know she doesn't want to talk about it!"

"But he's your father! You have every right to know."

"I know!"

"Then ask her!"

"It's not so easy! She doesn't like to talk about it. It – it hurts her."

"But, Aneesa," Hoosen added sadly, "you said you know she's lying to you. If you think your father's alive, you have the right to see him. She can't just say, 'he's dead'," and he threw his hands in the air, "and that's the end of that. She should tell you!"

Hoosen and Aneesa had come to a funny sort of agreement. She would sit at the bench eating her lunch and after a while he would join her. Both would look in different directions, chewing their lunch and pretending not to notice that the other one was there. Until one of them (usually Hoosen) would make a comment about the weather or another student and then Aneesa would reply. After a few moments they would launch into an animated conversation. Recently their conversations had centred on Aneesa's missing father. Aneesa had shared with Hoosen the fact that she suspected her mother was lying and that her father was actually alive. Hoosen hadn't berated her, hadn't told her she was imagining things, and hadn't pitied her. He simply believed her. In fact he was quite adamant that she *must* find her father. The fact was that Hoosen was fascinated by investigation series on television and he relished having a real life mystery to solve. After what he believed was careful questioning, Aneesa admitted that she had no proof for her belief except a gut feeling.

"Maybe your grandmother will have some information," Hoosen pressed.

"I don't know – she talks even less about him than my mother, if that's possible," she said, leaning her elbows on her knees and watching a trail of red ants march across the uneven tarmac.

"C'mon, you always say she likes you. Just sweeten her up. That's what they do on TV. Well… mainly the male detective sweet talks the ladies, but I'm sure you can tell your *Nani* how sad you are, how you miss having a father around, how much you love her cooking – which reminds me, when are you bringing me more of her *ladoos*?" Hoosen asked as he shut his empty lunchbox and looked at hers longingly.
"She hasn't made *ladoos* recently but here, she packed some *goolab jamuns* for me. Extra-soaked, just the way you like it."
As Hoosen munched his way through the sticky, fried dough he smacked his lips. "You know you should enter your *Nani* in some sort of cooking competition or something. She's *so* good," he muttered while golden syrup ran down his chin. It landed in a small blob on the ground and the ants quickly swarmed around to investigate.
"Ugh, Hoosen, you're getting it down your front," Aneesa complained as she swiped at his chin with a folded tissue. "Now there are ants by us!"
"Don't worry, they're going up to the prefab," he pointed out as the line of ants marched up the tarmac pathway.
"I hope the spitbugs get them."

No one actually knew what 'prefab' meant. All they knew was that it referred to the six classrooms on the hill behind the school. The prefab was built differently from the rest of the school – it sat on stilts above the ground and had high ceilings and wooden floors. There were rumours, of course, about the dark, wet places under the classrooms. Such murky places are bound to draw the attention of children.

They said something lived under there. An old creature with wet hands and watery eyes. It had small hard teeth that it gnashed together as it crouched in the dark, watching the little ankles file up the raised stairs. Sumeet Armugum had said that his father had said that before the school was built, the 'prefab' had been a science laboratory that experimented on animals. When the laboratory had been moved, one of the failed experiments had escaped and had lived under the prefab ever since. It was said that if you looked it straight in the eye it would attack you.

Aneesa hadn't believed it, but she always took care to run quickly up the classroom stairs. She sometimes imagined she saw little eyes peering at her in the

dark. The rumours were increased by the little bumps, shuffling and squelching sounds heard under the floorboards.

Later they found out that Avesh Naidoo from grade three B had been coming early to school and tying his dog, Larry under the classrooms. He had missed the animal far too much to leave him at home so he tied Larry, under the classrooms. It was only when Siphiwe Duma (on a dare) bent down in the dirt on his knees to look, that the dirty dog was discovered. Tied to a brown rope that was knotted around a floor stilt, and gnawing on an old bone.

Of course those were not the only rumours about the lonely prefab. Six wooden classrooms on a hill are a delicious source for stories. Especially for the children at the bottom of the hill. Those 'down under', they liked to call themselves.

There were the stories about the 'spitbug' trees that lined the pathway up to the prefab. They grew in dense bamboo like clusters that poked through the school fence and hung over the path. The spitbugs were small insects that sat in the trees and spat at passer-bys. The moment their spit touched your hair, it would fall out. It's not so bad for boys, Sumeet had said, but imagine the poor girls! Everyone (including the teachers) avoided walking under the spitbug trees. No one had actually seen one, but Aneesa had a vague idea that they looked like little white dots that sat watching and waiting for a particularly luscious crop of hair. Once or twice when she took a chance and ran under the trees she would imagine a spot of wetness on her hair and she would dust her hair frantically while jumping on the spot. This was a common sight on the path.

Aneesa crushed the ants with the toe of her dusty black school shoe.

"What do you want to be when you grow up, Hoosen?" A few ants struggled away.

"Don't kill them! They'll go on their own."

She stopped. "Fine. Well, what do you want to be?"

"A detective . . . or a cook like your *Nani*."

"Cooks don't make a lot of money, Hoosen. *Nani* says so."

"Then I'll be a detective."

"Hmph, you can't even find my own father," Aneesa snorted.

"Well, I'll try. I promise I will try my hardest to find your father."
"*Nani* want me to be a doctor."
He thought about it, one arm folded over the other with a hand cupping his chin. Effeminate almost. "I don't really like doctors. They always smell funny and they smile too much. It's creepy. Like how clowns always smile but you know it's not real because it's painted on – so you don't know what face they've got on inside. They could look like they're smiling at you… but maybe they're really frowning at you." He shivered slightly. "Do *you* want to be a doctor?"
"I don't know… I like writing and painting. But can you get a job from that?"
"Must be," he said licking his fingers.
"But my *Nani* wasn't given the chance to become a doctor and mum didn't want to be one and now – now there's me and I could do it – I could do it for her. I mean I am pretty smart."
"Doesn't mean you have to be a doctor," he said reaching for a third *goolab jamun.*
"I wonder what your dad did," and then sensing Aneesa's hard stare, he added, "Does – I mean does. Really, Aneesa, you should at least know what he does."
"I know!" said Aneesa so fiercely that Hoosen dropped his third *goolab jamun* on to the tarmac. He watched sadly as it collected bits of tiny tar stones and rolled under the bench.
"It's just – not the right time, Hoosen."
"But when is the right time?" he said as he stretched his arm below the bench.
"Don't you dare pick it up," she warned. "The right time will come."
"Right," said Hoosen sarcastically, cross that he wasn't allowed to retrieve the *goolab jamun*. "*Eish,* I don't know why I even try helping you when you clearly don't want it. If you ask me, you're just delaying. Delaying because you're scared."
"Well, I didn't ask you. Now I don't want to talk about this anymore," Aneesa said tersely as she squashed a few ants crawling toward the sweetmeat under the bench.

Dimly, somewhere in the back of her mind, she acknowledged that she had just used the same words as her mother on the topic.

KHADEEJAH

It was May and winter was beginning 'to show face', as Khadeejah put it. She didn't usually feel cold. Ever since her hot flushes nineteen years ago, it always seemed hot to her.

But today was different. The wind was working its way into the house through keyholes and door cracks. The back door shuddered against its bolt and the cold air swept under the door and wrapped itself around Khadeejah's ankles.

"*O, maar dis koud*," she complained to herself. She peered through the cream net of her kitchen window. The wind was shaking the poor curry leaf tree for all it was worth. Billee was cowering under the washing trough, yowling occasionally along with the wind. It was getting colder by the second. That sudden biting cold that has people rubbing their arms up and down while looking suspiciously at the sky. As if it had betrayed them.

Then suddenly the rain came down in sheets. Khadeejah worried about Aneesa and Summaya in this weather. She hated this type of rain. The soaking type that made everything dreary, the type that threw cars off the road and flooded the floors of houses. In fact she was terrified of weather like this, but she would never admit it. The pipe draining water from the roof outside was gushing water and flooding the ground around it. Little pools were forming everywhere and there was a miniature flood sweeping away her *dhania*.

Agh, nee man, thought Khadeejah. Now she would need to plant new ones and the price was going up every day. She hoped the *dhania* man would pop in this week – he may be expensive but at least he gave her a good bunch of the pungent leaves. She considered bringing the cat into the kitchen, but the thought of his dirty wet foot prints on her kitchen tiles made her recoil.

All of a sudden the front door burst open. Aneesa stood there dripping, Summaya shuffling in behind her, stamping her feet on the mat.

"Oh my God, ma! Can you believe this weather? One second it was bright and sunny and now," she gestured at Aneesa's wet appearance.

"Why's she so wet?" Khadeejah asked horrified, as she hurried to get a towel.

"On rainy days there's so much of traffic outside *madressah* – I just walked to mum's car so she wouldn't have to wait. I didn't know the rain was going to wet me so much," Aneesa volunteered.
"*Nee man*. *Kya theri akkal kho gayi*? It's that soaking-soaking rain. You should have fetched her from inside, Summaya!" Khadeejah pushed her grand-daughter crossly toward the bathroom door. "Go in the shower right now *Jau, jau!* Before you catch cold. Just look at you! Where's your jersey? Why you not wearing jersey?"
Summaya planted a hand on her head, knowing what was going to come.
"Sumaaaya! Why didn't you give this child a jersey this morning? You could see it was going to be cold!"
"No, actually I couldn't," Summaya replied dryly.
"Tsk! What nonsense. Any good mother can see what the weather was like. *Tanda hai!* Now just look at her socks. Oh my *Rabb* – they are soaking! Did she sit the whole way in the car like that? *Dheko! Dheko!* Just come see here!"
"Oh please, ma, it's not a big deal! She'll have a hot bath and she'll be okay!"
"Yeah *Nani*, I'll be okay," placated Aneesa.
"Tsk! Okay-okay. What okay?" muttered Khadeejah as she stripped her grand-daughter's socks off.

Children caught pneumonia this way. Didn't Summaya realise that, Khadeejah thought angrily. Was it so hard for her to just go inside and wait for Aneesa? Why was Summaya's life one big hurry-hurry? No patience, *no patience* that woman got. Her child will die and she'll still be hurry-hurrying.

Khadeejah's younger sister, Sarah, had been five years old when she had died of pneumonia. It had happened outside the flats in Bronkhorstspruit. Her sister had been playing outside and it had suddenly rained. Those freak showers that came down in soaking sheets and left as suddenly as they arrived. At first she was just feverish and fluey. Then she became gravely ill and lay in her parents' bed the whole day. All Khadeejah remembered of those quiet days were the sounds of ssh, ssh and seeing slices of her sister in bed through the slit of the bedroom door. The coughing would continue all night. Khadeejah was one of the seven sisters who slept in the lounge.

She could pick out all their wide eyes in the dark as they listened to the coughing and the hushed voices of their parents. They took Sarah to a government hospital in Pretoria, and Khadeejah heard later that her father had made a big fuss. He had been waiting for over eight hours for a doctor and the line had been long. His daughter would die there, he had screamed at a nurse. She would die there and they must know that it was their fault. In the end he brought her home and told everyone that he would never enter a hospital again. And he never did. Ameer Rahim Mia died in his bed at home despite the doctor's insistence that he admit himself into a hospital.

"We are dogs to them… just *kuthas*," Khadeejah had overheard him mutter to uncle Naven. "She was so tired, so small… What does the skin matter when you are sick? Tell me?" He took a deep puff of his pipe. Then he said in a low voice, "Sometimes. Sometimes I think …maybe it was a bad idea to come here. *We were better off with our own people*."

Sarah had died in her bed that very night.

Each pair of eyes in the dark cautiously, questioningly, sought out another pair when the coughing had suddenly, abruptly stopped.

Each pair of eyes stared unblinking for what seemed like an eternity, rigid and waiting. A terrible, terrible wait until Khadeejah's mother's long wail suddenly sliced the silence. They all stood stiff in the dark, not knowing what to do. Until the youngest in the room started to cry. Most of them were too small to understand, but they knew they had lost something valuable. There was one less of them in the world now.

One less person to play with, one less body to sleep against and one less pair of eyes to look with them into the dark.

The funeral was held at the flats. Her sister looked like a waxen doll wrapped in a white cloth lying on the carpet in the middle of the sitting room floor. Like a doll except for the camphor cotton wool stuffed in her ears and nose. The room was choked with visitors wrapped in headscarves and draped in cloaks all sniffing and crying or muttering *zikr* under their breaths. They sat in a circle around the body, with the space nearest the head reserved for Khadeejah's mother and sisters. Khadeejah's mother held her dead daughter's head in her lap and wiped angry tears from her face

with the edge of her scarf. The men came in to take her and the last thing Khadeejah saw of her sister was a piece of her white cloth swinging between a sea of hands and *topi*-clad heads as the men carried her away to the graveyard. That was the only memory Khadeejah had retained of her dead sister.

That and the hushed slit of her pale body through the bedroom door.

She never told Summaya about it though. She couldn't talk about these things – her throat closed up. No one could understand these things, these feelings in her head. She knew her daughter would tell her that the doctors today were not like the doctors in those days. That just because her sister had died then that didn't mean Aneesa was going to die now. But how did she know? You never knew. You should always be prepared. You should always be prepared, because you never knew when the worst could happen.

ANEESA

The glass was bleeding.

Aneesa was laying on her back on the carpet in her grandmother's lounge. She had her head turned towards the window, and she watched as the wind smashed tiny raindrops against the pane and smeared them sideways again and again. Like a painting, thought Aneesa. A beautiful watery painting. Why didn't people realise they had the most glorious artwork in their house on a rainy day? The dripping depictions of wild gardens, distorted houses, twisted trees and warped roads were the best paintings in the world.

Aneesa absentmindedly stroked Billee who lay curled on her stomach. He wriggled with affection against her because she had convinced Khadeejah to let him inside. The gas heater had been dusted and hauled from the outhouse, and was now slowly heating up the room. Khadeejah had her old Indian songs playing softly on the radio as Summaya helped her clean *elachi* pods spread out on the kitchen table. Summaya tore open the soft cardamom shells with her nails and emptied the tiny squashed black seeds into the large silver dish set between them. She leaned over to peer into the dish and sighed, "Ma, this is going to take forever."

"How I do it all the time?" Khadeejah paused from her shelling for a moment. "You get used to it."

"No ways. Not me," Summaya said. "Maybe you can do it, but I just don't have the time to sit and clean seeds."

"I also don't have time!" Khadeejah spat back. "But I try. Wait… what you mean you don't have time to clean? How you make all your *dhana*, *jeera* and *elachi* powders?"

Summaya paused guiltily. She cleared her throat. "Well – I just buy mine from Habibs," she said quickly.

"What?" Khadeejah looked outraged. "*Sies*. You *buy* it? And from there? You know how dirty they are? *Pagal hai*?"

"What ma? *You* buy your *jeera* from there!"

"My whole *jeera*, not the powdered one! And you know how much dirt comes out from the whole one when I clean it? It so filthy! Tsk!You think they clean it before

they grind it for you? Ha! They must be grinding all the branches, stones, leaves and mice's *ghoo*." She began to clean the seeds with increasing agitation. "You saw how dirty their shelves is? They don't even sweep the floor! They even keep their chilli powder open the whole night. The whole night! Tsk!" She threw one hand up in the air to emphasise her point and scattered *elachie* seeds onto the floor. "You think they going to clean it for you? What-what goes inside those powdered ones and you still pay for it. Paying good money for *katchra*! And me?" she said as if someone had just asked her. "I'll never eat it!" She turned around and called to Aneesa through the doorway, "You heard that, Aneesa? You eating rat shit at home."

Aneesa ignored them and continued playing with Billee. She was used to their bickering and using her as an instrument to goad one another. She never gave in to either of them and ignored them when they became like that. When she was younger she had hated watching them argue; she would sit on the back stairs and think up ways to help them make amends. Sometimes she even chose a side when she thought one was being unfair. But she learnt quickly that this only aggravated the situation. Nowadays their squabbling was merely an action in the background that she could tune out at will. Like an aerial that could tune out their pitched voices and tune into the metallic thud of the water dripping into the kitchen sink instead. Her mother was being silent-angry now. *Thud, thud*. Which would lead to Khadeejah talking about the weather. *Thud, thud, thud*. Summaya making a barb. *Thud, thud, thud, thud.*

Silence.

The heater was misting up the lounge window, engraving stagnant prints onto the window. Aneesa ran her fingertips in slow circles over the woolly carpet. Billee stood up, arched his back and went to investigate the heater by trying to nuzzle his nose against the long grey fins.

"Be careful, it's very hot," Aneesa warned.

As she said these words, a dim memory rose to the surface. It rose like a thin wisp of smoke that Aneesa suddenly, desperately tried to catch.

A memory of a memory.

She lunged at it. And it came in blurred segments, like an old black and white film with poor editing. She could see it happening to her, but she could imagine watching

it from afar as well. She closed her eyes and tried to pick her way clearly through the shadowy images.

A little girl tottered toward a television set. The television set was a glowing square in the dim room. A gas heater stood in front of it. A voice (from a sofa?) in the background was warning, "Be careful of the heater Aneesa! It's very hot." The child lurched toward the appealing screen. But something got in the way. Then there was hot, white pain. Hot white pain that sank into her body and shook the insides of her bones.

Screaming. Commotion. Crying. Strong arms. More crying.

Someone was yanking off her thick cream stockings but they stuck to the red burn. Red skin and cream stockings burning. There was more screaming and crying and hushing. The ceiling. Someone saying something about toothpaste. Hands. Sobbing.

A man's face.

Aneesa rolled up the leg of her jeans and studied the two long scars on her knee. Her red skin and cream stocking burn.

"How did I get these scars on my knee?" Aneesa stood at the kitchen entrance with her right pants' leg folded up.

"You know how," her mother replied squeezing out seeds from the *elachi* pods. She was still upset with Khadeejah so she wasn't doing a good job of it and half the seeds were being left behind in the shell.

"No, I mean how did I *really* get it?"

A hint of a shadow passed across Summaya's face. "You fell on the driveway when you were small." She reached steadily for another seed. "You know that."

"How come I don't remember?"

"You were too small."

"I didn't get burnt on a gas heater?"

She did not look at her mother. Her mother's face would give nothing away. Instead she studied her grandmother, who passed a quick, shocked look at Summaya, before hastily continuing with the shelling.

"No, you didn't," Summaya stated evenly.

Later that afternoon when Khadeejah was done with the cleaning and was busy wiping the kitchen table, Aneesa approached her.

"*Nani*, you knew my father, right?"

"Right," said Khadeejah warily.

Aneesa balanced her elbows on the table and rested her face in her palms. "What was he like?"

"What was he like?" Khadeejah repeated, realising even as she said it, how foolish she sounded. She wiped her hands on her apron and walked into the lounge. "Now where is that cat gone? I hope it's not in my room!"

Aneesa followed her. "Like – Was he nice? Or bad? Or what?"

"Where is that blerry cat of yours, Aneesa? It must be here somewhere."

"*Nani*."

"Oh, I don't know! Why don't you ask your mother all this? I'm too busy for all these nonsense-nonsense questions."

"I'm asking you! Plus, mummy doesn't like talking about it."

"Well then, maybe I shouldn't be talking about it also," Khadeejah replied cautiously before using the missing cat as a diversion again. "Maybe it's in the pantry. I don't know why you bring it inside, Aneesa. You just spoil that thing."

"Why doesn't anyone want to talk about him? Was he some kind of monster? He couldn't have been so bad or she wouldn't have married him!" Aneesa yelled.

Khadeejah stopped. "Darling, no. He wasn't a monster. He was – He was quite nice to me. I – He was at least honest. He was honest. Oh listen – Your mummy has finished in the bathroom, I can hear she's out. Rather you not upset her and talk about this anymore, *neh*? You know she doesn't like talking about this." She turned to face Aneesa. "What's in the past is in the past *beti*. Let it be."

She led the despondent Aneesa by her shoulders toward the kitchen. "*Au*, I'll get some *kheer* out for you. It's been in the fridge long enough. And maybe some *puree*. That will be nice, *neh*?"

Aneesa sat at the table and turned to look out the window.

The glass was still bleeding.

SUMMAYA

Drip. *Drip*.

The water ran down Summaya's slender arm that was hanging out of the bathtub. It slipped down her wrist, ran through her palm and under her finger tips where each fat drop collected before falling onto the tiles below.

Summaya did not believe she was a woman of indulgence. She did not care for chocolate and she disliked steak. Her clothes were simple slacks and cotton shirts. She abhorred women who followed fashion trends, draped in fancy shawls and expensive handbags.

And yet this.

This hot soak in a bath with bubbles and deep scents was a luxury she could easily surrender herself to. Especially after today. Mr Maharaj was ill-tempered because they had lost two potential clients. The weather was depressing. Ma had made her feel like a bad mother. And now Aneesa. Aneesa's obsession with her father. It was all too much.

She sank lower into the water. Let the water cover her face like a mask of warm cling-wrap, she thought under the water.

How could her daughter have remembered that?

She must have been nearly two. Who remembers what happens at two? Could you hold a memory for so long? Memories didn't just push themselves out of nowhere. Were *all* memories stored in the brain? Hidden in deep recesses and alcoves? Each experience packaged and stored away in cells and neurons and tissues. Some gone mouldy with age, some too dusty to find?

Why had Aneesa remembered suddenly? It was not fair that Summaya had to keep lying to her own daughter. And to herself.

The water was making her feel hot and tired. She always made it too hot and after a few minutes she was irritable and sweaty. But it was worth it.

First she would put in one foot, until the water covered her ankle. When the pleasurable burn of the ankle dimmed, the other one went in. After the heat had burnt all pain into numbness, in would go her knees. Smooth brown bends of bone. Then

the slow descent would begin, and when her thighs finally broke the surface – something extraordinary would happen. The mixture of hot water and steam and nakedness would trigger strange emotions. Summaya could never explain it. When the hot water covered her skin, memories would overcome her. Blunt pieces of her history. Holidays in Durban, spent with her cousins at the beach. The sandy wind stinging their faces and pulling their hair. Rough powder coating scalps, palms, soles and elbows. Running over an uneven tarmac to reach the car. The balls of their feet hurting as they jumped on the spot in towels that were too small for them, waiting for the car to be opened. Her father lining the seats with newspapers. The uncomfortable feeling of shifting wet bottoms on squashy newspapers. Toes wriggling with sand between them. The damp drive home that left little oval imprints through the newspaper on seats. Her father's shouting. Then all of them piling into a hot bath. Naked brown bodies tumbling over themselves as they fought to drench each other with the hand spray. Then little bodies wrapped in large fluffy towels. Warm and clean soft pyjamas.

And then there was a brief stillness in her mind. A quiet, wet, hot moment before she immersed herself into more memories.

Piercing her nose at a dodgy shop downtown. Meeting Ishaaq at the movies when she was fourteen. Hot summer days licking the bottoms of ice creams, the sticky orange dripping between the cracks of her fingers. Watching her mother roll *rotis* late at night, the fluorescent light emphasising the flour on her hands and the whites of her eyes.

Lying in a bed wrapped in his arms and breathing hard.

In those ten seconds as she entered the water her entire past would rise up from the steam and overwhelm her until she gasped out loud.

Cigarette smoke was a common highlight of many of her memories. The silhouette of her father in front of the television screen, a cloud of cigarette smoke hovering over his head as she, a twelve year old Summaya, tried sneaking out of the house. The distinct smell of Camel filters – intense and bitter. The bathroom, too, carried the faint smell of Stuyvesant cigarettes. Her mother would have been there previously, balancing on the corner edge of the bathtub so that she could reach the high bathroom

window. In fact if Summaya came home early from school she could see a cigarette resting from Khadeejah's fingers on the bathroom window sill. The grass outside the window was littered with squashed cigarette butts. Everyone knew, but pretended not to know. It was no wonder Summaya, too, had taken to smoking. She had started by stealing her father's Camels when he left them lying around. But she had found them too strong. She discovered her mother's hidden cache behind the Domestos in the cupboard, a much better choice. She used the same place as her mother to find a moment of peace. Her father never knew, always believing that the stale smell of smoke in the bathroom was Khadeejah's. But Khadeejah knew. They would look at each other knowingly as they passed on the way to the bathroom. But they never spoke about it. As if speaking about it would make it real.

He had made her give it up. He had convinced her that it was an unattractive habit. She never took another puff after the day he expressed his disgust when she had taken one out. They had been sitting in a circle on the University grounds and she had casually taken it to her lips. He had laughed and said it was disgusting to see an apparently educated woman like herself filling her lungs with that junk. She had continued smoking that cigarette, but it was an empty feeling. Only doing it to prove that his comment made no difference to her. She stopped that very same day. She hadn't even known him properly then. Hadn't even liked him…

And then the memories were gone.

Like a sigh they were exhaled and lost. Hiding wherever it is that sighs, pen caps, safety pins, unspoken words and blue buttons hide.

Summaya felt exhausted. Like a druggie whose high was slowly wearing off. She stepped out of the tub. Carefully dried herself, the insides of her elbows, between her toes, along her neck. The windows were filled with steam and the tiles were slippery. She listened. The rain hadn't stopped.

She came into the kitchen. Her mother was frying *purees* while her daughter slumped over the table eating from a glass bowl filled with the rice dessert.

"Oh, is that *kheer*?" asked Summaya as she opened a cupboard to get a bowl.

She didn't notice the way her daughter was looking at her.

The next day Summaya was sitting at her desk, trying to remain calm as the couple opposite her were locked in an argument. The man had angry eyes and shouted loudly and the woman wrung her hands and constantly used the word 'but'. Suddenly it seemed as if the woman were going to cry – her voice turned thin and she swallowed the last few words of her sentence.

Summaya tried to pretend she was not there. But when she pointedly looked away from them and began to type on her keyboard, the man, a portly fellow with a thinning hairline that was poorly disguised with the long hair from the back of his head, snapped around.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

And Summaya replied as professionally she could, "I'm just checking your bookings while you'll have a… discussion."

"No, we're discussing things with YOU. We pay good money to come here so we can discuss travel issues with an expert." Two flecks of spit flew into the air and hit the back of her monitor. Summaya tried not to react. "And you are being – being rude by writing while we're talking with you!"

"Mr Pillay, I – "

"No," he cut her off. "This is outrageous. We're trying to have a conversation here about our holiday. And you're supposed to help us. Not play solitaire or whatever it is you're doing!"

The tip of his nose was twitching. It was disturbing to watch. A little shudder danced through the tip every few seconds. And then he stopped it by hiking up his nostrils on either side as if he had sniffed something funny. Summaya had the oddest urge to laugh out loud. It began in her stomach and moved to her throat. She tried stopping it by clenching her cheek muscles. The same thing often happened at the dentist. She found that particular situation preposterous. A man digging so earnestly in her mouth, while she could see up his nostrils.

Mr Pillay's wife, seeming to suspect this (all women suspect other women of having hidden smiles on the edge of their lips), asked her if something was the matter. The husband, sensing from his wife what was happening, barked out, "If you think this is funny, we can take our business elsewhere!"

"Neville, she was just checking to see if our – " the wife began.

"Oh shut up. I know what I'm taking about. These kind of people loaf at any opportunity."

Summaya felt like smacking him. Grabbing his wife's small red polished bag with the gold buckle and whacking him repeatedly on his head with it. *Whack. Whack. Whack.*

But she didn't. She smiled at the woman and excused herself. She knew if she stayed with them a minute longer she would not be able to control herself.

In the bathroom she opened the tap and ran water over her face. She counted to ten in her head. She heard the door open behind her and the woman entered and smiled awkwardly at her. She passed her handbag from hand to hand and looked at Summaya.

"He's not usually like that, you know." She stopped passing her bag between her hands. "He's just tired. He works very hard."

Summaya looked at the woman in the mirror. "It's okay."

"I'm sorry about – about what happened there. He didn't mean it. You know how husbands can be." The woman grimaced.

"Yes. I know," Summaya replied as she wiped her hands and walked out the door.

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah knew a great deal about husbands.

In her many years of moving around the country she had come across a number of them. There were:

1.) The good ones who rubbed your back when you vomited. And tried to fry eggs on Sunday mornings.
2.) The mean ones who slammed your fingers in doors. Or pinched your thighs (and claimed it was a joke).
3.) The loving ones who rubbed coconut oil in your hair. And bought a sleek slab of chocolate to hide under your pillow every night.
4.) The domineering ones who walked ahead of you with long, quick strides. Who slept on high, firm pillows.
5.) The *very* bad ones who came home when the night was deep. And left you with a broken heart (and nose).
6.) The sad ones who didn't know how to smile. Too oblivious or drenched in self-pity to care about someone else.
7.) And the indifferent ones who forgot you were standing next to them. Until you pulled at their sleeve, and they turned to look down at you in surprise.

Oh yes, Khadeejah Bibi Ballim knew them all.

Take Roxanne's husband, Jerome, for instance. The couple had been married for five years and had lived next door to Khadeejah and Haroon during their time in Kliptown. They never fought. They never raised their voices. Khadeejah would watch from behind the curtain of her sitting room window as Roxanne planted a loving kiss on Jerome's cheek before he rushed off to work. He never even once turned to look back at her as she stood and watched him leave. A husband like him did not appreciate a loving wife.

The loving ones were not hard to locate. Peeping from behind curtains was unnecessary as this type of husband announces himself to the world. In

Bronkhorstspruit everyone in the flats could hear Hajji Goolam singing *phool thum hai beja hai* at the top of his voice for his wife Fawzia. And every few minutes they would hear her shy laugh, "Sshh, everyone will hear you."

Khadeejah knew especially about the hurtful husbands. In her opinion these men were born bad. Like bad seeds. It had nothing to do with being spoiled by mothers or money. These men were damaged right from the beginning. Maybe the sperm got in the wrong way or maybe the egg wasn't right. Whatever it was these men were born with a bad heart. Damaged. Khadeejah held the belief that if you looked at a baby in the right way you could tell if it was rotten. The Way it cried or moved its mouth. There was a tell-tale shriek at the back of the cry. A pout to the lips. And a greediness in the way the child suckled. She never told the mothers anything, of course.

She just didn't offer to hold the child.

She learnt a lot about bad husbands from her own marriage. But also from when she and Haroon had lived in the Laudium flats. They had only been married for three years. In those shabby flats everyone's business was everyone else's and someone was always having a squabble with someone else. It was a loud place with people yelling, cats yowling and toilets flushing. There was one particularly noisy couple living above Khadeejah. They were newly married. The story went that the girl had insisted on living on their own and not with her mother-in-law. Shortly later the girl had given birth to a baby. When the boy returned from work their voices were always raised. It would continue late into the night as Khadeejah lay in bed staring into the dark. After a few months she began to hear thumps and shouts. In her kitchen, Khadeejah would stop stirring her *haleem* and look up at the ceiling with her spoon hovering over the pot.

Sometimes there were dull thumps, sometimes they were loud. The girl would curse, scream and cry. She would threaten to go home. He would taunt her. The baby cried along with them. Khadeejah begged Haroon to intercede but he just kept turning the pages of the sport section in his paper. His eyes said it was none of their business. One particularly loud night, Khadeejah had heard the front gate slam as the boy stalked out of his flat. Khadeejah didn't know why she did it. Haroon had told her not to interfere, but the girl was sobbing and Haroon was in bed. Khadeejah walked up

the stairs into the girl's flat. She found her sitting in a crumpled heap on the kitchen floor. The girl had looked up surprised.

"Men," Khadeejah had started while pulling out a pot from the cupboard, "are *dom*. We women, we learn this quickly."

The girl had simply sat and stared at her.

"But even if these men are very stupid, we are still stuck with them, *neh*?" she said while digging in the cupboard through glass bottles before she finally pulled out a big bottle of *moong dhal*. She filled a silver dish with water from the kitchen tap and soaked the lentils in it. "We are stuck with them, because what can we do? We never went to school, well, at least *I* didn't finish. I didn't study after that. *Abba* got me married in two-twos." She snapped her fingers. "We never learnt how to do much besides cook. So we stuck with them." She lowered her voice for a second. "Even the rubbish ones. Now give me two onions please."

The bruised girl un-crumpled herself, got to her feet and passed Khadeejah the onions from a rack behind the kitchen door.

"We stuck with these men," Khadeejah repeated, as she began peeling the onions. "We stuck with them, *maar* they are stupid. And even though we haven't learnt anything like them, we are also clever. *Neh*? Chop one big tomato there," Khadeejah said while reaching for a bottle of *haldi* she had spotted on a shelf. "A man's head is in his stomach. It is in his *phetoo*. Where?"

The girl, with a tomato in her hand, pointed uncertainly to her stomach.

"Good, you learning fast-fast. You have *dhana jeera* and ginger-garlic?"

"I think so."

"You must always have in your house. And always, *always* grind your own. You'll save that *aloo* husband of yours some money, and it's much cleaner! Garlic is cheap at Randerees down the road. He usually has fresh vegetables for a good price *maar* sometimes he can cheat you, especially with his *doodi*. You must always poke it to check if it's fresh. If it's hard it's not good. *Samje*?"

"Yes."

Khadeejah poured oil into the pot and added the sliced onions.

"Tsk, Tsk. You must always keep your oil container clean. Don't let the oil drip down the sides like this. Tsk! And remember, *ghee* is better. It might be bit more expensive, but it makes the food taste *acha*." She raised her voice over the loud simmer as the onions hit the oil. "*Ja*, I was saying his heart is in his stomach. An Indian man especially. God made them that Way. Some men have their hearts in their head, some down there," and she waved her spoon at the girl's lower regions. "But the Indian man has it in his stomach. Now I will tell you something." She motioned for the girl to come close to her. "Look at my husband eh? He's not great saint. He shouts me and he fights, but we not so bad, *neh*? He doesn't bish-bash me so much, *neh*? He can, I'm sure he wants to. *But why doesn't he*?" She lowered her voice. "I cook good food." She looked up with a confirming nod and stirred the onions. "It's true. You see men like ours, they think all that wives are there for is to make babies and fry *aloo paratha*. You can't get divorced eh? Your parents won't let you. And you have child to worry about. What you will do for money? This stupid men with their big brains give us our money. So . . . " She took the chopped tomatoes from the girl and put them into the pot and then added *haldi* and chilli powder to the onion mix. "You can try to make it better for you. A man with a full *phetoo* cannot hit you. Remember that. A heavy stomach makes the hand tired." She turned to look at the girl. "Cook! Give him his food on time. I know you don't give him on time – I hear it. If you want to take him away from his mother, at least know how to cook. And if this – this," she gestured to the girl's state, "doesn't cut down, then learn something quickly. Learn to sew, to sell *samoosas*, to do something! Learn to make money and go. *Jau*. It is not worth it then," she said and then looked up at the girl. "*Arre.* Come now, stop crying. Let's see if you can finish making this *moong* by yourself."

As she watched the girl add the lentils to the simmering onions she sighed, "We must make the sacrifices, *neh*? Always the woman must make it. Otherwise no one will end up making the sacrifice and we will all end up killing each other."

For the next few months Khadeejah visited the girl and supervised her cooking. She always had some tip or advice to give.

"More chillies. That pumpkin is not nice. Wash your dishes first! Too much *pudhina*. Rinse your rice three times. Fry that longer, your husband will spit it out if you give him like that."

The fighting did subside and the couple seemed happier. The girl was eternally grateful to Khadeejah. A few months later they moved out of the flats and Khadeejah didn't see her again until years later when they met at a supermarket. The girl (who was now a woman) had opened her own catering company and had divorced her husband a long time ago. The girl had hugged her and sobbed in the middle of the fish aisle. And Khadeejah had awkwardly patted her back.

So, yes, Khadeejah Bibi Ballim knew a lot about husbands.

ANEESA

Sometimes Aneesa hated her mother so much she felt she would burst.

Her *Nani* and mother would walk into her room one day to find little cinders floating in the air. Cause of death, a policeman would later ask.

Hate, her mother would reply.

Aneesa was sitting cross-legged in Khadeejah's garden. The rain from the previous day had left watery patches in the sky. It was one of those days where damp things like clothing and clouds were drying out in the sun. The grass-soaked soil was wet inside and dry outside. A rich kind of wet that hides under crisp leaves. A secret that only little rears pressed into the ground can discover.

The garden had a number of low brick walls that were filled with different plants. Green tomato vines fell over discoloured plaster onto the grass like heaps of grasping green fingers. Lemongrass stuck out of the ground in long green ribbons. Odd corners of bricks poked out of the soft dark earth. Like hastily buried secrets.

The garden fascinated Aneesa. She loved the sound of rustling, the smell of leaves and the feel of earth on her skin. She was intrigued by tiny bugs and crawly things that crept in the shady places. Her mother said she used to talk to the plants when she was small. "About what?" Aneesa had wanted to know. "I don't know," her mother replied.

Aneesa wished she could remember how to do it again.

But eleven is that stuck-in-the-middle age when one still has memories of having been a child, but adulthood is already a looming shadow. People now said to her, "Do you *remember* when you were small you *used* to…" or "When you were small*er* you…" and "You're *big enough* to know better". But how much bigger was small than smaller? It is a strange time. A time of long pondering thoughts in the sun. Watching adults discuss important matters with words like 'financial' and 'corporate'. Watching children have tea parties. Throwing away tropical coloured swimming costumes with pink frills at the waist. Realising favourite sandals pinch at your toes.

Noticing sore little knobs on your chest. When you long for the past but wish the future was here already.

A stuck-in-the-middle age really.

Aneesa adjusted her rear like a duck on the grass. One cheek this way and one that way. She could feel the dampness of the grass through the bottom of her dress and under the sides of her legs. Small stones and squashed grass stuck to the sides of her calves. She didn't seem to notice. Little girls don't notice these things. It is only when girls are past the stuck-in-the-middle age that they start worrying about the dirt on their calves and the colour on their lips.

Aneesa inspected her hoard of snails with a stick. She enjoyed digging through the leaf-lined walls and bricks to find the hidden brown balls. She pried their clinging bottoms off the walls and collected them in a glass jar. Sometimes she would find them mating on cool empty patches of soil. Beneath the leaf of a green bean plant or in the shade of the old guava tree. Little entwined slippery bodies covered in white liquid.

Sasha Naidoo had told her in grade four what mating was. They were reading an animal book together when they had come across a picture of a bull sitting awkwardly on the back of a cow. Sasha had giggled and Aneesa had asked her why.

"Well, they're mating," she giggled again and placed her thin fingers over her lips.

"What does that mean?" Aneesa asked.

"It means – " Sasha said and then paused, a bit unsure about it herself. "It means they're like, making a baby. It's a rude thing," she had finally managed, hoping the answer would explain why she couldn't really explain it. Aneesa had a vague idea about this mating thing, but for a long time afterward she thought it only applied to animals.

Sometime she would poke the mating snails with a piece of rose twig. She hadn't realised then the seriousness of what she was doing – the interruption of such a sacred process. The snails would withdraw quickly, trembling, into their little shells. Sometimes if she was lucky she would find a snail half-buried in the sand slowly depositing wet white beads into a hole. Aneesa watched, fascinated. She never disturbed the mother. She may not have understood the logistics of mating and the

effects of disturbing the process, but childbirth she knew. Her mother had described in intense detail the pain she went through to give birth to Aneesa

"I'm only telling you because you should know what you're going to go through, Aneesa. No one ever tells you what it's *really* like. Even *Nani* didn't tell me. That pain, my God, was so unbelievable! It's like – it's like you're breaking in half, Aneesa. Really. Breaking. In. Half." Then she added morbidly, "Like a Kit-Kat."

Once, when the mother snail had finished her job (and Aneesa had not disturbed her because of the Kit-Kat pain), she had scooped up the eggs in the sand and had kept them in a bottle to watch them hatch. They never did. Perhaps the sand wasn't wet enough. Perhaps the eggs knew they were being observed by huge eyes through the glass. Perhaps they trembled ever so slightly in their shells. The eggs grew hard and brittle and turned to dust with nothing in them but shrivelled black dots.

She would use the spade to remove the big grandfather snails that made their way out of the deep places of the earth after rich rains. She never touched those huge ones with their sluggish bloated bodies and purple veined shells. There were no grandmother snails, only grandfather ones. In her head only grandfathers could be so obese and gross. Like old men who let their thickened toenails grow too long. She would collect the snails – a mixture of squish and solid trapped in glass – and then she would throw them – a spray of rolling globes, some eyes still poking out in mid air – over the wall into the empty *veld* behind Khadeejah's house.

Her dress was growing wet beneath her. Dampness seeped in. The snails were growing restless now. She dusted her calves and made her way to the back wall. To the *veld* of snails. She imagined if she stood on her toes and peered over the wall she would be able to see the results of her regular actions. There would be millions of snails in the *veld*. Big and small orbs all mildly protruding from the scratchy brown grass. There may be a whole snail city that she was populating. With little streets and buildings. A whole silent city behind *Nani's* house. And maybe they also wondered what was behind the great wall, watching and waiting with their straining eyes.

If only she could see over the wall.

As she made her way, she noticed the grit and wetness on her legs. *Nani* would not be impressed. She wiped the stones off her calves and dusted her dress. There's really only one way to go when you're stuck in the stuck-in-the-middle age.

Forward.

SUMMAYA

Summaya watched her daughter through the kitchen window, and wished she could be that again. Curious. Wide-eyed. Surprised. Intrigued by small things like ladybird wings and snail shells.

Age did that to a person. No, rather experience did that. Wiped away little 'ohs' of surprise, faded the colours and dimmed the twinkle. Experience, of course, is vital to understanding the world, but experience also limits the imagination. After all, the average person stops imagining how something can be if they *think* they've already experienced it.

Summaya acknowledged it could be the pessimist in her talking. The pessimist in her spawned by an underlying hate. And she hated many things. Hatred, for her, clung in corners of ceilings like sleeping bats that shudder their wings occasionally. Summaya could hear them swoop from one rafter to the next. They multiplied in the dark.

Summaya knew it was irrational to harbour hatred for things. She knew she had not always been like this. She had been happy once. A long time ago when the wind carried whispers of love. But now she hated happy people. It was true. A very sad sort of truth. She detested the shine in their eyes and the dimples in their cheeks. She hated loving couples. The whole bizarre idea that love like that, *like that,* could last forever. Forever was for the stars. Not for mere mortals to interfere with.

She *hated* the façade of relatives and certain friends. The Way they smiled at her and kissed the air around her ears. So insincere. Why did they bother? Everyone knew they pitied her.

Pity.

Such a twisted disgusting emotion. No one should ever pity another. It was insulting.

When *Gorimamoo* had visited Summaya during her Dark Days she had tsked tsked and run a sorrowful hand down Summaya's back. Then she had proceeded to tell Khadeejah about her grand-daughter's proposal to a *memon* doctor. A *specialist*. Then she turned to Summaya and said, "You mustn't misunderstand me, *beti*, I'm telling you this because I think it will be good for you to hear about glad tidings in the

family." Summaya had giggled very loudly. In the room with the curtains drawn, her high-pitched very un-Summaya-like giggle hurt the darkness. Made the atmosphere almost maniacal. They had all turned to look at her as if *she* were the one that was doing something wrong. The absurdity of it all. *Gorimamoo* had shaken her head sadly at Khadeejah. Summaya had giggled again. The only sensible sound in a room full of madness. Fake pity was even more disgusting than pity. People who offered fake pity should be shot in the street. She had even told *Gorimamoo* that people like her should be shot. *Gorimamoo* hadn't understood but merely nodded her head sympathetically at the word 'shot'. Thinking that perhaps Summaya had fallen back to some older, sorrowful memory in her current grief. The red-stained grief of her childhood.

Everything would be okay *Gorimamoo* had said and then phoned everyone to tell them that Summaya had been giggling in the dark.

Perhaps if Summaya took a moment to disturb the dusty bats, to make her way up to the roof and examine their leathery wings, listen to their soft rustles and sift through their droppings, she might have learnt that hatred did not always sleep in the corners of ceilings.

Contrary to what Khadeejah believed no one is born with hatred in their hearts. Babies (even boys) are born with equal measure of love and hatred in them. It's what happens afterward that determines what happens. Why men go bad. Why women turn bitter. Why things grow in the ceilings and flap in the rafters.

Everything has a beginning.

Haroon was not a perfect father. He was a weak man. With thin arms and hairy thighs and a fat laugh that turned raspy at the last second. He liked proving his authority by ordering his wife and daughter around. At work he was overlooked as the quiet, mediocre worker. His mother had spoilt him awfully, always feeding him his favourite foods and telling him he was extremely handsome. But women hardly gave him a second glance. He couldn't understand it. And Maggie Cronje who came to deliver the accounts never even looked at him. Even though he shined his shoes with spit every morning and combed his hair with a puff like Shashi Kapoor.

Summaya, as a small child, understood this and made allowances for it, just as she did with her mother. After all it was a universal rule that fathers must have faults. They forgot school meetings, they didn't always flush the toilet, and they sometimes smacked their wives. But Summaya didn't care. She loved him far too much. Even if he didn't love her.

Haroon was rude and demanding and favoured her brother, Naeem. He always made it perfectly clear that he preferred his son over his daughter. In her early years Summaya had gone out of her way to please him. She took his *champals* out for him when he returned from work, she rubbed his feet as he watched the soccer and she even learnt to stuff tobacco into his pipe so that she could have it ready for him. She knew the procedure by heart even to this day:

a. *Cleaning:* Tap the bowl upside down to remove old ash. It is very important to always remove the old cinders. Blow through the pipe to clean out the dust in the neck.

b. *Stuffing:* Carefully open the tobacco box. Rum & Maple is usually the best. Pinch a finger of tobacco and carefully stuff it into the bowl**.** Not too deep and not too packed. Not too loose either. Just the right balance between dense and sparse.

   NB: Don't overfull the bowl. The tobacco strands should just touch the sides of the rim.

Summaya should have learned from Khadeejah. But little girls don't want to learn. Little girls don't have *experience.*

But they do acquire it eventually.

There was a stage in Haroon's life when he took a liking to fishing. At that time Summaya was eight and Naeem was eleven. Every Sunday Haroon would take Naeem, gather his fishing rods, borrow his brother's company *bakkie* and drive to Bronkhorstspruit dam. And every Saturday night, Summaya would throw a tantrum,

insisting that he take her with. She would stamp her feet and snot would run down her nostrils as she wailed at his injustice. Her mother would try to distract her by showing her how to stitch little dresses on the sewing machine.

"See, one stitch here and then carefully down there. *Maar* not too fast. What colour would you like to do next, Summaya? Summaya?" Khadeejah would firmly pull Summaya's face toward hers and show her in detail how to perform the perfect chain stitch. Ignoring the little wet spots that pitter-pattered onto the fabric.

Why? Why? Summaya would always end up yelling, ignoring Khadeejah's urgent hands. Haroon would reply each time, calmly (almost maliciously) that girls were not allowed to go fishing. And when she questioned him further, he would shake his head and say that was just God's rule. And no one should question God.

So one Sunday as Summaya sat pressed against the window watching Haroon load the bakkie with Naeem sitting smugly in the front, she made up her mind to do something about it. While Khadeejah sat whirring at the sewing machine and Haroon went to get something from inside the house, Summaya sneaked behind the bakkie and crawled under the canvas cover. She smiled as she drew the cover over herself.

The drive was awful.

She would remember it years later when she accidentally stubbed a toe in the dark or banged an elbow. Then she was transported back onto the bouncing *bakkie*. With its smell of petrol and fish gut. Awkward, bumpy and jarring. It was difficult to remain flat when her ribs kept hitting the metal floor as they drove over potholes and dirt roads. The heavy tackle box and rods banged against her legs and one hook even tore through her jeans and gave her a long scratch down her calf. During that hour and a half long drive Summaya considered jumping out when she thought of what her father's reaction would be when he found her. But maybe it wouldn't be so bad, she hoped. Maybe her father would realise how nice it would be to have her there. She could pass him his bait, hooks and help him pull the rod if the fish was too big. She had seen it happen in the movies. And afterward the main characters had fallen on top of each other and had laughed in the boat. Even though the fish had gotten away. She also read fishing books from the library. She knew which bait to use to tempt which fish. She would do whatever they asked – she would. She'd help them carry stuff.

And maybe, just maybe, when her father saw her there he would realise how nice it would be to have all his children with him and how silly he was being. God didn't say girls couldn't go fishing. Summaya had checked with her *appa.*
Why, *appa* had even said she went fishing with her own father.

The car had finally come to a bumpy stop and the canvas was removed to reveal the stiff and bruised Summaya.

Haroon had gone ballistic.

He has ranted and raved and yelled and smacked her on her legs. He hadn't even noticed the bloody scratch. She had cried a lot and for once Naeem had kept his big mouth shut. Haroon had simply driven back home. He didn't offload anything. Didn't give her a chance to prove herself. He didn't let her carry the tackle or help pull the fishing rod or pass anything. All he did the whole ride was scowl at her. He blamed her for his lost day of fishing. This idiotic daughter of his who had the nerve, *the nerve*, to jump into his car without his knowledge. Summaya wisely chose not to remind him that it wasn't his car. At least, she had got to sit on a seat on the way home. Naeem couldn't meet her eyes but he let her sit by the door without waiting for her to ask. Maybe Haroon had taken her home quickly because he knew her mother would be searching for her. Maybe he just hated the fact that she had dared to intrude on his personal space and time. Whatever the case, the incident affected Summaya deeply.

She had *hated* him. A deep intense loathing.

(One baby bat fluttering in the roof.)

Sunday morning wouldn't find Summaya by the window again.

She learnt quickly that she was not important to him (she had never let herself learn before; refused to acknowledge the obvious). He was the type of man who believed daughters were merely there for marrying off. Inconveniences that needed to be fed and clothed. In this way Summaya realised he treated her very much like how he treated her mother. For him, they were merely there for perfunctory duties. She could see that what her mother did for him was not out of love, but rather duty. And love and duty made all the difference in the world. She vowed then that she would

only marry for love. After Summaya turned ten she rejected her father outright. She knew exactly how to annoy him. She knew his weak spots and she made sure she used them to her advantage. She didn't answer when he called her. She burnt his toast in the morning. She did not speak to him at meal times. She ignored his requests to change the channel on the television (which usually earned her a slap). And she forged his signature on permission slips for school. In this way Summaya learned to became very much like her mother.

Independent.

And that was the beginning of the darkness in the rafters. That was when things began fluttering restlessly.

But Summaya didn't know it then.

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah's sisters had come to visit her.

The little kitchen in Mayfair was bustling with noises and smells. Pots lids rattled on the stove, the kettle hissed and rice bubbled. Oil smells climbed up the walls and hid in wet corners. Bits of conversation in Urdu, Afrikaans and English floated through the rooms, until the noises and smells made the house swell up like a big breath in a small man. The walls stretched taut and the plaster threatened to crack before someone finally thought to open a window. Then like a sigh it all drifted out into the garden to hover over the tomatoes.

Three of her sisters had arrived. Feroza, the short one with the tic in her eye, Amina, the big one who dyed her hair with Best Shine hair dye (only from India), and Ayesha, the one who limped and didn't like being seen without her false teeth. Of the four other sisters that slept with them in that bedroom long ago, one had died, one lived in Canada, one lived in Faraway Australia and the youngest was in Durban.

Sisters from the small flat in Bronkhorstspruit were now scattered across the world. The naïve little children of the dark had passed away a long time ago.

But.

Sometimes when they caught each other's eye over the steam of a pot of rice, they would remember.

The nights of sleeping tightly against one another. And getting dressed as flower girls for yet another sister's wedding. Running through the flat's passages, chasing each other from doorway to doorway, being scolded by people with brooms in their hands and slippers on their feet. Skipping down the stairs, past Anna scrubbing clothes in her huge metal dish. The one they stole for their 'witch's brew'. They danced around it in their *madressah* cloaks and filled it with water, lanky weeds and a bottle of their mother's nutmeg powder. Some sisters remembered dancing and chanting around the dish. Others remembered watching the dance from afar. Too big or too small to join in.

Sureiya *babi* had seen them in the *veld* behind the flats and had scolded them. She had said that *djinns* came to catch you when you acted *pagal* like that. She had emptied their dish and told them to go make *taubah*.

For a long time afterward their mother was baffled by the smell of nutmeg that hung on the clothes.

Sometimes now, on early mornings when the sisters were poised over their washing troughs with a bar of soap in their hands and the smell of green Sunlight under their fingernails, they remembered. The flats always smelled like Sunlight soap in the morning when all the maids would gather and begin their scrubbing.

Early mornings were a soapy and noisy affair. All the shops lining the front of the flats would be opened with the clang of metal gates and the growl of roll-up doors. Then puffs of dust would rise from each shop as the entrances were swept. Shop windows were wiped clean and cars were soaped.

Behind the shops a line of silver washing dishes were all lined up, glinting in the early morning sun. Each one was filled with a froth of soap suds. Immersed in the foam were smooth brown hands with puckered pink fingers. The maids would clutch bright green squares of soap and vigorously scrub and then squeeze great heavy coils of material. It seemed every day someone was washing their curtains or large white bed sheets which were stretched across the lines like huge veils. The smell of wet washing and the squeak of the round-about-clothes-line lingered in the air. Along with the image of Sureiya *babi's* big cream panties and their little white uniforms flapping in the breeze.

Sometimes when the sisters went visiting and saw a sharply shined table or a wooden doorknob they remembered. The chemical-yet-alluring smell of strong *stoep* polish as each flat had its floor buffed to a brilliant brown sheen (each occupant determined to have the shiniest floor). The smell and the brilliant gleam all proudly displayed through open doorways. And the many times they skidded across the floor and ended up with bruised elbows and a cuff that smelled like brown *stoep*.

The sisters remembered the same things. Perhaps in different ways. They remembered the fish curry their father made and the pink starched dresses their

mother sewed for them for Sajeda *babi's* wedding. And the scratchy feel of it on their legs.

But Sajeda *babi* was dead now. The dresses were rotten rags locked away and forgotten in trunks inside the flats' ceiling. The ceiling was forgotten too. It kept its secrets in dusty corners that would never see sunlight again. The sisters were old. Some as old as creaking doors that couldn't be fixed.

But they remembered.

The flats were a nutmeg-flavoured, Sunlight soap and brown polished memory for them.

Nearly all of them had lived difficult lives. They knew poverty, they knew harshness, but (most importantly) they also knew how to cook. Their father, the shopkeeper, but also the cook, had ensured that. The Rahim daughters were renowned in their families for their cooking skills. (Which accounted for their fat, rather spoilt sons.)

"This fish is not right," Amina complained. "Look at the eyes. They not clear. I told you Khadeejah *appa*, that *Hamda's* doesn't sell fresh fish."

"*Arre*, what you talking? You check inside. See it's red inside. It's right," said Khadeejah and she hooked a finger under the fish's gill and bared the bright red flesh for her sister. "What eye-eye? Eye-eye doesn't tell you nothing about freshness. What you know?"

"Well, that's what *I* learnt."

"Ha! What you learnt? You been cooking rotten fish," Khadeejah laughed and the other sisters smiled.

They continued making fish curry with Ayesha and Feroza rolling the *rotis*. Feroza scolded Ayesha for making the *rotis* too big while Khadeejah shouted at Amina for not scaling the fish properly. When four Rahim cooks got together in a tiny kitchen, chaos was sure to ensue.

"Your backside!" shouted Khadeejah as she chopped potatoes into tiny triangles for frying. "What too much oil?"

"It's true," Feroza said piping up from next to the stove as she fried *rotis* on a flat frying pan. "These days we must worry about our health. How many bypasses can we take? We must cut down on the *ghee*. My son, Dr A Mayet," (Feroza always referred to her son by this title), "says we have all these heart problems *kyu ki sagla ghee* we use."

"Then how the food is going to taste nice?" asked Khadeejah who was horrified. *Ghee* was where the taste came from. *Ghee* and salt. These sisters of hers were *pagal* coming with their new-new ideas.

"Enough about that. You heard about Zubeida Bibi's daughter from Springs?" asked Amina, as she slit a green chillie.

"*Nimak kamthi hai*?" asked Khadeejah as she tasted some *masala* and then handed a teaspoon of the mixture for Amina to taste the salt.

"Too much," Amina said puckering up her cheeks. "Put more lemon juice *appa*… and some *dhana jeera*."

"*Nai,* right *hai*," Khadeejah said as she began mixing the red *masala* with her fingers.

"*Arre*, why you ask me then? You know you always put too much salt," Amina complained.

"What about Zubeida Bibi's daughter you were saying?" asked Ayesha who had somehow been pushed to the backdoor.

"Oh *ja*," said Amina scraping the potatoes corners from a silver dish into the frying pan and mixing them quickly as they sizzled. "Apparently she ran away with a Pakistani. I heard from Fareeda *khala*. Imagine that."

"Tsk, Tsk. Now what the family going to do?" Fazila asked.

"I heard the father hired some Nigerians to kill him. The couple hid in a flat in Fordsburg. The girl called her father and begged him not to kill her husband. She said *nikah* was already performed in Laudium. She told him they weren't living in any sin. But when she told him about the secret marriage he just got madder. Zubeida Bibi had to try to calm him down. *Betchaari,*" Amina explained.

"*Dis mos* the same girl they were trying to find a *memon* boy for? They turned down our Iqbal who went to propose?" Khadeejah asked.

"Same girl. Ha! *memon*? Now they didn't even get *memon* or *surthi*. They got a Pakistani!" spat Amina.

"See. Why they so fussy for *memon*. Muslim is Muslim. Now see they paying for being fussy. I always said after *abba* turned away those boys because they weren't *miabhai*, that I would never be fussy for my own children. Ha! What's so great about *miabhai*? Or *surthi*? Look at Haroon. *Abba* made me marry him but look how he turned out to be," Khadeejah said agitatedly as she chopped thick onion rings. The other sisters became quiet. They never knew whether to talk about Haroon or not. Khadeejah continued. "That's why when my Naeem brought that *urdu* one, I said why not? Muslim is Muslim no?" Khadeejah waved her knife in the air to emphasise her point. "Even when Summaya brought that fellow, I said why not? See, Zubeida Bibi was being so fussy for a *memon*, now they are paying the price. Ha!"

"*Ja*, but then… Pakistani is also Muslim," countered Ayesha.

"*Ja maar*." Khadeejah paused. "They not our type . . . Really Ayesha. You know what I'm saying. They different – they have their own ways. And *nahein* clean *hai.* And – and they always with the illegal things – selling fake Deeweedees and making gangs. And they steal our girls. *Bohoth* shady *hai*." She paused. "Indian is also Indian," she concluded.

"They have to make a living," Ayesha said confidently. "Some of them got honest jobs. *Abba* saw things were better here and isn't he came way here? *We* also live here. Those Pakis saw things are better here and they also came way. And what *if* they good? Got good business. And clean. Then what's so wrong with them? Arifa Begum's daughter got married to one. They say she's happy. Times are changing now."

"Aye, Pakis will always be dirty to me," retorted Khadeejah, ending the conversation with a thud as she sliced the head off the fish.

Khadeejah cut the fish into pieces and rinsed them in a dish. Sometimes her sisters just didn't understand her. These Pakis were different from them. So, yes, they were Muslim but they had different Ways. Indians had their own Ways and Pakistanis had their own Ways and that was that. Indians had a dusty dirty, but Pakistanis had a grimy dirty Way. That's how she made the differentiation in her head; there was a

distinct difference of dirtiness between people. The word Paki even stuck on her tongue. She couldn't accept anyone who was different from her. God made people different for a reason.

When Summaya was on campus there had been rumours of her and a white boy. Khadeejah had made *dua* every day that it wasn't true. How could Summaya let herself actually see a white in *that* way? And why would a white boy look at Summaya in that way? With her brown skin and odd eyes.

It just wasn't right.

When the fish and the onions were done frying the sisters fidgeted restlessly. All their lives their hands were engaged in work and being still felt unnatural. So they walked around the kitchen, lifting a sugar bowl lid to see whether it needed refilling, wiping *achar* bottles that were not wet and bumping into each other. Conversation shifted (as always) to their sister-in-laws. One of them was *chotibabu*, their widowed sister-in-law who lived alone. Her children had moved to Faraway Australia a long time ago. People had different opinions on *chotibabu*. Some liked her while others found her strange. The Rahim sisters held divided opinions. Ayesha said that *chotibabu* was just trying to make her boring life more interesting and there was nothing wrong with that. She said that *chotibabu* wasn't harming anyone with her stories. Feroza chose to believe that they were true. She said that if they believed in *djinns* then they should believe that these things were definitely possible. Amina and Khadeejah remained sceptical.

Chotibabu lived in the same flat she had always lived in when she first moved to Bronkhorstspruit to live with her husband. The flat behind the grocery shop. She grew old in the flat like the dresses in the ceiling. But unlike the dresses, she made sure she wasn't forgotten. She was generally a jolly old woman who was renowned in the flats for her delicious soft *burfee*. She never gave anyone the correct recipe. That was one of the reasons Khadeejah begrudged her. She was sure that *chotibabu* had given her the incorrect quantity of condensed milk for the recipe. (And perhaps even the method.)

Chotibabu didn't think her lying was so bad. Especially to Khadeejah, since Khadeejah never gave her the correct pineapple *achar* recipe. And, anyway, what was the point of perfecting something over years only to let other people learn it in two minutes? She took great pleasure when visitors would say through mouthfuls of *burfee*, "Ooh *chotibabu*. No one makes *burfee* like you. It's just too good." The only person she ever taught the recipe to was her daughter who left the page lying at the bottom of a cabinet which was sold in an auction many years later.

Chotibabu complained that she hardly saw her children and when they finally came to visit she would make platters of sweetmeats and pots of *dhal*. She cried and pulled their cheeks while feeding them little bits of *ladoo.* After they left she would cry for a whole week and complain about a pain in her chest. She was very proud of the many family photos that she kept framed on her sitting room walls. She would point to each photo lovingly and give the history of that child. She was especially proud of her grandson in Canada who, according to her, topped all his classes and knew how to cook *biriyani* by himself. "What a catch," she would tell any young girl who visited her. "What a catch I tell you! Why I heard he even cleans his own bathroom!"

Chotibabu loved company. She loved telling stories with wide gestures and raised eyebrows. And if there wasn't anyone loitering in the flats to yank inside she would be on the phone. Her phone was her lifeline out of the flats, beyond the washing lines, far over the shops, out into the world where her beloved children lived.

Chotibabu was a born storyteller. The only thing was, she was considered a bit of a fibber. It had started with the ghost in her flat.

There came a time when *chotibabu* had fevers and complained constantly of nightmares. People in the flat were very sympathetic and called on her often. When *chotibabu* saw how much attention she got from this, her night time experiences took a bit of an adventurous twist. According to *chotibabu* the ghost was the spirit of a woman who was murdered behind the flats. She had been a maid there in the eighteen hundreds and her boyfriend, Petros, had murdered her because she refused to sleep with him. *Chotibabu* had deduced from her blue pallor that she had been drowned in the stream that ran behind the flats. The blue-pallored woman would just stand at the

foot of her bed and stare at her. “It gets so cold before she come to visit. On the cold night I get so scared because then I know she’s coming. She just stand there and watch me with her big-big eyes. I want to scream but no voice come out of me.” The children would listen enthralled. “All I can do is hide under my blanket and read *ayatul kursi*. She only goes away when the *azaan* for *fajr* starts.”

She had a number of odd stories to tell the enthralled flat children and their parents. There were the *tokoloshes* that visited her pumpkin patch outside her window. She said they stole her pumpkins and she swore she saw them early in the morning from her kitchen window – little naked heads balancing her pumpkins and running away into the *veld.*

Her current story, under discussion in the Mayfair house, was that of the midget doctor. *Chotibabu* had been in hospital for a number of ailments. Often she had to sleep over, and recently a severe bout of pneumonia had left her in hospital for nearly a fortnight. She had many stories to share when she returned. *Chotibabu* claimed that every night as she lay in her ward in the quiet darkness, she would hear approaching footsteps. A little *tok tok tok* that became louder. She and the other patients in her ward weren’t able to see anything. All the patients would wait in their beds with drawn breath. Then the *tok tok* would stop right next to her bed and she would hear the scrape of the step ladder beneath her bed being pushed out. Then she would hear the stepping of small shoes on the stairs. Next the face of a little doctor would peer over her with large bifocalled eyes. He would tut tut for a moment before taking her pulse. Then he would pull her hospital gown down to place his stethoscope on her chest and cock his head to one side as he listened for her heartbeat. *Chotibabu* said she hated that the most – the feel of the ice cold stethoscope on her chest. Often he would shake his head sadly before climbing down and pushing the step ladder back under the bed. It happened to each patient in that ward she said. They would all heave a sigh of relief when they heard his tiny footsteps fade away in a distant corridor.

Khadeejah thought it was all nonsense and told her sisters that she wanted to laugh when she heard it. “A dwarf doctor? Agh, please. No such thing. That woman’s gone mad in the *kop*.”

"And what if there is a doctor, Khadeejah? Maybe he's just short and he has to check on them every night," argued Ayesha.

"*Arre* please. Then why he doesn't say anything to anyone, eh?" Khadeejah said. "That *chotibabu* is always telling lies. How many times I must say you'll? You know she gave the wrong recipe for the *burfee*? I'm sure it's three tablesp – "

"*Ja*, we know!" her sisters' chorused.

"I'm just saying," Khadeejah continued, "*chotibabu* likes the attention. And you'll keep giving it to her. And I think you'll forget very quickly what she said about my Summaya that time. What she said? She said my Summaya had a *djinn* in her! What she said? She said, Khadeejah *bhen*, that daughter of yours is sick, she needs to go to an *aleem*. There's something wrong with her. Tsk!"

"Well," said Ayesha, "Summaya *was* acting very strange that time. You know after – after what happened with… him."

"Can you really blame her?" piped up Feroza.

"Well, she could have taken it a bit better," Ayesha argued. "Acting so funny-funny like that."

"How can someone take something like that better? What, alone with a baby and all. It must have been very hard," said Feroza.

Khadeejah butted in, "Anyway, all I'm saying is why *chotibabu* must say that about my daughter? Why she must go and tell people my daughter got something on her? Not any of her business. I don't say anything about her daughter. Even though she hardly has time for her own mother. I don't say anything. I *choop chaap.*" And she motioned two pinched fingers across her lips.

When it came to the topic of Summaya it seemed everyone *choop chaaped*, thought Ayesha wryly. But then, she knew better than to argue with Khadeejah. Her sister was funny that way. She had the biggest mouth and the strongest opinions, but she shut up when it came to discussing Haroon or Summaya.

"I think we should dish out," said Amina.

"I'll get the *achar.*"

The oil smells dripped down the walls and climbed into the folds of the curtains.

Onion Tears

Nobody in the room noticed.

ANEESA

Hoosen sat in Khadeejah's sitting room and looked around him.

It was too neat for the amount of objects it contained.

Books. Qurans. *Duas* for the contentment of the heart. Old newspapers. Ornaments. *Ghee* buckets. Crocheted doilies. Fake flowers. An English tea set with tiny pink flowers laid in a circle. (The cracked cup placed at the back.) Plates in the shape of fishes. Plates in the shape of flowers. In the shape of plates. Photographs. A big worn-out carpet.

Big things packed under things. Little things packed into things. And delicate things placed on top of other things. A clean mess.

Everything seemed to shine at him. A tired knowing shine. Like an old lady with a wink in her eye.

The house smelled like onions and Mr Min. Something like the faint smell in Aneesa's school jersey.

Khadeejah walked in from the kitchen and studied him. He was a curious plump boy with a mop of curly dark hair. He had shapely calves that offended her.

Hoosen studied her. She was an old woman with thinning grey hair and a mole above her lip. Slightly hunch-backed; she looked old and young at once. She sat down on the sofa opposite him, her pants raised to reveal thin ankles with a deep network of varicose veins.

"*Asalaamwa'alaikum*. You Hoosen right?"

"*Wa'alaikumsalaam*. Y – yes, aunty," Hoosen replied, scared suddenly by the alertness in her eyes. Her onion infused eyes. It was like noticing sudden movement in a dull block of ice. He studied the faded carpet.

"My Aneesa talks a lot about you. Hoosen this and Hoosen that. Whole day."

Hoosen smiled at the carpet and Khadeejah saw this. "You like my grand-daughter?"

"Er… Yes."

The carpet had a pattern that was too vague to make out. A vomit coloured swirl of colours.

"You want to marry her?"

"Huh? No!"
"Why, what's wrong with her?" She eyed him warily.
"Nothing! I – I just mean… She's my friend."
"You smoke?"
"What? No. I'm too small."
"Do you want to smoke when you grow up?"
"Er… I don't think so."
"Good. It's bad for your health."

Aneesa came out of the bathroom. She hurried, knowing it was dangerous to leave Hoosen alone with *Nani.* Sometimes *Nani* was funny. Sometimes she said funny things like black-people-only-know-how-to-dance. Or your-hair-looks-stupid-like-that.
"*Nani*. This is Hoosen."
"I know. I was just talking to him."
"Oh…" Aneesa sat on the sofa next to him. "You know he *loves* your cooking?"
Hoosen squirmed.
"Is that so? Is this the boy you keep telling me eats all your lunch?"
Aneesa blushed. "Well, not all of it. But that's how much he likes your cooking, *Nani*."
"All boys like food. That's just the way they are," Khadeejah nodded knowingly at Aneesa. A private female knowing nod. She got up and went back into the kitchen.

"Your *Nani* hates me."
Hoosen was offended.
By the prying questions. By the dull eyes with sharp insides. By the knowing shine of the table.
But mostly by the private-female-knowing nod.
"No, she doesn't. She's just like that. She just talks like that. She's really nice when you get to know her."
"And I don't eat all your lunch."

“No, you don’t.”
“Where’s your cat?”

Billie was sitting in her usual place under the curry leaf tree. The sun shone brightly in the winter air. The type of sun that keeps the bright areas hot but the shady places damp and cold. They sat on the pleasantly warmed bricks. Like two lizards pondering life. Hoosen sat with Aneesa and petted the black cat. It squirmed and purred.
“You’ll have a lot of things in the house.”
“Yeah.”
“The house smells like you.”
“It does?”
“Yeah.”
“I didn’t know I had a smell.”
“Everyone has a smell.”
“What do you mean?”
“Well. My mother smells like Nivea cream and something like flowers. My father’s beard smells like *braai* smoke. Pretty smells like Jik and old jerseys. People just have smells.”
“And what do you smell like?”
“I don’t know. No one knows what they smell like. It’s just the rule.”
“Oh.” She pondered it. “Is it one of the rules that They make?”
“Yes.”

For a long time she and Hoosen had wondered who They were. They being the unseen people who made rules in the world. They say it’s not nice to talk with your mouth full. They say that the winter sun can burn you. They say that you can’t smell your own smell. Aneesa imagined that They were wise old men who hid in mountains and wrote their rules on papers that they sent with birds to people all over the world. That’s who she thought They were. Hoosen disagreed. He thought They were tall ladies who sat in an office around a table in a high building. They wore red stilettos

and lipstick of the same colour and pronounced ‘think’ as ‘tink’. They wrote memos on little square papers to governments about how rules should be implemented.

They knew everything.

Hoosen and her had already collected a number of rules that They made:

- You cannot get sick if you were sick in the last two weeks
    - Especially if it’s the flu
- You cannot eat bubblegum and chew food at the same time
- Adults think they know everything because they think they have more experience than children
- Nothing ever stays hidden
    - Not even things you bury in gardens
    - Or throw in the sea
- You can’t hate a family member forever
- Every person in the world has a secret
- Adults will always talk about love and marriage.
    - They are obsessed with it

And now:

- Everyone has their own smell
    - No one can smell their own smell

“I wonder why adults think of marriage all the time. Marriage, marriage, marriage,” Hoosen sang. “All the time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your *Nani* asked me if I wanted to marry you.”

Aneesa laughed. “My *Nani* only has marriage in her head.” Then she added in a hushed voice, “She wants me to marry a scary man.”

“A scary man?”

“Yes, he looks like a ghost. She wants him to be white-white. Like a wall.”

“Why would she want you to marry someone like that?”

"I don't know. Sometimes she's funny." She grasped a bunch of grass and tried pulling it out. Those aimless things one does when one is thinking like a sun-pondering lizard. The grass burned her tight palm, but she continued to pull until it suddenly gave way and she flew back in that abrupt sort of way that adults get embarrassed by and children laugh about. She dusted her hands. "But you right, adults only worry about who we going to marry."

"From the start! They always saying your wife must be-like-this, your wife must be-like-that. You must get a wife who's pretty. You must get a wife who can cook. Your wife must love your parents. Your wife must read all her *namaazes*. On and on."

"Yes! And your husband must be a doctor. Or at least an accountant. And he must be tall. And he must drive a Mercedes."

Hoosen laughed. "All my aunty does is worry about her daughter's wedding. If she has enough AMC pots. If she has enough clothes. From the time she was small she's been collecting things. Their whole life is built for a wedding."

"Then what do they worry about after they're married?"

"I don't know." He thought about it then added, "They must be very bored."

"They all mad about marriage."

"Not your mother though," he said.

"No, not my mother."

Khadeejah called them inside for lunch. The table was laid out with *masala* chicken, creamed potatoes and sweet corn *bhajias*. There was a plate of sliced papaya and a bowl of litchis. At the end of the table stood a little stack of glass dessert bowls and a dish of *rus ghoollas* that bobbed in a clear syrup.

"Wow, *Nani*. You made all this?" asked Aneesa.

"How, I always make like this," she said quickly. "And anyway some of it is from last night."

"*Nani*… aww *Nani*."

"Shush. I always make," Khadeejah brushed her off as she went quickly back into the kitchen.

"She really makes a feast," Hoosen whispered to Aneesa, his eyes wide.

She looked at him and smiled.

As they ate, Summaya came in from work. She washed her hands and took a seat at the table. She looked at Hoosen as she pushed her chair in.

"Ah, you must be Hoosen. Aneesa said you're coming today," she said as she dished out chicken into her plate. "She talks so much about you." She paused and then, looking around at the table in confusion, said, "Ma, so much of food today?"

Hoosen found Aneesa's mother beautiful. An unsettling sort of beauty.

Tall, with deep eyes that made you look twice. And still you couldn't be sure of their colour. Her hair was short. Chopped bluntly around her ears and tapered around her neck. Too short for an Indian mother. And she was too tall. The combination made him slightly uncomfortable.

She was athletic and yet delicate. Her shoulder bones poked out of her shirt and her wrists were fragile-looking.

He couldn't quite stop looking at her.

Later, after Hoosen had finished his third helping of dessert and Summaya helped Khadeejah clean up, Hoosen whispered to Aneesa, "Your mother's very pretty."

And Aneesa looked at her mother and felt sad that she also didn't have eyes that made people look again. Something burned in her chest that wasn't there before and she tried to swallow it.

"She's thirty-seven, you know." She paused. "Well. She'll be thirty-seven soon."

(She said it in revenge for her mother's special eyes.)

Children thought thirty seven was old. It made them think of people who lived in big houses and had children with names like Abdullah and Sameerah. People who drove sleek cars with cream leather seats.

People who were thirty-seven said, "You won't get ice cream until you finish all your peas."

Why, thirty-seven was almost forty. And forty was ancient. Forty was for grandmothers and rich fat men and people who leaned to one side and complained of clicks in their hips.

"She doesn't look thirty-seven," he said as they washed their hands in the bathroom.

And his perception of thirty-seven changed. It became a good age. Not old, not young. A pretty young mother sort of age. A delicate shoulder-boned and sad smile age.

Aneesa saw it in his eyes and felt betrayed.

Later she lay on the spare bed in *Nani's* room. Her holiday bed when she came to stay over. When she was older, *Nani* said they would clean out the spare room that was Summaya's old bedroom and turn it into Aneesa's bedroom. She said they would paint the walls off-white and put in a new carpet and then Aneesa would have her very own room. One day when she was older. Aneesa wanted to know how much older? How much longer did she have to wait to get her own bedroom with off-white walls and a new carpet? Did it mean years? (Which meant waiting a very long time.) Or days? (Which meant a little time.) Or was it months? (Between a very long time and a little time.)

Nani said it meant until She Could Afford It. And Aneesa didn't know how to measure that in her head so she always hoped it meant tomorrow or next week. Because tomorrow and next week were good times to get a new room.

"There you are," her mother's voice came from the door. "Why'd you leave Hoosen alone?"

"He seemed busy."

"It's not nice to leave your friends alone when they come to visit, Aneesa."

"Well, I don't know what to do with him anymore," she said in her cross-fidgety voice. A not-exactly-sure why-she-was-cross voice.

"Well, his mother's come to pick him up. Come outside and say bye."

"Fine."

"Did you'll have a fight?"

"No."

But he thinks thirty-seven is a good age.

"Friends are precious, Aneesa."

"Hmph! You don't even have any friends!" And immediately after saying that she felt bad.

Bad.

But not enough to say sorry.

“What’s wrong, Aneesa?”

“Nothing.”

You don’t tell me everything. You lie to me.

Summaya sighed. “C’mon. Let’s go say goodbye to your friend.”

SUMMAYA

Summaya hadn't had many friends.

There had been the group at university which she had belonged to. But they were merely people to sit and laugh with. Not sit and talk to. Zohra was the only one she knew from high school whom she occasionally met. It wasn't that Summaya didn't like people. She found people interesting with their funny little habits and different sounding voices. It was just that she didn't know if she wanted to be around them all the time.

People talked a lot and they had too many opinions. People had smells in their hair and clothes. Their sweat was invasive (and their perfumes). They laughed too loud and were conceited. And if one of them cried or was upset you had to ask them what was wrong. Or pat their back.

When all she preferred to do was watch.

The only true friend she had known was Laila Essack.

She had been a strange girl that Laila. Some would say even more strange than Summaya herself. She was a student studying law at Summaya's university. She was a pretty girl. Some (only the special ones) would say unusually pretty. Her hair was wavy and her skin was like porcelain. She had delicate features.

But they were too small to be noticeable; her eyes, her face and her lips. When she was young, people had said, "Oh what a beauty she'll grow up to be" and "She'll make the boys dance this one." But she grew up and she stayed small and her beauty grew into herself (like roots beneath the earth). And only when someone studied her properly, in the right light, did they see how beautiful she was. Princess like. "What a pity," people said when she had grown up and she was Just pretty. "She could have been a stunner," and they looked at her like it was her fault that her beauty had not developed.

She was often seen propped up against walls in dark corridors of the university eating madiera cake from her fingers and reading mystery novels. The cake would crumble and fall into the pages of her book where she would impatiently brush it

away because it covered a sentence. A shy engineering student who had a crush on her had bought her a copy of Patricia Cornwall's *Postmortem* and had left it in the spot she usually sat in during winter. She never sat there again. Even though it got the best sun.

Summaya had liked her from the moment she saw her.

Sitting on a wall with a novel (no madiera cake that day) with a purple knitted hat stuffed with deep brown dyed curls. Summaya had asked who the girl was. Nobody really knew because nobody had much of an opportunity to ask her. And besides, people may have wanted to know who she was, but they were not interested in getting to know someone like *that.* She was merely the girl they could point at and giggle.

So when two people like *that* met they instantly recognised something in the other. The way the lips moved or the way a wrist twisted in conversation. After their initial astonishment, Laila and Summaya embraced their different similarities and struck up an odd friendship. No communication was really necessary; they only needed to be near each other. They were not other people to each other but a copy of themselves. It was like having your shadow talk back to you. The feeling was comforting and safe. The differences between them were small; where Summaya spoke aloud, Laila whispered. Where Summaya grew angry, Laila merely grew melancholic.

Laila, like Summaya, was not really interested in boys. But when Summaya had met *him*, she forgot about Laila. And Laila had needed someone to fill the void that Summaya had left. So she had married the shy engineering student who had finally worked up the courage to talk to her. After the wedding she merely smiled at him and patted his hand vaguely when he asked her if she loved him. They went to live in Canada and Summaya didn't see Laila for a long time.

Today when Summaya thought about it, she found it sad. Sad that it seemed an unwritten law of the universe that marriage takes precedence over friendship. Friendship had no definite rules of loyalty whereas marriage did. There should be laws for friendship, Summaya thought. A legal pledge as well.

Maybe then she wouldn't have let her friend go so quickly.

Laila returned years later. Alone. Her husband, she told Summaya, had divorced her. She had found out he was having an affair and, really, who could blame the poor

man, she said. The strange thing was that he was angry because she wasn't upset or surprised. He had shaken his head sadly and said he just couldn't take it anymore. His heart couldn't take it he had said. He told her to leave.

She never told him about the leukaemia.

When Summaya had asked her why, she said that what he did took courage and was years in the coming. After he had finally built up the strength to escape their loveless marriage, how could she give him information like that? Information like that was a ball and chain, she had said.

It was a sign, she added. That he had decided to move on with his life when she had found out hers was to end. Laila knew all about the signs. She was sure about all her decisions. Because she could read the signs.

Maybe she would have been able to read the signs better for Summaya if she had been there. Maybe she could have warned Summaya about what was going to happen on that normal Saturday when the dogs were barking and the taxis were hooting. And the wet clothing had dripped tears on the grass for her. Because people like Laila knew all about signs. And people like Laila could make the right decisions and be confident about it.

Summaya thought she would never be able to muster that kind of courage. Summayas of the world were weak. Take for instance Summaya Paruk down the road. She ran a little corner store, *Summaya's Cosy corner,* that sold stale bread and dusty Coke cans. And no matter what anyone told her she refused to believe that her husband had a second wife in Laudium. She never confronted him about it. She was weak.

Laila had lived in a little flat and done some legal work that involved phoning people and looking through documents. She made just enough money to pay the rent and buy basic food. She became stick-like.

A thin bird stuck in a flat filled with dusty mystery novels.

She sometimes came to visit Summaya and took Aneesa for walks in the park. A sad little wisp of a woman. Thin and alone. And only Summaya understood her.

But they were awkward around each other. Summaya not knowing how to fill the spaces from all those years she missed, and Laila not knowing how to tell her that she didn't need to. Both were silent, slightly broken.

Aneesa sometimes asked about the thin pretty woman who used to take her to the swings, but like Khadeejah, Summaya also found that her throat closed and the words wouldn't come out.

When Laila died Summaya had not cried. She knew that her friend's suffering in this world was finally over. This world wasn't meant for certain people. The people who kept quiet and chewed their lips. Who stared into the distance and sighed under their breath.

Some people just couldn't wait for the end.

Summaya had a lock of Laila's frail hair. She had snipped it off just before they took her body away. Some piece, some part of the person she once loved. Something more tangible than dusty memories that could be distorted or forgotten at any moment. She looked at the thin hair in her fingers and thought that Laila would have told her what to do. Which path to follow. Which signs to look for. Laila would tell her to stop waiting. And, finally, she would listen.

"You must always look for the signs, Summaya."
"I don't know where to look."
"You'll know them when you see them."
"Please don't leave me."
"It's going to be okay."
"I love you."
"I love you too."

Summaya only loved certain people. People like her, who craved the quietness of life. Who were left behind on the platform while the rest of the world climbed onto the train to take them Somewhere. Any place just so long as it took them. And the stragglers would shuffle behind with their hands in their pockets and wetness in their eyes.

But sometimes. Sometimes Summaya didn't feel like straggling. She felt like running. Running and panting after the moving train, begging it to stop and let her on board.

KHADEEJAH

Fareeda *khala* loved a good story.

Especially one that involved scandal. Experience had taught her that the ones involving a petticoat, a manila envelope or a trust fund were usually the best.

Fareeda *khala* was Haroon's unmarried elder sister who always blamed Khadeejah for her brother's death. She came to see Khadeejah occasionally but her visits were borne out of curiosity rather than maintaining family ties.

Fareeda *khala* was an inquisitive woman. She always wanted to know who was doing what where. She poked through people's drawers when they went to answer the phone. She skimmed through young girl's diaries. And she dug her fingers into the food in people's fridges. Sometimes she liked what she tasted, sometimes she didn't. If people ever caught her opening doors she wasn't supposed to she would smile confusedly and say she had forgotten where the bathroom was.

All of Fareeda *khala's* younger siblings married before her. The only man who ever proposed to her was forty and already had a wife and two daughters. Her parents were willing to overlook that and the fact that he was of the *hyderabadi* caste. But Fareeda *khala* had stamped her sandaled food and insisted that he divorce his first wife. He had refused and the only opportunity for her parents to be rid of her had walked away with a shaking of his head and a clucking of his tongue. Her parents were tired of this daughter of theirs who only entered the kitchen to cook a pot of *channa*. It was the only thing she would (and could) cook and she would eat it the whole day. Throwing chickpea after chickpea in her mouth as she watched *The Bold and the Beautiful* from her favourite pink sofa.

The chickpeas always gave her indigestion.

Since her parents never forced her to look for a job and were too scared to ask her to help in the house, Fareeda *khala* grew fat. Her face developed a double chin, her eyes caught a greedy gaze and her fingers swelled so that she couldn't wear her mother's ruby rings anymore. She grew fat eating Cadbury's Dairy milk chocolate, pots of *channa* and dishing out the biggest helpings for herself where ever she visited.

She hated beautiful young girls. Sometimes she felt like gouging their eyes out with her spoon. And her hate for them only intensified after she started reading romance novels. She blamed all those doe-eyed, plump lipped, buxom women for stealing all the good men out there.

She grew bored at home and took to watching the neighbours from behind her curtains. She learnt to listen at doors and peep through keyholes. Knowledge was power and Fareeda *khala* loved feeling in power. It made her feel less fat and ugly. She felt happier with the knowledge that other people were also unhappy or could be *made* unhappy. She hated her younger brothers for getting married and having children. How could they move on with their lives so happily when she, their very own sister, was suffering? This led her to cause mischief between siblings and parents. She had planted deep seeds of mistrust in her parents' mind when Khadeejah and Haroon had decided to move out from her parents' house.

Fareeda *khala* felt very smug with herself when she got her parents' house after they died. She had everything – the bedrooms, the cutlery and even the little basement below. She felt as if she had somehow triumphed over her brothers and their wives. She failed to realise that, even though according to Islamic law her siblings had a share in the house, they had not laid claim to it.

They just wanted a place where she could be kept away from them.

Fareeda *khala* sat in Khadeejah's sitting room. Half drowned in the sinky couch. It was not a bad sitting room by all means. But still, she felt her sitting room was better. This one was far too stuffy. Well, maybe Khadeejah had a few more ornaments than her. But Fareeda *khala* had two brass vases that were (rumoured) to come from a royal family in Pakistan. Not everyone could say they had *two* brass Pakistani vases from a royal family in their ornament cupboard. And those chocolate sweets saved from weddings were so tacky. (Fareeda *khala* made sure she ate all hers.)

And everyone had a statuette of the Sydney Opera House.

She took a sip of tea and then sniffed the air, hoping Khadeejah would invite her for lunch. She couldn't quite place it, but she was sure it was some rice dish. She had

timed her visit such that when her younger brother came to pick her up it would be lunch time and Khadeejah, ever the hospitable host, would be forced to invite her to stay and eat. As Fareeda *khala* sat there she planned in her head that she would politely say no and shake her head twice. When Khadeejah pressed for the third and final time Fareeda would graciously nod her head and finally agree to her sister-in-law's kind request. But she would make sure it looked realistic. It was not like she was desperate for food.

She shovelled more *chevra* into her mouth. *Crunch. Crunch.* She wondered where that pesky little grand-daughter was, the fair one with the big eyes. *Crunch.* Oho, she suddenly remembered the girl's mother. Now there was something exciting. She wondered if the girl was still as crazy as before. It had been quite a while since she had visited Khadeejah or seen her daughter. She remembered she worked at a travel agency nearby. Maybe she would also come for lunch. Good, that would give her time to observe her. She never liked that Summaya. Always quiet and watching. Like a cat. Even as a child it seemed like she always knew what Fareeda *khala* was up to. She would always be standing there when Fareeda *khala* was planning to pull open a drawer or skim through someone's documents. And that damn child never gave in to Fareeda *khala's* needling.

When the children were smaller Fareeda *khala* insisted she brush her nephews' and nieces' hair after their daily bath. She performed it with the rigour of a drill instructor. She would pinch the cheeks of one child between her thumb and forefinger and use her tortoise shelled brush lined with spiky bristles to plaster middle paths on their heads. She got a perverse pleasure from sliding the hard needles across (and into) their skull. And when they tried to squirm away in pain she would pinch their cheeks harder and hold their face firm. She made herself believe she was doing the children a favour; making them look good and teaching them the meaning of discipline. However, Summaya was the only one that did not move. Not even when Fareeda pinched her cheeks extra hard and made her eyes pop out like a goldfish. She just sat and stared at Fareeda *khala* with those mud-coloured irises of hers. It was unnerving.

Fareeda khala hoped Khadeejah was gone into the kitchen to get those round chocolate biscuits. She liked those.

Khadeejah came back in the sitting room, wiping her hands on a dishcloth. For some reason Fareeda *khala* was looking at her in a disappointed way. It was funny that everyone, including Khadeejah, called her *khala*. After all she really wasn't Khadeejah's aunt but sister-in-law. But Fareeda had always been the aunt, never the mother. She was *khala* to so many children that adults were always telling children, "Go call Fareeda *khala* to come eat" and, "Go find Fareeda *khala*". It just stuck. One of those names that come about and stayed. Like aunty Cookie. Or the *dhania* man.

"Come now, Khadeejah *bhen*. Come sit. The food can wait, *neh*? *Bohat dhin se bath nahi kari*." Fareeda *khala* patted a seat next to her on the couch for Khadeejah.

Khadeejah placed herself gingerly in the space left available next to Fareeda *khala*.

"*Ha* Fareeda *khala*. I just had to check on the onions so they wouldn't burn. How is everything at home – *teek hai*?"

"*Teek hai*. You know how it is. Normal-normal story." Fareeda *khala* took another sip of tea. "Mm… *achi chai hai. Nilicha* tea?" Khadeejah nodded that it was indeed boiled lemon grass tea. Fareeda *khala* continued, "But that's all boring-boring talk. My life is always the same. Tell me how everything with *you* is?"

"Same-same story. I cook, clean. I make *achar*. I make *samoosas.* Summaya and Aneesa come visit. Nothing so exciting, Fareeda *khala*."

"*Acha.* How *is* Summaya? I haven't seen her for such a long while. And that little one of hers – so cute," she said bunching up her nose in what she hoped looked like a cute expression.

"Oh," said Khadeejah, her eyes brightening at the mention of Aneesa. "She's good. *Alhamdulilah*. She's doing very well at school. Nearly always first in class. Grade six now. So quickly they grow up, *neh*?" Then realising she was talking to Fareeda *khala*, who had no children, let alone grandchildren, she quickly added, "Summaya is good too. Carrying on."

"Oh, that's good. You and I know what and what that poor girl went through. It's good to hear she's okay," Fareeda *khala* said in a concerned voice.

Khadeejah Bibi Ballim was a fairly gullible person. She was gullible enough to believe that she had been giving six months of her pension to an organisation that claimed to distribute money to Palestinian refugees. In reality the man was duping old women so that he could use their money to buy his mistress a house in Cape Town. Khadeejah felt sorry for a lot of things. She felt sorry for the little birds twittering at her window. Before Billee came she always made sure she gave the birds crushed white bread every morning. And if she didn't have bread she would give them bits of her Woolworths hot cross buns. She even felt sorry for the Mozambican boy, James, who worked next door. She would secretly feed him because she felt he wasn't given enough food by his employers. She would beckon him with the crook of a finger from behind the banana tree to her backdoor where a glass of Coke and a plate of *dhal* and rice would be waiting for him.

Perhaps it was her pity that made her gullible.

But Khadeejah Bibi Ballim was not gullible enough to believe Fareeda *khala* was concerned about Summaya's well-being. She had lived with her long enough to know some of her Ways. She knew her interest in Summaya was not family concern. She could see the mischief brewing behind her huge fake-concerned eyes.

"Yes. She went through a lot," agreed Khadeejah and stopped there. "More *chai*?"

"*Ha.* Just little bit more," Fareeda *khala* said indicating with her thumb and forefinger. She felt that by asking for less tea she was somehow spiting Khadeejah for closing the subject so suddenly.

She pulled open her scarf a little and cocked her head. "Ah, *azaan. Zuhr namaaz hoi gayi*," Fareeda *khala* said as she heard the afternoon call to prayer from the local mosque. She was very proud of her sharp hearing at her age. And she never let an opportunity pass to show off. "Can you hear that?" she asked Khadeejah while pointing to the open window.

"*Nahi*. My hearing is not what it used to be," answered Khadeejah. Khadeejah waited, she knew what was coming next.

"Oh, my hearing is still good you know. I can hear very-very well."

"*MashaAllah*, Fareeda *khala*. You have been blessed."

Indeed, thought Fareeda *khala*. She could still hear what the people next door said in their kitchen and these days she had an added advantage. People thought age had deteriorated her hearing so they spoke about her too casually and too close. Fareeda *khala* heard it all and committed it to memory to use against them.

Khadeejah stood up. "Let me go make *whudu*," she said referring to the ablutions they had to perform before conducting each prayer.

Fareeda *khala* didn't like that. She normally always stood up first and said she had to make *whudu*. She thought it made her look like a better Muslim. She always made a great hullabaloo about her five times prayer. From the way she announced she was going to make *whudu* to the way she would loudly ask for a *burkha* and *musallah* to perform the prayer. She also made sure she carried her green marble *tasbeeh* (the rosary she had found in her mother's dressing table drawer) everywhere so that people could see her moving each bead slowly as she muttered under her breath. She hoped that that, combined with the effect of her thrown back head and half closed eyes, gave her a regal appearance.

In all truth, Fareeda *khala* was not a good Muslim. At home she missed most of her five time prayers and she stopped giving the obligatory charity, *zakaat*, a long time ago. If she felt bad about it she gave some beggars at the door the change she found in the corners of her father's drawers, but she never calculated the exact amount that under Islamic law she was compelled to give. Sometimes she read the Quran or a *kitaab* but that was mostly when she was looking to find a verse or *hadith* to disprove something someone had said. She made *dua* for the wrong things, like the downfall of an enemy whose only crime had been to call Fareeda *khala* 'an old fleabag'. The *zikr* she made on the *tasbeeh* was for show and therefore not valid. Fareeda *khala* was the kind of person who was born into her religion, but never really made the effort to find out what it was all about.

After her prayer, while Fareeda *khala* had some time alone in the bedroom, she opened Khadeejah's cupboard and quickly glanced through the shelves. People's cupboards were a fascinatingly intimate place. Sometimes she found crushed biscuit packets and dirty underwear pushed in the back. One time she even found a *Busty*

Blondes magazine in a young nephew's cupboard. She had glanced through it a great deal before she told his mother.

Khadeejah's cupboard was boring. There were neatly folded piles of clothing on the shelves. Cotton vests and white long johns. Fareeda *khala* poked into the shelf that held Vaseline containers and Dawn body cream. There were medicine containers, old till slips stacked neatly and at the very back of the shelf were small jewellery boxes. Fareeda *khala* pushed her hand in to see what was in them.

"What are you doing?" Khadeejah stood by the door.

Fareeda *khala* turned slowly and laughed, "I was just looking where to put this *burkha* of yours." And she held out the black head cover to Khadeejah.

"*Acha*. Give it here. I'll put it away. I came to tell you – Yahya is here to pick you up. He's waiting in the front."

"Oh, is it?" She hadn't expected him to come so early. Damn. Lunch time was still a bit far. "So soon? Tsk! And I didn't even get a chance to talk to you properly-properly, Khadeejah *bhen*." Fareeda *khala* waited for the offer, but it didn't come. Sometimes this Khadeejah just needed some pushing. "I wish we had more time to talk," she pressed.

"Me too, Fareeda *khala*, but what to do – Yahya is here already."

"Oh! Don't worry about Yahya. I'll just tell him to come later – after *Asr*. He will understand that we didn't have enough time together. Don't worry about it. He'll understand. I'm just so glad we have more time together."

Fareeda *khala* went to the car to tell her brother to come later. She came back in with Aneesa and Summaya on either side of her. "Khadeejah *bhen*, see who came in just now! So nice. We can all have lunch together and catch up, *neh*?"

Khadeejah sighed. It was going to be a long afternoon.

SUMMAYA

Summaya hated Fareeda *khala*.

She embodied everything Summaya detested in a woman: loud, manipulative, hypocritical and rude. Every family has an aunt like her. She may come in different sizes and shapes and wear different coloured hats (or scarves), but her intention is always the same: to make others miserable. The type that piles her saucer high with biscuits at tea time and steals hotel towels on family holidays.

At funerals she cries extra hard and bewails the good qualities of the deceased – just to receive attention and make the family cry more. Why, Summaya remembered one particular funeral where Fareeda *khala's* distant niece had passed away. Fareeda *khala* had rubbed the mother's back and sobbed how horrible it was that the child went before her mother and how she went just like that! (And she clicked her fingers.) Just took everything and went! And how they were so old they were dragging half their feet in the grave but their children were going just like that! (And she clicked her fingers again.)

Summaya thought that perhaps people like that didn't even know they were doing it. Bad etiquette was just a part of their normal behaviour.

Even at weddings they find time to cause tears. At the *bidaagri*, the bride's farewell from home – when the time came for the bride to hug and say goodbye to her relatives – that type of aunty will squeeze her extra hard and tell her that it's okay, that her parents will always be there for her and that even though she's leaving them they will always love her. And when the bride is bawling her eyes out and messing up her mascara, she'll start afresh with the parents.

Those type of aunties.

Summaya paid Fareeda *khala* little heed. She had learnt quickly that it was the most effective form of infuriating her. She remembered the days when her aunt shoved her thumbs into their cheeks and made their skulls burn with that dreaded tortoise shell brush. But she had learnt to ignore it even when the thumb dug further into her cheek. So now as they sat at the table, she did not look at Fareeda *khala*

directly when she spoke to her. She looked past her, as if she was not worth looking at. As if she was insignificant.

"So Summaya *beti*. How's work?"

That's how it started. One question that would lead to another question that would lead to her agenda. Subtle, but it was a tried and tested formula.

"It's going okay, Fareeda *khala*," said Summaya as she dished some rice into her plate.

Fareeda *khala* scooped out some potatoes. "You still by that travel shop?"

"Agency. Yes." Summaya ladled some *dhal* onto her rice.

"Agency, shop, what difference it makes? You still selling something, *neh*?" She chuckled loudly at her joke. "So you not thinking of doing something else?" She licked her fingers and took out more *katchumabar*. (Whatever she had to say about Khadeejah, she had to admit that the woman could cook.) She continued, "I'm sure you can get a much better paying job *beti*."

"I like what I do."

"*Acha*. You must do what you like," Fareeda *khala* said. "Talking of the jobs, did I tell you Yahya's daughter, Sameera, got a job at a big accounting company? Yahya was so excited. She must be earning big bucks. I told her she must start buying me my groceries now. So much I did for her when she was small." She laughed loudly and then peered into Summaya's plate. "*So* little you eating?"

"I'm not really hungry."

"*Arre*, people are starving in the world. You must tell her to eat more, Khadeejah *bhen*. Just look at her. So thin," Fareeda *khala* said pulling the last word into a drawn out syllable.

"I'm okay, Fareeda *khala*."

"*Nahi*. Like one *pakli murgee*." She used her clean left hand to pick up one of Summaya's wrists for inspection and tutted before dropping it back onto the table.

Summaya did not like being referred to as a skinny chicken. She knew what Fareeda *khala* was trying to imply. That her problem hadn't really gone away. Playing on her mother's fears to see her reaction. She always did this. When she knew she couldn't get to Summaya, she got to her through her mother.

When Summaya was twenty three and still unmarried, Fareeda *khala* used to visit often. She had taken to placing all sorts of fears in Khadeejah's mind about Summaya's future. Twenty three is a precarious age for an Indian girl. Somehow it's the stage that indicates whether she's either going to make it in life or not.

"Make it or break it," Fareeda *khala* would sing. "You're going to make-it-or-break-it".

In the case of a young Indian girl it meant whether she would get married and be happy for the rest of her life, or not get married and be unhappy for the rest of her life.

Khadeejah had made *dua* every day that Summaya would find a nice boy. She had brought home a number of proposals, but Summaya refused. Summaya found the situation preposterous. That she had to meet her prospective husband in her mother's sitting room, serving tea and biscuits to him on a tray covered with a gold paper doily. But she went through with it for her mother's sake. The only time she had lost her temper was when a mother had come without her son. Summaya was questioned and inspected by the woman and her husband while she and Khadeejah sat quietly and wondered what the son looked like or what he did for a living. The parents made it seem as it were a given that anyone would want him. The last straw was when the woman had asked Khadeejah if Summaya had any sisters or cousins. Summaya had 'accidentally' poured tea into the woman's lap.

Maybe that's why she had such a bad reputation with the family.

And her mother never understood when she said she just didn't feel any – any connection with them at all.

"You think I felt any connection with your father when I married him?" Her mother would scream at her when she tried to explain her feelings. "Marriage is marriage! Connection ponnection! *Pagal hai*? You want to be an old unmarried lady? What the people will say! That was a good boy Uncle Farouk brought. Good job too. And he was nice to you isn't? Isn't he was nice?"

"Ma, he talks so soft I can't hear him."

"And that's a reason not to like him?" She had screamed incredulously. "What *katchra*! At least you know he can't shout you then." Her mother had then sighed before continuing, "When will you understand? The older you get, the harder it gets!

Boys – good boys don't grow on trees. WE all were married at your age. You're not getting any younger!"

Her mother had suddenly stooped to Summaya's level on the sofa, reached for her hand and said softly,

"Listen my child. In life you're either a ripe mango or a raw onion. Ripe mangoes are perfect; they're sweet and juicy and everybody likes them. Raw onions? They're good for nothing. Nobody wants to eat them like that. They are like people who are… not complete. They have funny-funny ways and they don't do nothing right. Now tell me, do you want to be a ripe mango or a raw onion? Of course you want to be a ripe mango! Everybody wants to be a ripe mango."

Fareeda *khala* enjoyed every minute of it. She would tsk tsk and agree with Khadeejah about the scarcity of boys. She complained that girls today were just too fussy and that they were spoilt. She would agree that the older you got the harder it got. She after all, knew everything about it, she said. And for once Khadeejah couldn't disagree. All Fareeda *khala* had to do was place her bloated body onto the sofa and there was the frightening proof of what happened to girls who didn't get married.

But Summaya hadn't been worried. When the time was right it would be right. And everything would come together. God knew and she knew and that was enough.

And besides she had had Laila then. Laila would listen to her and nod her head. Sometimes they would sit next to one other and gather comfort from each other's presence. They would whisper and tell each other their secrets. Their relationship scared Khadeejah and spurred her to find a husband for Summaya. But Summaya kept insisting she was fine.

Sometimes, however, on quiet afternoons when the sun set and the sky stretched itself across like a light sheet, Summaya did worry. She wondered if she was meant to pass through life alone (for Laila was like herself and so she didn't count). And alone wasn't such a bad thing. It meant space and freedom and independence. Away from weak emotions like love and anger and hate. Alone was quite appealing sometimes.

But sometimes, too, when it counted most, it was not.

"You eating okay these days, Summaya?"

"Yes."

"Because you know before was bad. Very bad. I remember those Dark Days."

Summaya looked up at her, alarmed.

Khadeejah started, "Fareeda *khala* I'm sure we –"

"No, Khadeejah *bhen*, let me finish. I'm only saying because I'm her aunty and I care for her." She turned to face Summaya. "You're like my own daughter." And she clutched her heart. "How worried we all were about you. What and what your poor mother went through. Now I'm only saying because I love you. Because you like my own daughter. If you having a problem you must just say. We all here for you. *Neh*, Khadeejah?"

Summaya glanced at Aneesa who looked back at her in a curious way. "Everything is fine, Fareeda *khala*. Everything is fine."

"But – " Fareeda *khala* started.

"*Bachi ke saam neh math kaho,*" Khadeejah interrupted suddenly. "Have more *dhal* Fareeda *khala*."

Fareeda *khala* thought for a moment and considered saying something else. But she decided it was not safe. Khadeejah's encrypted warning in Urdu for her not to say anything in front of the child was stern and direct. 'Accidental' questions wouldn't be viewed so innocently after that. She wondered how much the child knew. Evidently, very little. And evidently, from the expression on her face she wanted to know more.

How interesting.

Afterward, when they were cleaning up and Fareeda *khala* sat at the dining table pretending to wipe dishes that were already dry, she asked Khadeejah about Aneesa.

"No, Fareeda *khala*. The child knows nothing. She was too small to remember."

"*Acha.* But now she's big. Shouldn't she know?"

"It is a hard thing to talk to a child about. Summaya doesn't want her to know."

"It's not such a big thing to keep a secret."

Khadeejah turned to look at her. "Small things for some people are big things for other people, Fareeda *khala*."

Fareeda *khala* licked her lips as an idea formed in her head. She knew *why* Summaya went crazy After what happened. Not that she wasn't always crazy (that child had been *pagal* from the start). But now she could do something about it. Oh yes, Fareeda *khala* knew enough to put that gold-eyed devil in her place.

And now she knew exactly how.

ANEESA

The air was heavy at the lunch table.

With the sweat above her mother's lip. With the rubber smile on Fareeda *khala's* face. With the thick fear behind *Nani's* eyes.

There were always secrets. Always whispers. Always words she didn't know.

Her mother had looked at her. Fareeda *khala* had looked at her mother. *Nani* had looked at Fareeda *khala*. Each pair of eyes spoke words. In a language Aneesa didn't understand.

Looks were words. Like when Mrs Brown was watching from under her eyebrows during a class test. Her eyes said, I-am-watching-and-I-will-be-furious-if-you-cheat. Or when her mother looked at her as she slept and she could feel her watching her through her lids and she knew her mother's eyes were saying, I-love-you-so-much. Or when *Nani* sighed and closed her eyes and when she opened them again they said, I-am-remembering.

Sometimes you didn't know what they were saying. But you knew they were saying something.

And that's when you looked at another person and said, "What? What is it?" That's what she felt like saying to them now. What? What is it? But all she ended up doing was pouring more Coke in her glass. Because she knew no one would answer and she didn't know how to talk with her eyes. Only adults could talk with their eyes. But she tried anyway. She looked at her mother and asked her, What-did-Fareeda-*khala*-mean-about-the-Dark-Days?

Her mother asked her to please pass the Coke.

SUMMAYA

Dusty tears and deep darkness was all Summaya remembered about that time.
The gloom had been unbearable and the drought unquenchable.

When she had stopped eating.

When the world had stopped.

Food dissolved into tasteless ash on her tongue. Fragrant rice and juicy chicken became empty husks and arid pieces of sponge. Too large to swallow and too rough when she finally tried.

Scratchy. Choking.

Dry.

Even Khadeejah's food.

Food constantly interrupted the welcoming darkness of sleep. Food was accompanied by noises: clattering spoons, whispering relatives and her mother's coaxing. Food was a nuisance. Platefuls of cut-up colours. That had smells and textures and tastes which all interfered with the dullness she had tried to maintain. Summaya didn't care to eat. Sometimes she sipped a spoon of soup (dry, dry water) or chewed a piece of bread slowly for a long time.

Half interested pecks like a lone hen in a yard.

Her body constantly felt dry and she kept licking her lips and rubbing her elbows. Her lips were cracked no matter how much Vaseline she smeared on them. Sometimes she would lie in a cold bath just to feel alive.

She remembered her mother sitting at the foot of the bed with a crying Aneesa, imploring her to wake up. That the mourning time was over. That life was waiting. That her daughter needed her. And for God's sake her lips were not dry, they were fine.

But nothing was fine anymore.

Everything was black. A vague sort of black that seeped into the rims of her eyes. She just wanted everyone to leave her alone. Take the crying child away. Just leave her under the duvet. Like they had for the first few days when she had lain there and just stared at the ceiling. But after a while they kept coming in, touching her, talking to

her, throwing the damn child in her face. Prodding her. Opening curtains and blinding her with an explosion of light. She felt like some old wrinkled creature that had become blind. Light burned behind her eyelids and throbbed in her temples. She thrashed wildly when the light hit her face.

They left her alone after a while. Curled and crumpled on her bed.

Extreme depression, the doctor said.

(*Djinn*, the family whispered.)

Summaya spent her days lying in bed in the dim room. Listening to the sounds of the house. The flush of the toilet. The clatter of pots. A child's cry. A voice on the phone. The cars on the road. Someone calling to their child playing outside.

She grew thin. Nothing had taste. Not even the box of brightly coloured Smarties she asked her mother to buy her on a sudden whim.

But one day when Khadeejah was peeling big messy pineapples in her kitchen for *achar*, throwing the peel and chunks of eyes onto a soggy newspaper, Summaya showed interest. She had slumped out of the room to go to the toilet when she saw her mother. She had stopped, leaned inside the kitchen doorframe, too frail to stand on her own, and watched her mother. Then she had picked up a dripping piece from the mess and popped it in her parched mouth.

Khadeejah had pretended not to notice.

And then Summaya was only eating pineapples. It was the only thing that put taste back into her mouth. With its pungent, sour sweetness. It bit into her dead tongue. It made the insides of her cheeks pucker and her throat tremble at the sweet juice. Khadeejah would give her pineapple *achar*, slim slices covered in savoury syrup. Pineapple cubes sprinkled with chilli powder. Crystallised sugar pineapples. And tender small pieces cut fresh. Summaya could not get enough. She sat in bed licking her fingers with sticky juice running down her chin.

She refused anything else.

And then one day she saw Aneesa playing on the sitting room floor. Summaya picked her up and fed her a piece of pineapple. Aneesa had cooed and touched her face with sticky fingers.

And then everything wasn't so dry anymore.

KHADEEJAH

Mayfair was an oily dry town. Oily with the spirit of small busy shops. And dry with the quietness of hard roads and flat driveways. People lived in their little houses (with high walls) and complained about the ants in their kitchens.

In winter, they complained about the bitter cold that froze the water in their pipes. And in summer they sat on their verandas, with tall electric fans that blew dust onto the surface of their tea. Some of them bought their bread from Summaya's Cosy Corner. Others didn't.

When things began to come 'right' in the country (the people said 'right' because they didn't know what to call the period of adjustment and it gave the impression that what had happened before was wrong) the first thing Khadeejah had done was to pack her bags and leave Lenasia to move to Mayfair. She had never liked the dull town that she had been forced to move to. The birds were too few in the sky and the earth cracked open easily. Many Indians moved to Mayfair. Many Indians stayed in Lenasia. Spread out a little. Like melted butter that gathers in the shallow bits of toast.

People in the country moved where they could. In small groups. Into tree lined streets and houses with pools. Onto farms in lonely fields. Into flats next to white women who leaned on walkers and grew pink begonias on their balconies.

The people wrote their new addresses in scratchy black ink on onion paper application forms and hung their photos on the walls of their new homes and searched the wrong cupboards when they needed glasses to drink juice.

And they looked around them and wondered if they would ever get used to the stillness.

But many of them stayed stuck. In places with dusty wind and overcrowded clothes-lines. Where food smells wafted through the streets and dogs limped towards trashcans. Those people didn't or couldn't change. They stayed where they were put. Pieces of butter that couldn't thaw.

Khadeejah sold her house in Lenasia and bought a smaller house in Mayfair. She left her and Haroon's old house to start afresh. She was nearer to her customers and to the shops.

She said she wanted to be a proper place on a map.

People said it wasn't nice that Khadeejah was living on her own with two children. People said Khadeejah should have moved closer to her brother. People said a lot of things. Because people thought They Knew Better. But Khadeejah didn't listen to them. After Haroon died she brought up her son and daughter on her own. She worked hard on her business. She bought her own house. And she was one of the first people in her street to install a satellite dish.

Her son thought it was a good idea. For the Quiet Days, he said.

He made a big to-do about buying the dish before he left to live overseas. The more guilty he felt about leaving his mother, the bigger a deal he made about the satellite dish.

"Two hundred channels, don't you know, ma? You just have to sit here and you can see what's happening all over the world. Even all the Indian films. Imagine that!" She had nodded enthusiastically. (And told everyone that her son had brought the world to her doorstep.)

He placed all his guilt in the dish and presented it for her to keep.

The day her huge satellite dish had arrived at the house there had been a commotion in the street.

"Khadeejah Bibi from number ten has a new satellite dish, didn't you know?"

"Will it block my view of the road?"

"How can she afford it?"

"Well, I was also going to get one too, you know."

"Tsk! What a waste of money."

"Did you see how big it was? I won't be surprised if that thing comes crashing down."

(For, of course, everyone must have an opinion. Opinions are very much like moustaches. They are interesting and considered very important to the owner but are, in fact, unnecessary.)

And then a month later there was a satellite boom all over the country and everyone wanted a satellite dish. Every roof was fixed with a metal bowl, opening its huge mouth to the heavens to fill the houses below with adventure, mystery and

romance. People sat in their sitting rooms and hardly came out. A blue flickering visible through their curtains.

Mayfair's streets became a little quieter.

Khadeejah never learnt fully how to use the remote control for her satellite's decoder. She only knew that pressing the red menu button and the number three would lead to her beloved Zee TV channel. If the controls got reset and she couldn't get back to her Zee she would complain bitterly to herself and swear at the remote in Urdu, while waiting for Summaya or Aneesa to come home and fix it. She loved her Indian channels filled with Indian soap operas and comedies. She felt it kept her closer to her beloved India. And that she was fulfilling her father's wish for them to remain close to their heritage.

Hadn't he told her, hadn't he told her every day: "Never forget your beloved India. Never forget where your roots are, Khadeejah Bibi".

(Because roots were old and grew into deep secret places that made a plant stand strong.)

And she never forgot where her roots were. She made curries. She wore *punjabis*. She watched Indian films. She had a framed photo of the Taj Mahal in her bedroom. Her house smelled like onions, curry leaves and garlic. She kept India Alive in her own little Way. And on late nights she turned up the radio to let the sweet melody of an old Indian song fill her bedroom.

But amongst all the things she did to Keep India Alive, she loved her Indian soap operas the most. She had two favourites, *Salomi* at eight and *Thien bahu rania* at nine at night. And there were repeats in the morning if she missed them. The soap operas (or serials as they called them in India) entranced and shocked her. How could Sita cheat on her husband with that no good Vikash? Everyone knew he was a ladies man. After everything her husband did for her! And what a big wedding he had for her too. With elephants and fireworks! Didn't she feel any shame?

Those were the only times she allowed herself to sit down and relax. Or rather, allowed herself to pretend to relax. Because Khadeejah Bibi Ballim couldn't really do the resting thing. Resting meant putting your mind and body at ease. And Khadeejah's mind was always busy with thoughts. And her body was always waiting

to move. Erect and tingling. Her feet were ready to stand. Her hands were ready to chop more *dhania* or slice more mangoes. Or fold *samoosas*. Sometimes just before she fell asleep or when she sat and watched her soapies, her fingers would unconsciously re-enact the steps:

1.) She held a strip of *pur* in her left hand
2.) She used her right hand to fold a strip of *pur* into a pocket shape
3.) She used her right fingers to fill the pocket with mince
4.) Then she folded the *pur* over repeatedly to form a triangle shape with her right hand
5.) Occasionally she used her left hand to tighten the triangle so that she could avoid gaping holes in the corners.

Every night at eight o' clock (except weekends) Khadeejah removed her false teeth and, dressed in her cotton gown in summer or her nylon gown in winter, settled down comfortably on the sofa across from the television. She would keep a cup of tea and two biscuits on a saucer on the doily-covered table next to her. Then she waited for the familiar song of the opening of her serials. While she watched she would dip her biscuits in her tea and make them as soft as possible before sucking the tea out of them, pushing the dried remains that stuck to the top of her palate to the back of her throat with her tongue. Khadeejah would sit leaning forward on the sofa in front of the television and 'tsk tsk' to herself as she dipped her biscuits. When her shows ended she would delay switching the television off.

Because when she finally did, the silence would engulf her. Frighteningly so. Sometimes on quiet nights she would imagine she heard a bump in the garden or a creak in the bathroom. And she would be afraid. A vague sort of fear that caused her insides to shiver. She would walk cautiously into the kitchen and peer in. She would open the back flap of the door and look into the darkness of the garden. The garden that seemed so friendly during the day was uninviting and frightening at night. And she would imagine she saw things walking toward her or crawling on the floor. She had stopped watching horror films a long time ago. But one particular scene from a

film stayed with her. An image of a rotten hand digging out from the ground and pulling along with it a decaying corpse that turned its empty eye sockets toward her.

Outside, at night, seemed a foreign place. With deep shadows and dark corners and nameless creatures that made peculiar sounds in the back of their throats.

She would shut the door flap, relieved for the sturdiness of the walls and the warmth of the light inside. The fake flowers and the fish-shaped plates and doily-covered tables made everything seem safe. Even the television with its little smiling people and constant jabbering. She knew everything in her house. And everything knew her. She trusted it the way someone trusted an old good friend.

She would never move again. It was too late for her anyway, she thought. She was too old to change. She had reached that Stuck-In-Your-Ways age. When you got upset if the colour of your toothbrush was changed or the position of your sofa was moved. She liked her old-fashioned black telephone balancing over the one-seater so that she could reach it quickly from the kitchen. She liked her framed photos sitting on top of the television. Exactly tilted. She liked the familiarity of it. She always wore the same style Green Cross sandals. And when they discontinued the range she found the closest style and started buying that.

But still, she missed the old style.

And when she went to unfamiliar places like government offices and new restaurants she became quiet and reserved. And she crossed her arms and looked around warily. She smiled consciously at the other people.

She was happiest in her house in oily-dry Mayfair.

With her stove and her Zee TV.

SUMMAYA

Summaya hated Zee TV.

She hated that it was the global representative of her culture. A song and dance culture with heavily lined eyes, glossy lips and a clutter of colours.

She refused to believe that Indian television represented any culture of hers. (Or any culture of anybody's really.) A culture obsessed with beauty and fairness. And sex. An entertainment-at-all-costs kind of culture.

She hated that Indian television perpetuated fairness as beauty. A mild apartheid. A mindset of colonialism that they had never let go of.

She had once watched an advert where a boy was rejected by his girlfriend because he was dark-skinned. The boy then discovers the advertiser's fairness cream and after using it, finds a bevy of women chasing after him, including his old girlfriend. The advert ended with a smooth voice singing, "Fair fair is sexy sexy." Summaya had forbidden Aneesa from watching the channel with her mother. Khadeejah had complained that it wasn't such a big deal. Summaya had told her it was wrong, completely wrong to make people think dark-skinned Indians were unappealing.

Khadeejah had sighed and said that was the Way of the world.

The Indian serials infuriated Summaya. The plots were ridiculous, the characters over dramatic. Excessive colour. Make-up. Jewellery. As if *nothing* was ever enough. Everything clamoured for attention.

"Ma, really I don't know how you can sit and watch that."

"How? It's interesting. So nice stories they tell."

"It's demeaning to women and it's just – just sick!"

"*Arre*," Khadeejah said, and sipped her tea. "It's just a show, Summaya."

Summaya gave the Indian soap operas credit for one thing, though.

True love never lasted.

ANEESA

HOW COULD YOU?

The subtitle on the screen read. One sentence with all the words given equal preference. But Aneesa was sure that there was an emphasis on the 'How'. Because the woman's first word had been high-pitched. So Aneesa had read it as, HOW could you? Then there was a slap, but the sound of the slap came before the hand actually struck the cheek. The slapped woman looked outraged and held her hand to her cheek. More *doom-doom-doom* music. And then the slap was shown three times in slow motion.

Aneesa was amazed. She strained her neck to see between the legs of the dining room chairs. But just then an advert came on and she quickly withdrew her head under the table. This was the only way she could watch Zee without getting into trouble with her mother. Aneesa wasn't exactly sure why but her mother flew into a rage if she ever caught her watching the channel with *Nani*. She would go on about Reality and Injustice and Discrimination. So Aneesa simply watched from under the dining room table.

Aneesa loved the serials. The women in shiny, clingy clothing and crystal earrings that touched their shoulders. And perfect pencilled eyebrows with beautiful kohl-lined eyes. The men punched and the women slapped each other. Sometimes the men and women even kissed. And if they started hugging each other as they kissed (like the time Ranveer had suddenly grabbed Sita in a hallway and clutched her while she said, "No, oh no.") *Nani* would suddenly fumble for the remote and change the channel, glancing sideways at the dining table.

Her mother's legs appeared in the sitting room and Aneesa crept further under the table. Her mother's legs asked *Nani* where she was and *Nani* had given the legs a small shake of the head. A small I-don't-know shake. Or perhaps a small-I-do-know-shake. Either way, her mother's legs disappeared into the kitchen.

Aneesa turned around quickly and picked up her scissors and magazine next to her on the floor. She began cutting out figures and shapes. Her excuse if her mother ever found her there. She opened the magazine to an article that said, 'How to make your

man want you' (YOU with an emphasis, she was sure). It must have been a magazine from the pile aunty Colleen gave *Nani* because these were not the type of magazines her mother bought. Whenever her mother saw a magazine like this in the stores she would say bah! and her lips would twist like a strip of newspaper. Her mother said life was not about lipsticks and purses and gaining men's approval. She said you could learn more about life looking into the eyes of an old woman than from any article in there. *Nani* had said she was being overly romantic, and then Summaya had laughed and said she never thought she'd be called that.

The article that Aneesa was cutting from was accompanied by a large photo of a pretty woman with a man standing and watching her wistfully. The expression on the man's face caught her attention. It reminded her strangely of her mother. A sad longing kind of face. That only showed late at night when her mother thought the shadows in the bedroom were covering it. Did her mother always have that face on underneath? Did she wake up every morning with that wistful face and then rearrange her features to hide it? That was also a rule.

- Everyone has faces they hide

Aneesa knew she had an angry face that she hid. And a sad face. *Nani* hid a tired face. And a sad face. She often heard Mrs Davis, who was going through a divorce, crying in the teachers' bathroom but she smiled at them in class, so it meant she also hid a sad face. She wondered why people hid their sad faces so much.

- Everyone has faces they hide
    - Especially sad faces

Maybe, like her, they didn't want other people to know. They pretended that they had happy faces because everyone else was pretending to have happy faces. And explaining you have a sad face means explaining why you're sad. And sometimes. Sometimes you couldn't really explain why you were sad.

Because a lot of things just couldn't be explained.

For instance, why she remembered the burn memory. Or why Nasmeera Dangor didn't like her. Or why she couldn't swallow Panados. Or why the sight of rubbery gloves made her eyes water.

Or why she hoped she would see her father again. Or why she hoped at all. Hope was a funny word with a funny meaning. It was a love-hate word. Some people hated hoping. Others loved it. *False hope. Dash your hopes. Here's hoping. Don't get your hopes up. Hope against hope*. It was an ugly word that she wanted to hold close to her. A sad word that she wanted to make her happy.

Hope.

Suddenly her mother's legs appeared in front on the dining room table. She bent down and her head came into view.

"What are you doing here?"

"Cutting pictures," Aneesa held up the scissors.

"Why are you under the table?"

"Just."

Summaya paused and then glanced at *Nani* on the sofa. "You're not watching the television?"

"No." She looked confused. "I can't even see it from here."

"You're sure?"

"Yes!"

Her mother crouched and turned to crane her neck at the television. The adverts were still running. "I hope so." She stood up and went back into the kitchen.

Aneesa picked up the magazine and began cutting out the red heart above the man's head.

Hope was a colour.

A foggy dream colour.

Black and white with poor editing.

SUMMAYA

Colours made up Summaya's life. They seemed attached to everything she did.

Ideas. Thoughts. Memories. Emotions.

Yellow was the undertone of her skin. The colour of *haldi* smeared across her mother's fingers as she cooked.

Black was the colour of *his* hair. The colour of angry tears glittering in her eyes.

Green was the colour of her daughter's knees on a rainy day. The colour of unspoken words fermenting in her mouth.

White was the colour of Laila's words; soft, sad and simple. The colour of nervous stretch marks, streaked across a stomach.

And red?

Red was nothing. It was not part of her colour palette. But still – sometimes she turned Aneesa's painting of three red poppies on its face.

Twenty-four years earlier, Summaya had returned home from *madressah* to find the front door of their house unlocked. She had entered cautiously. Her mother and father were still at work and Naeem was out with his friends. The moment she went in, she felt cold. Goosebumps popped up on her arms. Someone had drawn all the curtains and the house was dim and quiet. Like a church in a horror film. She didn't take her schoolbag off while she made her way warily into the sitting room. As she approached the room she heard the detached sound of soccer commentary on the television. Only her father watched the soccer. But he was still at work. She entered an empty sitting room. The disconnected voices continued as Summaya peeped into the kitchen.

"*Abba*?"

Her voice sounded like an unsure sound in the night.

She didn't like it. She didn't like feeling as if someone was watching her from behind a wall; the red backpack on her shoulders, her hair pulled into a high ponytail. She imagined she could almost hear the muffled breathing. She swung around

suddenly. But there was no one. She was perspiring. She walked toward her parents' bedroom. The door was ajar.

They say children have an intuitive sense. They know which cats will scratch and which ones won't mind being stroked. They sense things.

The core of a person.

A change in atmosphere.

They may not always know what the glances being passed mean but they do know they mean *something*. Summaya stopped outside the door. It seemed as if she waited there a long time. She knew even before she turned the handle that there was something terrible waiting inside.

His eyes were like wet marbles.

He had a shadow of a smile on his face. As if he wasn't concerned about all the blood around him.

Summaya had never realised until that day how red blood was. Red like the glassy lollipops Sweetie aunty sold on a tablecloth over a plastic crate outside the school gate. The ones that cut her tongue so that her mouth felt like a mixture of spit, crushed glass and blood.

The ones Naeem had declared would turn you into a vampire.

"Why would Sweetie aunty want to turn us into vampires?" she had argued.

"You're so stupid. Haven't you noticed she wears those plastic sunglasses all the time? And the way her hands shake when we come close. She can *smell* our blood. Don't you see her sniffing?"

"That's because she has a cold!"

"No, man! You're so thick sometimes, Summaya. She's a vampire and she wants to turn all schoolchildren into vampires!"

"I don't believe you. You're telling lies again."

"Fine, don't believe me. But when you start changing don't say I didn't warn you! She fills those lollipops you love so much with vampire blood! Slowly but surely, you *will* change."

"I – I don't believe you."

"Can't you feel your side top teeth are sharper? Those are your vampire sucking teeth."

Summaya had pushed her small fingers into her incisors and felt their protruding edges in alarm.

"Told you so!" he had smiled with glee at the expression on her face.

But this was more red than the lollipops. Darker. It soaked her mother's white sheets, lay in rich wet stains on the cream carpet and covered his face in splattered drops. It was amazing to think that that much liquid flowed inside one person. One person's shape, one person's skin held all that liquid. Like a well defined water balloon.

Except this was a blood balloon.

A burst blood balloon.

Later as an adult, when she let herself think about it, she realised how beautiful it was. Like a melodramatic opera scene. The half naked man lying lifeless on the bed. Part of his head blown away. Bits of brain on the wall. And rich red on white sheets.

Her first thought had been: who would clean this all up? Were her mother and her expected to clean up the body parts of her father? Or did the police do it? Who did these things? Why didn't they discuss these situations in advance so she knew?

She didn't think the police would do it. Neither would the paramedics. Policemen wrote in little notebooks and said things like, "Are you sure?" and "We'll call you back". And paramedics came rushing in and rushing out, shouting things while running with a trolley that held a body that they were trying to save. But this body was beyond saving. So they wouldn't come rushing in. Or rushing out. They may walk sombrely out of the house. And give her a sad smile. But they wouldn't clean up the mess in the room.

She really didn't think she'd be able to wipe those bloody bits off the wall. And what with? The floor rag? The dish rag? That wasn't right. Object rags and people rags were very different.

And where would she squeeze the excess blood while she was wiping? Into a bucket? A drain? It was a person's blood. You couldn't squeeze a person down the drain.

You just couldn't.

And then for a second, it looked like his eyelid (the one with blood splattered on the eyeball) had quivered. A nervous flicker. And then she couldn't see dead-object-eyes anymore but real-person-eyes that were watching her. She imagined gurgling coming from the torn mouth. She didn't remember when she had started to scream. She only remembered that it had seemed like she had always been screaming. Even before she came into the room.

The piercing scream that startled the bats in the rafters so that they scuttled in confusion and flew into each other. The silent scream that jarred her for the rest of her life.

She had been scooped out of the room by aunty Phyllis from next door. She remembered little after that. The screaming with no beginning and no ending continuing like a long drone in the background. The room door being swung shut. A narrowing gap of a smiling bloody head saying goodbye. And everything was hurried. A jogging sort of hurry with a scream in the background as she was dragged along with aunty Phyllis.

And then blackness.

A vague red sort of blackness.

No one really knew why Haroon Razak Ballim raised a gun to his head that day. There were rumours of course: tax evasion, depression, debt, even a tale of drug addiction.

It didn't matter what it was – he had killed himself. Family, friends and neighbours couldn't believe it. The mild mannered man who went for *Maghrib* every evening? Of course, some remembered him as the man whose yelling could be heard all the way down the street. But somehow the harsh things about a person are usually forgotten when they die. Wrapped and buried with them in a white cloth. "Let the dead Be," they said. Summaya tried.

At the funeral everyone had been very quiet around her. As if sound might hurt her ears. But little hushed words reached her:
"She's the one who found him." "Yes, the daughter." "It must have been a terrible mess." "I heard she was screaming so loud they had to slap her." "Poor thing." "Tsk-shame."

A tsk-shame silence followed her at family functions for a long time afterward. She became a tsk-shame girl.

Haroon's mother would not accept it. She could not resign herself to the fact that her son had assured himself a place in hell. To save her son from the shame and her family from the scandal, she explained his death as an accident. He had slipped while cleaning his gun in his bedroom. A most bizarre accident, she said. Most people could deduce the real story from the official one and they nodded their heads knowingly at each other when she told them. When Haroon's mother saw that they didn't believe her she turned her wrath on her daughter-in-law.

That awful daughter-in-law who had stolen her son away from her house. The one that made him wait so long and then hadn't even bore him a decent number of children.

When the story of Haroon's death died down, she openly lied to people who didn't know that her son had had a heart attack, and secretly implied that his wife had been the cause of the stress.

And she did believe it in her own manner. She believed that Khadeejah's headstrong Ways had led Haroon to suicide. She refused to hear the drug and tax evasion stories. Over the years she began to believe her lies. Old age intensified the stories in her head. She preferred to construe her daughter-in-law's silence as an admission of her guilt. By the time she died she held the firm belief that Khadeejah Bibi had raised the gun and shot her son in the head.

"I told him not to marry that girl," she would mutter toward the end of her life. "Look what she did to him – gave him one fat boy and one girl with yellow eyes and then bang! She killed him. My boy. My little boy. No one even has that colour eyes in our family…" That was all Summaya heard her grandmother mutter when they went to visit her. During each visit while her grandmother was choking on her bed,

Summaya would turn to the vanity table mirror and widen her eyes to see their colour properly.

Not blood-speck coloured eyes.

When her grandmother eventually died Summaya sat at the vanity table in her room. She made faces at herself until someone came to call her.

Summaya liked to believe that her father had realised what a sad life he lived, and that his final act had been to do the world a favour and remove himself from it. That he was capable of *some* kindness. She knew she was probably wrong. But she tried not to think about it.

Because people said she should let the dead Be.

So red made her uneasy. It was a nothing colour. Empty. But if she acknowledged it. Stared too long at it. Then sometimes she would see strange things. Strange things like in the middle of the red, in the deepest part, she would imagine she saw an eye blink at her.

It would happen with the posies on the fridge. A blood-splattered eyeball with a dilated black pupil staring at her from within the petals.

Red was not the colour of blood-laced lollipops.

Red was not the colour of a punctured balloon.

Red was the colour of a silent scream that never ended.

Therefore red could not be a colour. It could not belong to the colours of the world. On a good day red was simply a word made up of letters.

It meant nothing.

ANEESA

Aneesa had found something.

It had been there all the time. Just sitting there, waiting. A mistake her mother could not bring herself to correct…

It had all started when her mother's boss had invited her to join some clients for supper. Some place fancy, her mother had said, while throwing dresses and skirts onto the bed. Her mother didn't usually go for these things, but she said there was a rumour floating around the office of a promotion. It was the opportunity she had been waiting for. So now, she was always ready to work late nights, go to office parties and even attend the occasional client supper. She endured the people. She smiled back at them. And she tried not to flinch when they touched her hand.

"Which do you think is better, the black or the green one?" asked Summaya as she held a green dress and a silky black shirt to either side of her chest.

"The green one. It makes your eyes look… nice. Where's he taking you all?"

"I don't know… but I'm sure it's some place fancy. You know how Mr Maharaj is. He really likes to indulge." She slipped on the green top which made the muddy yellow in her eyes pulse. Then she applied thick kohl to the rims of her eyes. With a mascara brush in her fingers she said slowly (as if moving her lips affected her eyes), "Mm, it's been a long time since I did this."

"You look beautiful." And Aneesa wondered when she would be beautiful.

(A stuck-in-the-middle-aged sun-pondering thought.)

When boys would also turn to look at her and whisper, "She's very pretty."

Would her eyes change colour? Would her nose lose its button shape? And if it did, what shape would it take? How much could the skin stretch and twist and change? When you looked at photos of children they looked very little like the adults they grew up into. Eyes became smaller and sadder, lips stretched into cupid bows, noses squirmed into new skin and new shapes. People changed.

Inside and out.

People said, don't change Aneesa. Stay as sweet as you are. But what if she changed and couldn't help it? Then she thought, no, she would never change her

personality. She would never betray her Now-Self. Never. But she became worried that she might change without knowing. What if change crept up on her like a shadow that she didn't know was there until it was upon her. Or what if it happened slowly. Little things she wouldn't realise until she had changed too much. Then her Future-Self would betray her Now-Self. She tried to remember if she was the same person she was two years ago.

And what if she changed for the better? Then what.

Her mother had left soup for supper and because the soup looked terrible (a dishwater consistency with shrivelled carrots and peas) Aneesa decided to make a sandwich. So, really, all she had been doing was making her sandwich. She hadn't had any bad intentions.

When she found the mistake her mother couldn't bring herself to correct.
She was merely looking for the pepper container in the pantry cupboard since the shaker was empty. And, really, all she had done was climb up on a chair to reach the top shelf because she thought it was there. And, well, could she be blamed for noticing the lavender box that sat right next to the pepper bottle? A box kept high away from little hands, but accessible enough for an adult.

It was an old stationery box. The type that held decorated papers and matching envelopes and were given as presents by friends who didn't put much thought into their gifts. A hazy field of worn-out lavenders was printed on the box. A sad sigh of a box. Aneesa almost felt as if she heard one escape when she opened the lid. She sat with her knees against her chest on the pantry floor leaning against the shelves. A can of tomato puree jabbed into her shoulder but she didn't care. The box had to be important or her mother wouldn't have put it up there. And really, she reasoned, could she be blamed for being a bit curious?

It was one of those treasure boxes that held bits of memories and important pieces of paper. Photos, clippings, a plastic teddy bear charm, report cards, scrawled notes and ancient movie tickets. A black moleskin with bent pages and spider veins cutting through the cover. She remembered seeing this somewhere one day but she couldn't place where…

She found a photo of herself as a baby – a gumless smile with big shiny eyes. A photo of her mother in pants that sat high on her waist with her arms around a thin pretty girl. Aneesa felt strange seeing her mother's life like this. Her mother had always seemed somewhat like a branch.

Dry, stiff, with no apparent history. Just existing.

And these things, these bits of her history, unsettled Aneesa. It gave her mother life. A substance. And it seemed as if she had taken everything interesting about herself and pushed it into a box with a lid she could shut. She opened the address book. It was dusty and the pages were yellowed. On the front page, in bold, was her mother's details, written in her distinct style:

If lost please return to:
Summaya Ballim
13 Rose Avenue
Lenasia
1821
Republic of South Africa

The phone book had a collection of people's numbers her mother had gathered over the years. Some were scribbled in red ink; others were scratched in with pencil. The names were unrecognisable except for Zohra *khala*, so Aneesa put it away and continued her hunt.

As Aneesa scratched through some old report cards she came across it.

Pushed in the back. Hidden below letters. The mistake her mother could not bring herself to correct.

A photo.

A photo her mother could not bring herself to get rid of.

And Aneesa knew.

She was looking at her father.

The image of him in her flashback had been vague. She had seen the face but not the features. Dream-like almost. But this photo gave it form. The photo turned the air into smoke, the shadow into shape. She could see his face filled in. Like a join-in-the-dots drawing.

He had an older version of her eyes. More intense and deeper than her wide shallow ones. Thick black eyelashes like hers. His nose was not a button. His high cheekbones were supported by a strong jawline. Cheekbones like her mother. They must have made a striking couple. They *did* make a striking couple. He had his arm around the waist of a laughing Summaya. For a second Aneesa was distracted from the man by her mother. She had been caught in mid twirl, the edges of her long yellow dress fanning out lightly in the air. Her mouth was open in mid laughter. She looked at the camera directly with a look of disbelieving happiness. As if she herself couldn't understand how she came to be like this. Caught laughing in this man's arms wearing a yellow top with polka dots that covered a round bump…

Aneesa turned the photo over. There were no dates and no names. But she knew this had to be her father. Of course it was possible that this could be any man posing with her mother. But the box's location, the shape of his eyes and her mother's laugh all told Aneesa that this had to be him. Besides, she liked to think she recognised her father when she saw him. She stared at the photo for a long time, tracing his face with her finger, trying to transport herself into the moment. Imagining herself in her mother's stomach. Trying to remember if she could have known inside, what was happening outside. Tiny legs tucked against her chest, listening quietly to the muffled laughter somewhere. Because now she knew it was possible to remember things that happened A Long Time Ago.

Later, when she had drunk her fill of him she put the box back. She wouldn't tell her mother she found it. She knew that this was something her mother had hidden for a reason. She knew she wouldn't press her.

No daughter likes to see her mother tremble.

SUMMAYA

Summaya fidgeted with her earrings.

She was not used to wearing them, and they made her earlobes itch. Little gold drops that clashed horribly with her eyes. She found earrings to be the strangest things. Little pieces of metal that hung on either side of the face with the intention of making a person appear more attractive. The long ones she wore now made her nervous because they occasionally grazed her cheek, leaving her glancing anxiously over her shoulder.

The restaurant was as smart as she had expected. Little candles lit up the tables which were decked with an array of silver cutlery. When the waiter put her seafood platter before her she realised it had been a long time since she had eaten prawns. She had liked them Before.

It was strange how everything became After or Before.
As if there had been nothing after Before. And everything before After.

"Prawns," she remembered *him* saying as he tucked into his plate, "are meant for eating with our fingers. Not for playing with with a fork. That's why God gave us fingers you know." Then he would grab another big prawn and suck the juicy tail, encouraging her to get as much as she could get out of the skin. His side plate was always filled with soft translucent skins that looked like little heaps of crackling pink flowers.

The prawns stared up at her from their bed of rice. She pried open the shells with her fork and inspected the succulent flesh. It was a long time since she was forced to eat such a heavy meal. At home they let her get away with plain food with just a bit of salt and a dab of butter (her body never having fully recovered from the shock of After). She preferred things with as little taste as possible. Because taste mixed uncomfortably with the blandness she had built up in her life. But perhaps the richly flavoured food in front of her signalled a new start. She smiled at Mr Maharaj and tucked in.

With a fork.

Mr Maharaj was making a joke and slapping his wife on the back. His wife's fork missed her piece of salmon each time she was slapped forward. She gave Summaya an embarrassed what-to-do-these-men-are-like-that sort of shrug. The group they were entertaining were big shot Indians riding the wave of India's sudden economic surge. Not the cheap type who scratched their toes (why, these ones in their pointed shoes seemed to own no toes at all). The women wore brightly-coloured dresses that showed off the fat of their upper arms. Thin gold bangles tinkled on their wrists. Under their short dresses they wore tights that showed off their fleshy legs.

Fleshy legs on an Indian woman were surprising, but not completely uncommon. Summaya listed three theories accounting for this strange occurrence:

a. *Old age:* When Indian women become old they stop moving as much, thus allowing the oil in their food to accumulate into rolls of fat around their stomach and collect in their calves. It is sadly the only time the average Indian woman will see some meat on her bony legs.

b. *Money*: Rich housewives who ceased their yoga classes soon after they stopped being in fashion. They eat too many *goolab jamuns* in fits of indulgence, and all their exercise whittles down to is painting their nails (bright red) and bending down to untie the buckle of their stilettos (that struggle to hold in their plump toes).

c. *European genes*: Somewhere along the family line there had been either an inter-racial marriage or an affair with an European. The descendents are then blessed with thick calves (and finer hair).

These women seemed on the brink of b. They had long bright nails and laughed 'hahahaa' in strangely pitched voices. They called her 'daahling'. The men wore gold rings on their pinkies and had their huge bellies stuffed into shirts with painted palm trees. The wives (with their plump toes) couldn't get enough of Africa's overpriced wooden giraffes and tribal masks at the markets. They placed their wooden statue on

a shelf in their third sitting room and said, “Oh that old thing is from Africa when we went in ’09. What a funny thing happened there, did I tell you that story where…” when visitors asked them about the giraffe.

Their clients laughed a lot. Loudly. As if being on holiday was an excuse to be raucous. They asked for more wine. Mr Maharaj slapped his wife’s back a bit more. The women made rude jokes. Summaya made polite talk with them. Conversation about price tickets and airline food. Conversation of women, as a universal rule, reaches a point where relationships must be discussed. Summaya knew the question was inevitable.

“So dahling, are you married?”

Three pairs of previously uninterested kohl-lined eyes turned her way.

“No.”

“Oh.”

And there was an ‘oh’ sound left hanging in the air. It stayed there for a bit before falling suddenly when they all realised how quiet they had become.

“Shame. What happened dahling?” And without waiting for an answer the questioner swung her head to the rest of the group and laughed, “You know we women can pretend we’re too independent, but we’re really not. And that’s what puts them off.” She waved a hand to the men who were engrossed in conversation. “All this talk of wearing the pants.” She squinted at Summaya. “You seem like a very independent type. No offence.”

Another one butted in before Summaya could say anything. “Oh, Joy.” (Somehow names like Jyothika and Shilpa became Joy and Ships, as if the tightness of it made them younger.) “Leave her alone. Independent is good. Independent women are cool,” she said pronouncing the ‘c’ with the heavy ‘k’ that accompanied Indian languages.

“Oh *yar*. Maybe it’s good for *some* people. But *we* could never be independent. What would we do without our husbands?” and she rubbed her thumb and forefinger together and winked at Summaya. They broke into a loud squeaky laughter.

Summaya nodded, smiled and looked away. Retreated into her mind where these colourful loud women could not invade. It was a trick she learnt when the family

started visiting her After. She would nod at their concerned faces but she would be far away.

When had been the last time she wore mascara? She hardly ever wore makeup. Even the mascara she found now had to be coaxed to release a few smears. She had worn make-up Before. When it mattered that she look good. That she show him how pretty she could be. The last time she had applied mascara was the day they went out before she gave birth. She had complained that she felt like a fat cow. And he had told her she was beautiful. He pinched her cheeks and said she was the best looking cow he had ever laid eyes on. Eleven years without make-up because she didn't care if anyone else found her beautiful.

The meal ended with much kissing of air and handshakes. Mr Maharaj seemed very excited and kept beaming and patting his wife's back as if she were the one who signed the business deal.

As they left for their cars, Summaya realised she left her bag on the table. She made her way through the crowded restaurant and picked up the clutch which was still next to her plate. Relieved that one of the waiters hadn't taken it she made her way to the exit. As she walked out she glanced at the silhouette of someone's back. A familiar silhouette. One that made her pause and almost drop her bag. Thick black hair. Strong shoulders. She felt breathless. She steadied herself on a nearby chair. There was a papery pile of shells next to his plate.

It was impossible.

She pulled courage from deep within her. Put her hand in and plucked it out like a magician that was surprised at what he pulled out. She somehow managed to walk past on wobbly heels. Hardly daring to breathe. Cursing herself for hoping. And hating herself for glancing. First at the woman. Blonde and beautiful. (Hadn't he said blonde women were beautiful?) She wore a dress that showed off her silky shoulders. (Hadn't he whispered that shoulders were the most sensual part of a woman?) Summaya turned toward the man opposite the woman. She could almost feel the strings in her heart stretch. Taut. Waiting to snap…

It was not him.

When she sat at home that night, removing her shoes and massaging her temples, she realised what it was. The nose. It was all wrong. Hooked slightly toward the right. Not *his* nose. He had the perfect Roman nose.

The man had turned to look up at her. At this dazed woman with wet eyes who was staring at him. And then she had opened her mouth and seemed to mouth “Thank God” before shuffling away. And he had picked up his fork and continued with his meal, joking to his wife that strange things always seemed to happen to him.

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah was making syrup lemons.

They did not sell particularly well since they could be bought in big packets cheaply at Mr Lee's in Fordsburg Square. But her grand-daughter liked them so Khadeejah still made them. Khadeejah maintained that her homemade ones with good brown sugar and fresh juicy lemons were better than those dehydrated things that Mr Lee sold. She herself enjoyed syrup lemons immensely, but somehow felt more comfortable implying that they were for her grand-daughter. As if the simplicity of the syrup lemon was relegated only to children.

Khadeejah tasted the syrup that was boiling on the stove and tested whether it was sticky enough. She leaned over the pot and dabbed a little mixture between her fingers. She pinched her index finger and thumb together slowly. Still not tacky enough. After stirring the pot for a few minutes she went to her outhouse to search for a glass bottle to store the syrup in. The room was small and lit by a bare bulb. It was filled largely with dusty bottles, cardboard boxes, ice cream tins and *ghee* buckets. In one corner stood her old Singer sewing machine. She hadn't used it in years. It was no longer needed to sew the extra clothing she brought from the factory, or her family's clothes. Those days had passed.

But it was a reminder. A reminder of what she had been.

When there had been no milk in the fridge for days and the factory air clogged up her lungs like a hot blanket.

They had had an outhouse in Lenasia too. Almost twenty eight years ago. Haroon had hated her storing all her 'junk' there. He always ended breaking something when he went inside for his fishing rods. She stopped trying to explain to him that she needed all the things to continue her business. The business that paid for *their* bills. He never listened but merely tripped over yet another jar that she would have to sweep up later.

The truth was that Haroon had wanted the space for his business. He had had a dream.

He wanted to build a coconut lamp factory.

Haroon had acknowledged that he was not very good at many things. He didn't always balance the amounts in the books correctly and sometimes he forgot to buy the bread on his way home. On a good day, in his heart of hearts, he even acknowledged that he wasn't much of a husband or father. He acknowledged at some point, too, that he wouldn't succeed much in life. That he was destined for mediocrity. But one day, quite by accident, he had fixed a blender that Khadeejah was on the verge of throwing out. Ever since then he had considered himself a bit of an electrical genius. It didn't matter to him that he had blown the fuse several times at home. Or that he had broken more things than he had fixed. He merely blamed the mistakes on the fuse box, on the tools or on Khadeejah. Somehow everything was always Khadeejah's fault. Even the way the electricity ran in the walls.

He borrowed great big books on business skills from the library and read them late into the night. He said he had to *find a market for his skill* and *develop a business plan* (Khadeejah wondered if he knew what he was talking about). He walked around the house for months muttering to himself about potential products he could market successfully. The months wore on and all Haroon did was read and insist that he was going to make them rich-rich (even more rich than Baboo uncle who had his own bioscope in Laudium). Then one day as Haroon was reading his book he looked up and observed his wife scooping out the tender flesh from a coconut. Haroon sat up and examined an empty shell and the gears in his rusty mind began to work. Khadeejah assumed it was intense desperation to prove himself as a successful electrician that led Haroon to believe that creating electrical lights in her discarded coconut shells was a successful idea. Haroon would drill holes into the hairy halved shells and insert a bulb with a wire attached through the opening. He was amazed at his talent and quickly dreamt building up a whole coconut lamp empire. Everyone would want an original coconut lamp in their house and people would congratulate him on his ability to spot potential in what was normally considered junk. Initially he had wanted to name it Ballim's Coconut Light, but his daughter had smirked and said it sounded like a cool drink. Khadeejah had to agree so Haroon changed it to Ballim's Coconut Lamps. He, however, refused to change the slogan that he felt so aptly suited

it – *you'll go nuts about it*. He bought sacks of the hairy fruit from Randerees and spent nights drilling bits of coconut. The entire house was full of coconut lamps – above their bed, along the passage and much to Khadeejah's dismay, on either side of their front door.

She always imagined them to be little *tokolosh* heads poking out of the walls. Turning their heads to peer at her as she walked past them. But she wouldn't say a word to Haroon. She just quietly screwed on her *achar* lids as the sound of drilling filled the backyard.

They had failed miserably.

No one wanted to buy Ballim's Coconut Lamps – *You'll go nuts about it* – except one small Indian grocer in Lenasia (and he had only done it as a favour to his good customer, Khadeejah). He had smiled at Khadeejah and told her he would try to send some down to his Durban branch. But don't hold your breath, he had said kindly. No one was really interested in Ballim's Coconut Lamps and no one was going nuts about it either.

At least not Indian people anyway. Coconuts were used for their oil to rub into the hair, for drinking from, for toasting for *chevra* and for breaking at doorways for blessings. Not for making fancy-fancy lights that didn't even shine bright enough. So Khadeejah was left with a house full of coconut lamps, dusty light bulbs, coils of cord and hairy bits in her carpet. Her outhouse of dusty jars remained intact. Haroon on the other hand never stopped trying to sell his coconut lamps and resented Khadeejah's booming *achar* business. The outhouse, for him, stood as a constant reminder of her business triumph and his failed venture.

He always made sure he kicked a bottle when he was in there.

Khadeejah returned to the kitchen with a big round glass bottle. She washed it with Sunlight soap and put it to dry on the dish rack. She took great pleasure in wiping it dry. Reaching inside the jar with her dishcloth to make sure nothing was left wet. Her greatest pleasures in life came from little things. Wiping wet jars dry. Slitting a shiny

green chilli. Peeling big smooth potatoes. Pushing her hand into a sack of rice. Watching a rich curry boil and bubble.

She glanced at the clock and realised it was later than she thought. Maybe Summaya wouldn't come today. The house was unbearably quiet when they weren't around. Khadeejah switched on the radio on top of the fridge. The sound of a sermon came through the speakers. Khadeejah kept it on because *Tasty Delights*, the recipe show with Khairoon Murchee, would soon be on. Khadeejah liked the recipes she gave. Khairoon never held back on the butter or sugar and she had a pleasant voice. Sometimes Khadeejah just switched on the radio to keep a constant hum in the air. So that the stark quiet was momentarily dimmed.

Many years ago the quietness had been unbearable. The flat they had lived in had been like an empty cave.

Those early years without a child.

She knew what they were thinking. All of them. Family and friends. They didn't need to say it. It was written in their smiles and in their knowing glances at each other. They knew she knew they knew. She hated them for knowing.

It became quite the family scandal when Khadeejah Bibi Ballim hadn't fallen pregnant after two years. After all, two years was the maximum amount of time one should wait before having a baby. The absolute maximum. Babies were as much part of marriage as cooking.

Initially Khadeejah ignored her mother-in-law's hints and her sister's jibes. Haroon and her were young. They had time. But by the end of the third year she too had become concerned. It was not just the pressure from her family and his family. No, she herself wanted something else to love, to care for, to make the marriage worth it.

But the baby didn't come.

Naturally Haroon blamed her. His family blamed her. It seemed somehow these things are always the female's fault. These matters of anatomy and internal organs and making babies. According to them, the man has a simple job. It is the woman who is in charge of the complicated part, no? She must take what he gives and change

it. If she can't do it then she's proven at the earliest stage possible that she can't be a good mother. Because she can't make her own baby.

They never went for tests. Not because they already knew it was her fault but because Haroon didn't want to know if it wasn't.

But after much *dua* and bargaining with God the day *had* finally arrived when she had felt nauseous in the morning. When the doctor had confirmed their suspicions, *mubaraks* came from all over the family and sighs of contentment were heaved. Of course, Haroon wanted a son. Khadeejah had dreams that he would become a doctor or maybe even a specialist. They even placed an early order for sheep for the *aqeeqah*. Khadeejah was overjoyed that she would soon fulfil the important role of being a mother. That she would have company. That she had not been a bad mother. She had made a baby.

God had made a baby, they quickly reminded her.

But it had all changed in a day. The way all big changes happen. Suddenly. Shockingly. Delivered with a solid punch to the gut. She still remembered that morning. That sickening morning. She had been four months pregnant. Haroon had been especially nice to her and had let her sleep in. There had been pains. Distant stomach cramps. But they couldn't have been hers – they were too far away and deeply buried. Like a dream of a dream that was only slightly becoming urgent. Like incessant beating on a far away door. It was enough to nag her awake. Enough to make her peer groggily into her bed.

Enough to scare her into fumbling away from the bed with a scream in her throat.

It is hard that a child should be lost that way. It is a disturbing, detached experience to find the blood of your child covering your sheets. Feeling in some odd way that you are responsible for it.

As if you have rejected your child.

Khadeejah had cried. Slapped her face, beat at her traitorous body. Her body, of all things, knew how much she needed that child. If her own body could betray her then what was left?

It was God's will They said, but behind the doors their whispering continued. Haroon became sullen. To him, it was a matter of failing to establish his masculinity.

The silence grew. It swelled and stretched the walls of their flat. It echoed off the kitchen tiles and wandered into their bedroom. It seeped into their carpets and crawled into their ceiling. It swooped into their mouths when someone opened their lips to speak.

It happened again and again. Once when she had been in front of the stove frying onions. She fell to the floor with the pain that time. The deep faraway pain that was a muffled knock in a distant room. So silent. The onions had burnt. Blackened ring at the bottom of the pan. When the pain had subsided, she had quietly cleaned up with trembling hands, emptied the burnt onions in the bin and continued with a new meal. She hadn't cried that time.

Merely scraped the pot clean.

The next time had been in the grocery store. She even managed to look for Haroon in the aisles and tell him that she needed to go home. That time she hadn't even needed to go to the hospital.

She began to detest her body. This instrument of such intense hope and disappointment. This rebelling body. At night she stared at her naked body in the bathroom mirror, then slowly she would pinch her cheeks, claw at her thighs and pull her stomach, trying to understand why it was so violently disobeying her. She sat at her *musallah* and made *dua* every day. She negotiated, she made bargains and she wept. The silence grew into a big wave that swelled the air between Haroon and her until she almost couldn't breathe around him. As if she was always holding her breath and waiting.

The fourth time she did not tell him of her suspicions. They both pretended to ignore the fact that she had stopped eating chilli *achar* and that the bathroom no longer smelled of stale smoke. They even managed to ignore the quiet swelling of her stomach.

But they knew. Quick glances at her belly, hurried peeks at baby magazines and small pauses at the children's sections in stores. When people asked her if she was pregnant, Khadeejah remembered the three horrible times and said no. At seven

months, though, even she had to acknowledge the solid round lump and she very cautiously allowed herself some feeling of joy. Experience is, after all, the mother of all teachers. Full joy only came after the baby was born. A baby with hands and curls and blood and slime. That kicked and gasped and cried in their arms. The baby had been a boy and Haroon had been overjoyed.

The baby screamed and finally, finally, the silence had been broken.

"Beat the egg well before adding it to the dry ingredients," Khairoon explained carefully over the speaker. Khadeejah tested the boiling mixture again. Now her fingertips stuck together for just a fraction of a second before pulling apart. The syrup was ready. She went outside and fetched her tray of salted dried lemon slices and slid them into the liquid. Then she added chilli powder and a drop of red food colouring that quickly erupted into a froth of bubbles. She waited for the lemons to bob to the surface in the boiling syrup and then removed the pot from the stove.

She heard the front door open and Aneesa popped her head into the kitchen.
"Ooh, *Nani*, syrup lemons," she cooed as she walked inside and fished a warm lemon slice from the pot. Summaya followed after her and opened a pot lid and sniffed the yellow rice. "Oh good *khurry kitchri*. I was feeling for that."

But it was now.
It was now that the silence was truly broken.

SUMMAYA

Summaya had maintained a sullen silence around boys. She hadn't liked them. Even when she was little she had stalked away when they shyly approached her. And as she grew older her contempt for them increased.

Their movements were aggressive. They were loud and they had a stupid sense of humour. They seemed like oversized monkeys to her. Hairy and vulgar. With a coarseness to their gait. She paid them little heed. She felt no emotion for them except perhaps a vague sense of irritation.

How they could be deemed attractive was beyond her. They were noisy, clumsy and widely proportioned. Their hair seemed to sprout from everywhere. The back of their hands. The insides of their nose. Over their big thighs. And they were so shallow. So easily drawn to pretty things like bright cars and stupid girls. Like dull crows that collected shiny trinkets in dirty nests. How could anyone *love* them?

That was, if Real-Love even existed.

Real-Love for her then, was like the whisper of rain in a dry earth. A fleeting notion, a myth, intangible; it did not exist. It was either lust or the comfort of being with someone you knew. Or both. People mistook it for Real-Love. A wild mistake. And if there was such a thing as Real-Love, if it *did* exist, Summaya wasn't sure she wanted to subject herself to the weakness of that kind of emotion. Or the irrationality of it. She watched women weep and walk through life with hollow eyes. Men who uttered quiet gasps at night as they dreamt of the one they lost. An emotion so racked with intensity that sense was abandoned; buried deep in a grave on a cold night.

Summaya hated those girls who allowed their men to swing an arm *around* their necks in a stranglehold. The weight alone made the girl look as if she was being dragged. Their kind of boyfriends wore tight T-shirts and drove low cars with loud engines. The kind of boys who would grow up into fat, bald men who liked their fish curries extra hot and their women extra submissive.

Then there were the nerds. The only type Summaya may have considered worthy of interest. They carried black leather satchels and held sharp pencils in their hands. They were studying to become engineers and actuaries. Summaya wondered to Laila

whether they might have nice bodies; small and slim beneath their white shirts. They were not loud. But they were so involved in their equations and they were so shy that sometimes Summaya couldn't bear them. The moment one of them stepped in front of her they would smile. Bright beaming smiles that struck Summaya through her forehead. They would stare dumbly at her.

If they were not too loud then they were too soft!

Sometimes she felt like pulling their sharp pencils out of their hands and whacking them repeatedly on their head in an attempt to make them more lively.

But then there was *him*.

The man-who-smiled-with-deep-secrets-in-his-eyes.

Faheem.

He did slap backs. And he did laugh loud. And he had a fair amount of hair on his hands.

But he didn't make lewd jokes. And he didn't suffocate girls. He had a Way of looking. A sort of tender, serious look mingled with yearning. Not the blunt dull look of other boys. She thought of him as a gazelle. An intense creature with deep secrets in his eyes. He could stare at a blank wall and make it look interesting. He became engrossed in whatever he did. He was a deeply passionate person. And that was what would lead to their downfall. Her downfall really.

Summaya fell in love with him the day she saw him walk out of the campus *jamaat khana* in a white *kurta* on a Friday afternoon. Tall with white material billowing around him. The blackest of black hair, all ruffled and soft. She doubted she would ever see anything more beautiful again. It was all in that look in his eyes.

And the blackest of black hair.

With Faheem it was all different. She wanted to talk to him. She wanted to know his secrets. The reason behind his gaze. What his body looked like underneath his clothes. She had never been interested in a man's body before. She had always considered it physically imposing, protruding and grotesque.

But she wanted to tuck the soft curls behind his ear. She wanted to press her palms against the softness of his stomach. She wanted to push her fingers into his chest. She

wanted to pinch his skin. His thighs. His upper arms. To feel the malleability of it between her fingertips. Brush her fingers over his Roman nose and between his lips. To run the inside of her palm lightly over his eyelashes.

The male body was different now. It was all body heat and skin and sensuality. It consumed her thoughts and made her tremble. She wanted to taste him.

She discovered intense feelings pulsing inside her that she never suspected she would ever have. It was what she felt for Laila, but more – much more. Sometimes she cried when she thought about him.

She didn't like being that weak. She shuffled uneasily when he sat in their group. She avoided eye contact with him. She could taste his smell on the tip of her tongue as they spoke.

And when she declared her love and they were married and they lay in bed together, in an attempt to possess him completely, she would sniff his wrists, the side of his neck, his waist. As if trying to capture everything of him.

He had smelled of nothing. A vague sort of nothing, tinged with soap and hair and a hint of tobacco. A trace of some universal domestic soap. The tobacco was baffling because he never smoked. But it was there, just at the end of his scent. A sharp hint that faded before it could be established.

Years later when she walked into a room or passed something that had a similar scent she would stand still. Very still. Inhale. And remember.

Things Gone By.

Memories tinged with the almost nothing smell.

One she would never smell again.

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah's life was defined by smells.

Sunlight soap. The heavy suffocation of dusty rolls of cloth. Brown *stoep* polish. Moth balls rolling hollowly on the floors of dark cupboards. The sweet stench in the swan-shaped perfume bottle on her mother's dressing table. Dull tobacco smoke on towels and sharp on fingers.

Some smells you could taste and some tastes you could smell.

Khadeejah said she couldn't taste anymore. She said that her taste buds were finished and that was why she added so much salt to her food. So when people asked her why her food was still so good, even though she couldn't taste properly, she replied that she could still smell. And that, she said, was almost as important as tasting.

Her daughter-in-law had scoffed at that. She had said that the two were very different senses and that there were many things that smelled differently from how they tasted. "Take paw-paws for example. They smell awful. Like vomit. But they don't taste bad. Or even fish. Smell and taste don't always correspond. What you're saying just doesn't make sense, aunty Khadeejah. Think about it." And because she said it so confidently, it sounded like she was right.

Khadeejah had never liked her daughter-in-law.
In fact, she detested the woman.

Her son and his wife, Ruqaya, had lived with Khadeejah during their first few years of marriage. Previously Khadeejah had not believed she could actually hate a person. She had felt extreme dislike for her mother-in-law, even Fareeda *khala,* but she did not *hate* them. She believed she was quite a tolerant woman. Hadn't she given permission to the neighbours on her right to build a second floor that blocked her view of the road? And didn't she pay Cynthia for the days she didn't come to work? (When she was clearly bluffing that yet another cousin had passed away.) She even forgave Mrs Sirpal from number fifteen for breaking her favourite piping machine. So yes, Khadeejah Bibi Ballim thought, she was a fairly tolerant woman.

But with that Ruqaya it was a different story. No one, Khadeejah believed, no one, could tolerate such behaviour. That one definitely had something wrong with her. Khadeejah could not for the life of her understand what her son saw in the woman. Naeem was a good boy. He was a good son who let Khadeejah sit in the front seat of his car. He would rub her legs when they were sore and he was the one who installed her DSTV. But she didn't know how he went wrong and chose such a woman for a wife. That woman must have made *jadoo* on him. How else could she explain it? How could he bear to look her? What with her dark eyes, long devil hair and her nails! Her nails wanted to make Khadeejah cry. Hadn't she warned her beloved Naeem, hadn't she warned him that long finger nails were filthy? That they were a sign of the devil? That *shaytaan* himself lived in those fingernails. Hadn't she drilled that into his head from the time he was a little boy?

Khadeejah brought up Naeem with all the love she could possibly give. She knew she and her husband were spoiling him too much, but she just couldn't help herself. When he was born she would wrap him up in vests and jerseys that she had lovingly knitted. When he had started school she had first tried to convince Haroon that the boy was still too small to endure the stress. She felt such pity in her heart to watch her dear boy wake up at seven o' clock for school. Such a small *arme* thing. Every morning she would wake him up and carry him to a large wooden chair that she had placed outside the bathroom, where she would prop him up. Then she would brush his teeth and mop his face with a wet cloth until he woke up enough to go to the toilet by himself. Khadeejah felt she owed the world to her son. Her son who had stopped the silence from seeping into the house.

Stopped the swampy silence from bursting through the bulging walls and drowning them.

Khadeejah's food had taken on a strange bitter tinge after Ruqaya came to live in her house. "I am telling you, she brought a bad *asr* with her," Khadeejah would whisper to her daughter. "Why else would my *mithi rotis* not be sweet? Tell me." Summaya had had to bite back a retort that maybe she had just forgotten to put in the sugar. She had learnt a long time ago that no one should ever question Khadeejah's culinary skills.

"Anyway, good it has less sugar, look how many she's eating. Hmph! And she didn't even help me. Tsk!"

It was true that Ruqaya hardly helped with the housework. She would mostly stand at the front door and watch the road through the gate. Khadeejah thought back to her own days when she had always strived to appease her mother-in-law. Hadn't her own mother taught her that she should always help her mother-in-law? (Even though that damn woman was beyond pleasing.) Hadn't she spent whole mornings rolling *rotis* for that ungrateful family? And Khadeejah felt she was nothing like her in-laws. She let Ruqaya sleep in late. She didn't ask her for help with washing her clothes. (Even though she had to wash Ruqaya's underwear. Her underwear!) She felt she was a fairly reasonable mother-in-law.

But everyone has their limits.

Khadeejah thought the stories she heard about mother and daughter-in-law hostility were exaggerated and ridiculous. She even laughed at the tales she heard on Radio Lotus about daughter-in-laws poisoning mother-in-laws and mother-in-laws chasing daughter-in-laws down the street with *belans* in their hands. But after living with Ruqaya, Khadeejah could easily imagine herself running after the woman with a rolling pin in one hand. Every day Khadeejah had to slog over hot pots while Ruqaya just stood and watched the street. Khadeejah hated that Ruqaya never made her bed. She hated that Ruqaya never cooked anything and she detested the fact that Ruqaya refused to cut her nails. But most of all she hated the way Naeem accepted all of this.

Why, when Naeem returned home from work, Ruqaya would just put one swipe lipstick, give one flutter eyelash and off they would go. To the movies, or for supper or wherever *rani* Ruqaya wanted to go, while she, Khadeejah, would stand in the kitchen and listen to the front door shut. Yes, yes, she hated that damn woman who stole her Naeem from her. Yes *stole*. That woman who would not even let her spend some time with her son (her own son!) after work.

One day Naeem had been very sick. He had stomach cramps that left him in bed moaning and sweating. The newly wed Ruqaya hadn't known what to do but wring her hands and pile him with blankets. It was Khadeejah who had removed all the blankets that were suffocating him and had washed him down with a cool cloth. It

was Khadeejah who had cooked clear chicken soup for him. It was Khadeejah who made the *hakeem's* mixture out of camphor and olive oil for him. It was Khadeejah.

When he was better he had thanked his mother and hugged Ruqaya for being there for him.

"They say you know someone truly loves you if they are there for you when you're sick," he had said to Ruqaya.

Khadeejah had thought then that the love thing really did make you blind.

And that's why Khadeejah worried about Naeem there in Faraway Australia. She was sure he was getting thinner every day. She knew if he ever got sick that woman wouldn't know what to do and her son would die from neglect. Oh, she could just picture it. Naeem lying in some wooden house in the middle of the desert with a cactus in the background (after all, Faraway Australia was all desert except for that water near the Opera House), sweating to death in a fever while his wife stood in the doorway and watched those balls of weed roll across the sand. And he would call out, "Ruqaya" in a raspy voice. And she would not turn to him. And then he would call "Ma!" and she, his beloved mother, would hear it in her house in Africa and she would not be able to help him. Oh, how Khadeejah wrung her hands at the thought!

The tension in Khadeejah's house was quite terrible while Naeem and Ruqaya had lived there. It had grown worse in *Ramadaan* – everything seemed hot and heavy in the house. The Taj Mahal painting seemed to drip down the wall and puddle on the carpet. The ornaments seemed to be sweating. The doilies wrinkled and puckered and flies buzzed incessantly against windows. There was a drone in the air and a dull quietness crept into Mayfair.

Khadeejah felt slower and older. She felt like she was talking and walking in slow motion. She had to prepare *iftaar*, set the table, make the almond milk, the pink rose essence milk, fry the *samoosas* and cook a main meal (because Naeem insisted he also wanted a curry) and make dessert. Occasionally, if she was feeling up to it, Ruqaya might make the dessert, but it was sure to be something simple and most likely out of a box (much to the horror of Khadeejah). Most of Ruqaya's *Ramadaan*

was spent lying on a sofa in a thin gown complaining of the heat. During that month Khadeejah felt extra exasperation with her daughter-in-law, but tried to restrain herself from strangling her because it was the month of patience and understanding. Khadeejah was greatly tested (more than others she felt) during *Ramadaan.*

But Khadeejah had gotten her revenge one day, through a surprising but welcome accident. Toward the end of the fasting month, Khadeejah had been invited to break her fast by her sister. Khadeejah had left early in the morning leaving Ruqaya looking dumbfounded. As stupid as Ruqaya may have pretended to be, she was a fairly clever woman. She knew Naeem liked his food and she knew she could not cook to save her life. When Khadeejah left she had experienced a moment of mild panic before phoning Naeem at work and asking him if they could go out for supper that night. Naeem (who was feeling moody from fasting) had said most certainly not and that *Ramadaan* was about being less extravagant and eating at home.

Khadeejah had heard later that Naeem had not been at all impressed with the burnt *samoosas* and box jelly his wife had served him after a hard day's work. Khadeejah couldn't help but chuckle when the next day Naeem had been curt with Ruqaya and had suggested she watch his mother and learn how to cook a decent meal.

The whole house breathed a sigh of relief when Naeem announced his intention to move to Faraway Australia.

SUMMAYA

Naeem had not been a bad brother. He had done all the basic things brothers should do for sisters. Picked her up from school. Helped her carry heavy things. Even fixed the broken lock on her cupboard door once.

But neither had he been a very good brother. He picked her up from school only because his mother asked him to. He helped her carry heavy things only because he felt he was expected to. He fixed the lock on her cupboard door only because she promised to repay him with the latest Madonna tape.

Not a good and not a bad brother. Just a so-so brother. As if he had been handed a position that he felt obliged to accept.

They used to have terrible fights when they were young. They would slam doors, throw ornaments at each other (much to their mother's dismay) and sometimes they would even come to blows with Summaya wrestling him on his back and Naeem trying to throw her off. She showed a wild abandon when she fought with him. She ducked nimbly, pulled at his hair and clawed wildly at his eyes. With a curious ache in her heart. She felt a sad exhilaration that made her look forward to fighting with him. She always won. Her lightness and agility working against his heavy and squat frame. But after some years they tired of fighting with one another. They reached an age when they could no longer easily release their anger in action. An age when physical fighting was deemed immature. Too raw and blunt for a sophisticated mind. So they did something worse – they used words. Bitter poisonous words that struck like arrows. Until they were so far apart they couldn't talk normally to one another again.

After his studies Naeem went to work in Cape Town and came down on certain weekends and public holidays. After four years he came back to live with his mother with a wife in tow. Summaya's mother's joy at having her son back was somewhat dimmed by this arrangement. It seemed she would never have him to herself.

Sometimes Summaya saw her father in him. An irretraceable streak that surfaced every now and then. Her mother never saw it, of course. But Summaya did. Meanness. Anger. It was in the little things. The Way his lips twisted when he told Khadeejah he

wanted *aloo ghost* that night. The Way he sat up straight and adjusted his jaw squarely. The Way he looked at Summaya. A you-are-hopeless-and-a-burden look. People like that don't even know they are doing it. They are surprised (even offended) if anyone points it out to them. If anyone told Naeem that he was anything like his father he would have vehemently denied it.

But he had the same nose. And the same eyes.

(And the same laugh in the throat.)

Summaya never missed him. She did not consider him a sibling. He was merely a person who had lived in the same house as her. Naeem had never approved of anything she did. He thought of her Ways as unfathomable and inappropriate for a woman. He thought she was 'loose' and insolent. When their father had died Naeem had tried to ground her and she had laughed in his face. He was like a staunch old man. He always kept his room tidy and he carried a handkerchief in his pocket. He thought there was a Right Way of doing things and a Wrong Way of doing things and that was that. There were rules and if you didn't follow them you were wrong. He often said aloud, and with his eyes, that she was a strange creature who needed taming. He said that Summaya thought she could do as she pleased. He said she needed to learn about Real-Life. He also said that what had happened to her was a result of her wayward actions. "There are rules in Real-Life, Summaya. If you don't obey them, there will be repercussions. You've taken life too easy. You can't go dancing about life the way you do. Now you are beginning to understand what Real-Life is all about." And Summaya had had a strong urge to jump on his back and slap him as she had done when she was ten.

She had wanted to say that if Real-Life was about living a mundane, impassionate life like his then she could do without it. Life to him was about paying bills, going to work, going to mosque, saving for the future, building a house and bringing up children the Right-Way.

But that wasn't what life should be about. Life should be about contemplation, about helping others, about understanding and gaining knowledge. Life should not be about rules, plans and Right-Ways and Wrong-Ways. Everyone's trains are different,

she had wanted to say. But she was scared she was wrong, so she swallowed her words and kept quiet.

(The thoughts squirmed down into her stomach and slept there like a caterpillar.)

She never thought of him as a brother. Perhaps once, when they were children and they lay together in the dark and spoke about their mother's long hours in the clothing factory and their father's surly moods (on the rare occasion that Naeem admitted his father's faults). And perhaps when they played marbles and hide-and-seek in the passage outside their flat. Or when they shared their *Eidee* money to buy an orange ice cream from the ice cream man in his white van. Maybe then she had thought of him as a brother. Because children do not hold grudges. Children forgive as easily as they get angry.

But then they come to the stuck-in-the-middle-age. And they become older and it takes a little longer for the anger to leave. Until it gathers there like a sieve collecting pieces of dirt. Oblong and ugly. And the dirt piles up and obstructs the throat and all they want to do is scream, *I love you, I forgive, let's forget everything!* But the sieve's clogged. And they try to swallow and then then say nothing.

And now Naeem was like some distant relative who carefully moved the salt shaker to the centre of the table and wore a tie that he wanted ironed every morning. And when he moved away he became an even more abstract idea. Like a story you didn't really believe until you saw it for yourself. Relatives that disappeared overseas were forgotten like sugar in tea. Only remembered through odd phone calls and photographs of them sitting at the beach with a straw hat.

When Naeem left (with his important bag and important documents) he had hugged his mother and cried a little. He had hugged Summaya too (but with one arm). He had stood there in the airport in his shirt and tie and looked important while his mother fussed with his collar. Her brother had said that there was nothing left in South Africa. That they were trying to revive a dead land. That things were gone Too Bad. That no matter what everyone said, the country was finished and they shouldn't harbour fancy images of hope. 'Fancy Images'. Summaya had tried to think what that was. Because she couldn't believe that Fancy Images stood for Hope. Hope for a

better country without crime and corruption. Because she had hope for South Africa. A small twisted hope in the pit of her stomach. But hope nonetheless.

"This country is going to the dogs!" Naeem had spat. "I'm not waiting to be another statistic. I need to keep my family safe." And Summaya had wondered what she and her mother were.

Her sister-in-law had agreed.

"It's just too awful. I can't take it anymore."

Summaya had wondered if she was talking about the crime, or affirmative action, or the lack of service delivery or the people or the heat or the Way the trees grew. Because her 'awful' seemed to encompass everything. But she didn't ask her sister-in-law what she meant, because she knew sometimes people didn't know. They just hoped if they said it convincingly enough others would believe it. Like politicians. And sometimes mothers.

Her sister-in-law didn't take her seriously. Which was a pity. Women who thought they were better than others did not take women who thought they were not, seriously. Especially ones that cut off all their hair, almost down to the scalp. Summaya still remembered Ruqaya's reaction when she had walked out of the room with her shorn head. Ruqaya had shrieked and dropped her teacup. And when Ruqaya had asked, why? But why? Summaya had said it was what she needed. She said she needed a change, to feel alive. Naeem had said this was exactly the sort of behaviour he was talking about. "You're a woman, Summaya! A woman! You can't do that sort of thing!" And Summaya had said but she just had. She called him narrow-minded and he called her 'off the path'. He seemed relieved not only to be leaving the country, but also to be leaving her.

The country was bad, Summaya thought. The country was a recovering patient that was using its illness as an excuse to behave recklessly. Like someone who's not fully drunk but uses the opportunity to behave wildly. A terrible indulgence. With no proper doctors.

When Naeem and Ruqaya had boarded the plane, Summaya had felt a little sad. Sad in her heart that she didn't feel more sadness that her brother was leaving. Sad

that their history of sitting in the dark and of playing marbles had not risen to overwhelm her.

Her mother had cried a lot. She had sobbed that she even missed Ruqaya.

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah kneaded her *roti* dough.

In and out. Up and down.

Soft like the skin on a baby's neck.

Her ring made dents inside the soft-as-a-baby's-neck dough.

Haroon had given her the wedding ring that had been passed down from generation to generation in his family. It was an ugly thing. Ornate and gaudy with the old style of raising the diamond so that it looked bigger than it actually was. She hated it. It reminded her of the quiet Way Haroon would grab her hands when she was serving food. He would wrap his knobbly long fingers around her wrist and hiss that the food was cold.

Once Mohamed *bhai*, their old neighbour from the flats, was there for lunch and saw Haroon do this. Mohamed *bhai* held a soft spot for Khadeejah and treated her like an aunt. He (Khadeejah wasn't sure if he was conscious of the act) had reached over and quietly unclasped Haroon's fingers from her wrist. Haroon had been outraged but he also seemed embarrassed that someone had witnessed his Way with his wife. Mohamed *bhai* had taken Khadeejah aside after the meal and told her if Haroon ever troubled her she should phone him.

Khadeejah thought he must have been a good boy when he was a baby. (One of the quiet ones with full eyes and the scent of coconut in their ears.) Haroon wasn't in the habit of beating her but there were a few times when his clothes smelled funny and his eyes held a strange glaze and then he would raise his hand easily. Afterward he would apologise and sometimes cry. But Khadeejah didn't tell Mohamed *bhai* this. She had thanked him and told him he was a good *beta.* She was fine, she had said.

(As fine as the dusty dresses in the roof that no one remembered but her.)

Khadeejah had considered selling the ring. When times had been bad. When food had run low.

But gold was gold, They said.

Don't ever let go of your gold.

Gold, Gold, Gold, a whispery round word with shiny edges.
People opened small purses with crumpled tissues and quietly showed others their long gold chains that they inherited from their mothers. Women wore thick gold bangles around their wrists and looked knowingly at one another when they heard the clink of it under their sleeves.
Gold was gold, They said.
Don't ever let go of your gold.

When things had improved financially in the house Khadeejah had told Haroon that they had to start saving money for their *Hajj*. Haroon, who suddenly showed an interest in Islamic knowledge, said it wasn't compulsory until they had a certain amount of wealth. But shouldn't they start saving, Khadeejah had asked him. Wasn't it a tenet of Islam? Wasn't it their duty to their creator? After all, she remembered singing with all her siblings, clad in their small white *burkahs*, at the *madressah* classes her father gave at the flat:
Once in a lifetime
For those who can
Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam…
Their clear voices rising like birds in the sky.

She had heard the most wondrous stories of this pilgrimage. The journey there, the sight of the Arabian Desert, the bustle of the cars in the city, the beauty of the quiet mountains. But mainly the closeness one felt to one's creator in that glorious city. That place where Prophets walked the Earth so many years ago.

So Khadeejah had saved a little bit of money every day in her pink jewellery case on her dressing table.

One day she had opened it to find it empty. Her shock had turned to anger when she discovered that Haroon had used the money to buy drills and stands for his coconut lamp business. It was the first time she had ever shouted at him. She told him that Hajj was *fardh* – compulsory. He had said it was an investment. That they would make much more money when his coconut lamp factory kicked off.

Now she saved her money in pairs of socks and under her mattress. Even though Haroon was gone she still had a fear of keeping her money in one place. She never trusted the banks with her money. She believed that no one could honestly keep your money for you. And wasn't that proved with so many bank scams happening every day? Khadeejah hid notes and coins and waited. To make that journey to the beloved land.

And after she made that pilgrimage she would use her money for teeth implants. Because, beyond the beloved lands, the thing Khadeejah Bibi Ballim would have liked the most – was a pair of teeth. Khadeejah detested her false teeth. She hated the hard wet plastic that she had to force into her lower jaw. She hated taking it out at night and letting it float in a glass of water while little pieces of dirt that had escaped her wash floated out from between the teeth. She cursed them for hampering her speech and eating. Khadeejah thought everyone could hear the small wet bubble that accompanied the letter G in her speech. She always told her grand-daughter to look after her teeth well. When Aneesa stayed over she would make sure she brushed and flossed every night. She even bought a small bottle of expensive calcium tablets from Clicks for her to take. "You don't want anything to happen to your teeth, Aneesa," Khadeejah would warn. "Teeth is important. *Maar* we don't know that until they gone. *Ya Rabb*, how I suffer! What and what those dentists did to our teeth! Tsk!"

Khadeejah blamed her teeth (or the lack thereof) on apartheid.

"If anyone complained about one tooth hurting, that old Mr Venter, he would just pull it out. Just like that! Pull. Pull. Pull." And she would proceed to re-enact the gruesome scene of Mr Venter yanking her poor tooth until it finally came out with a bloody plop. "You think those dentists cared about our teeth? Ha! You heard about what happened to *chotibabu*?" Khadeejah would ask. "*Chotibabu* was eating *sevya* one day and she had one bad pain in her tooth. So she went to that white dentist in Witbank. That *gora* just pulled the sore tooth out. And when he gave it to her, *chotibabu* saw one *elachi* seed stuck inside it. Poor *chotibabu.* She lost a good tooth like that. Tsk!" Everyone would roar with laughter. And Khadeejah would smile but her hand would go up to her cheek, as if she were remembering her lost teeth.

The older one got, the more one remembered Things Lost, thought Khadeejah as she began frying the *rotis* on the stove. No one really pondered Things Gained. The mind always held onto things that had been there. Objects like a Barbie doll with a hairbrush stuck in her hair or a pen with *Welcome to Gold Reef City* down its side. Clothing like a favourite green scarf or a beige pair of pants with a small slit at the side. Certain people. Special relationships. Habits. Little incidents.

No wonder the head felt heavy at times! The mind held too many things. She lifted a *roti* off the frying pan with her spatula and glanced down at the huge ring on her finger.

Even memories of dead people who didn't matter anymore.

ANEESA

Aneesa lay on her stomach on her holiday bed in her *madressah* cloak with her bare legs swinging immodestly behind her. It was raining again. One of those cold spells that lingered in the air. The rain hit the roof tiles creating a noisy clatter throughout the house that exaggerated the rainfall outside.

The *dhania* man would be happy, thought Aneesa. He loved all types of rain, but especially the steady soaking type.

No one knew what his real name was. It could have been Rueben. Or Joseph – he had a very Joseph looking face. Aneesa imagined he must have been a smart-looking man with Goals and Achievements before he became the *dhania* man. But now he was something smaller – a bit sad in his crumpled anorak as he wiped the bottoms of his gumboots at the door.

But at times it seemed he never had a name. That he was always the *dhania* man. Quiet. Unassuming. Forever waiting at the door to sell *Nani* his wet packets of coriander. He had a rich soil smell on him; like the earth after rain. He was a wet man with watery eyes and muddy footprints. Sometimes he spoke to Aneesa in a deep raspy voice. He would tell her about plants and how they grew and which rains were important. Then his eyes would shine with deep plant-like secrets and he wouldn't look so small anymore.

The rain began to slow down. Outside the room she heard *Nani* talking to Fareeda *khala*, who had come to visit. There was the sound of teaspoons and cups. Snippets of conversation came through the ajar door. Fareeda *khala's* loud, sudden laugh. A floorboard creaked. Then there was the rumble of the vegetable truck as it made its way into the front driveway.

Aneesa poked her head into the passage and yelled, "Vegetable man's here, *Nani*."

Aneesa heard her grandmother complain that he was early and then hurry to fetch her brown washing dish. Aneesa wandered into the sitting room hoping to find some spinach *bhajias* to eat. She doubted there would be any though. *Nani* only fried those for special people like Overseas-Visitors. When they had Overseas-Visitors they

would all dress in their best and clean the house. Everyone would say 'excuse me' and 'worter' and they would not say *'neh?'* after everything (because Overseas-People did not say *neh*? *Neh* was not a word in the Oxford English dictionary).

Everyone that is, except her mother, who insisted that it was a stupid custom that gave a wrong impression to their family from other countries. *Nani* even insisted they dress smartly when uncle Naeem and his family came to stay over. Aneesa never liked her small cousin who spoke with a strange accent and looked at *Nani's* house with an odd expression. Her Overseas-Cousin was a strange boy. He didn't like *achar* and he didn't drink water from the tap. And *Nani* gave him too much attention (even though he didn't like her *achar* and had said so to her face). And he didn't like coming out to play with her in the garden because he said his mother said it wasn't safe outside. When Aneesa had told her mother this, she had snorted and laughed.

There were no *bhajias*. When Aneesa walked into the sitting room Fareeda *khala* was pushing her fat fingers into the sides of the couch. When she heard Aneesa enter, she stopped what she was doing and looked slightly alarmed. Then realising it was only Aneesa she positively beamed.

"A*salaamwa'alaikum* Aneesa! What a nice surprise!" She saw Aneesa's curious eyes on her hands which were still firmly embedded in the crevice of the sofa. She yanked it out. "I was just looking for my glasses. Don't know what happened to them."

"*Wa'alaikumsalaam* Fareeda *khala*," Aneesa replied warily. She was not sure how she felt about this lady with fat cheeks that drooped like a baby's wet napkin. She got the overall feeling that *Nani* wasn't so fond of her even though she occasionally entertained her. "I think that's your glasses there," Aneesa said and pointed to a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles sitting on the coffee table.

"Oh yes. I'm so forgetful. And without them I couldn't even see where I put them. Well, that's what happens when you get old, *neh*? Everything starts packing up." And she put on her sorrowful face and sighed. "Where's your mother? Coming home soon?"

"No – she's at work. She picks me up after she's finished."

"*Acha.* Then we have plenty time together!"

Aneesa thought she looked almost delighted.

"So how's the school *beti*? Don't stand so far away from me. How! Come sit by me." And she patted the space next to her ample bottom on the couch as Aneesa made her way toward her.

Aneesa looked at Fareeda *khala's* feet which were small and fat. Flesh bulged between two strips of Velcro across her shoes. They were absurdly small for her frame.

"School is okay, Fareeda *khala*."

"Very good. The school is very important. So tell me," she lowered her voice conspiratorially, "you have a boyfriend?"

"Huh? No."

"You can tell me. I won't tell no one"

"No, I don't."

"I'm just asking. You know these days the children move so fast. You never know anything!" And she laughed a little irritating laugh. Like a hen with an unclear throat.

Aneesa made to get up and go but Fareeda *khala* shot out a plump hand and stopped her.

"How, where you going? Stay and give me company. It's rude to leave your visitors alone, you know. Your mother never teach you manners?" And she laughed but her eyes were sharp.

So Aneesa stayed because the aunty told her to stay. And you had to listen to aunties when they told you something. Especially if you were trying to prove that your mother had taught you manners.

Fareeda *khala* shifted her bottom so that she was facing Aneesa. "How's your mother, Aneesa?"

Her voice betrayed something that made Aneesa look into her eyes suddenly. There was a deep shine in them. And Aneesa thought, so this is what it means to read eyes.

And all of a sudden Aneesa knew why Fareeda *khala* was suddenly interested in talking to her. Why she wanted her to stay. Because Fareeda *khala knew*. About the Dark Days. And she wanted Aneesa to ask her. Because she couldn't bring it up on her own.

"Fareeda *khala*?"

"Yes?"

And when Aneesa paused, Fareeda *khala* leaned forward so that Aneesa could see a strong black hair growing out of her chin. And her eyes said yes-yes-yes-ask-me.

"What happened to my father?"

Fareeda *khala* almost gave her self away and smiled. But she hid it with her concerned eyebrows. She sat back. "Well, what do you know?"

"I know that he's alive," Aneesa answered confidently.

"You do?" Fareeda *khala* was surprised. She was quite sure that Khadeejah had said they had told the child that he was dead.

"Yes. They say he drowned. But I know he didn't."

"Hmm." Fareeda *khala* didn't agree or disagree. She merely hmmed and looked at her nails. Waiting. Savouring the moment like a lion circling its prey.

"Fareeda *khala,* please tell me what happened."

"*Beti*. I don't know if I should. They kept it a secret for a reason." And she tried to look concerned and made it seem as if she really wasn't sure about revealing the information.

"Please! Tell me!"

"Okay, but you must promise not to tell anyone what I tell you. Otherwise everyone will be very angry. Okay? You promise?"

"Yes! Yes! I promise."

"And I'm only telling you because you already know he's alive. And I don't think its right that little girls must suffer so much to know what happened to their fathers." And poor Aneesa had nearly cried. Finally, finally, someone understood what she was going through.

"But Aneesa *beti*, it's not a nice story. And it might make you more upset. But I think you old enough to know. And it's better to know the truth I always say. But you can't tell anyone. You promised."

"Yes, yes. I know," said Aneesa, eager. Not caring whether it was a sad story. The truth was the main thing. That elusive truth. That's all she wanted.

Fareeda *khala* looked carefully into the passage. She puffed herself up a bit. This was how they did it in the soap operas. They prolonged the moment.

It was a pity there was no music.

Fareeda *khala* sat forward. “It was your mother. Your mother found someone else to love.”

“What?”

“Your mother found someone else. She had a… well, they call it an affair. And your father found out. And he left her. He packed up his things and he left her – You’ll.”

“No!” It was a shocked no. A small unbelievable no that clung to the walls and slid down with a wet squeak.

“Yes.” It was a heavy yes. A fat yes. A gloating yes that suffocated the no and squashed it with its full rear.

“He left and your mother got sick. She couldn’t believe what she did. She got very sick in fact. Stopped eating altogether. Couldn’t even look at you, let alone look after you. Dark Days those were for your family. But what to do, the damage was done. He went away and never came back.”

Aneesa stared at her. “It can’t be.”

“*Arre beti*. I can’t lie about this. Everyone knows the story. We all were quite shocked – because your mother was *very* in love with your father. We couldn’t understand how it happened. But she was the wrong one. And you poor thing is just a – a victim.” She tried to pet Aneesa’a head, but Aneesa moved, stood up quickly.

“It’s not true.”

“Sit down darling. Nothing is *your* fault.”

Aneesa stood there. The swirl in her head and the carpet made her feel nauseous.

She felt old. A furious anger tinged with sadness overcame her. Like flames licking a block of ice.

“What was his name, Fareeda *khala*?”

“His name? Your father?”

“Yes.”

“Faheem. Your father’s name is Faheem.”

Not was. Is.

There was a man somewhere out there. Walking around in the hustle and bustle of the streets. Maybe she had even passed him one day. Maybe he had even brushed against her.

Not a Was man. An Is man.

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah hurried outside into her driveway with her bucket in tow.

Thank God she had made it in time. The vegetable man, also known as Sagren, was still sitting inside his truck. Recently he had taken to the unusual habit of peeing on her marigolds on the side of her driveway before he knocked at her door. And while Khadeejah chose the reddest apples and the crispiest heads of lettuce from boxes in the back of the truck, she could smell marigolds and urine rising from the earth behind her. She supposed being on the road most of the day made it difficult for him to find a proper place to empty his bladder. She didn't know how to deal with the embarrassing situation besides to hurry there early before he could do anything in the driveway. So far it seemed to be working, but he always held a slightly strained expression on his face as he served her. She would have offered him the use of the toilet, but that would have been a direct acknowledgement of what he had done in her driveway. And since he was nearly her age, she didn't want to embarrass him. Khadeejah wiped the doorbell clean each time after he left.

The rain had stopped now and the sun suddenly came out.

"Hello, Sagren. *Hoe gaan dit met jou*?" Khadeejah asked as she came up to the truck.

Sagren put down the newspaper that he was reading and opened the door. He had resigned himself to the fact that these days Khadeejah was always ready on time for him. He had found a quiet lane not far from here to do his job, although he was hoping to use the town library toilets if he could make it there in time.

Sagren was a good man. His wife had called him a 'moderate man'. He didn't eat too much and he didn't ask for too much in life. He always liked his fish curry and rice on Thursdays and he always wore the same clothing to work every day. He wore a khaki fisherman's hat on his head and a pair of beige shorts that sat above his knobbly brown knees. He resembled a dry stick insect. If he had been in India he would have probably been a *dhobi* enjoying the sun on his back as he scrubbed great piles of cloth on a flat stone. But if you asked Sagren, he would have said that, had he been given the opportunity in the old South Africa, he would have made an excellent lawyer. After all, he reasoned, he liked reading the newspaper and he smoked a pipe.

But he had had to take over the reins of his father's business. Instead of selling vegetables at his father's stall in the market he took a loan and bought a truck so that he could travel and sell his goods to a larger customer base. A move which surprised his family and made his lower caste father, who had come to South Africa with the indentured labourers, very proud. He boasted to all the neighbours that his son meant business. Imagine, he said, my son was so clever to get a loan to buy a truck and actually *take the vegetables to the customer*. My son is going places, he had chuckled to the people.

But Sagren was a moderate man. And he felt the money the truck brought in was sufficient for him and his family. His wife had resigned herself to living a moderate life in a moderate house with a moderate fridge that sometimes broke and was fixed again. The week before she died from the cancer in her stomach, he had bought her a bunch of bright pink orchids. He had stood shyly by the hospital door with them until she had noticed him. She had cried and said she was sorry for calling him a moderate man.

"I'm fine. Just fine," Sagren said as he pulled off his fisherman's hat and walked up to her.

He rubbed his hands together. "So what will it be, Khadeejah Bibi? I got some nice big juicy green peppers. Fresh from the farm. Bestofthebest." Sagren had a Way of shooting out information. It had started when his father had been teaching him about the family business and had shown him how to make a convincing pitch. His father had brought the talent of the persuasive Indian shopkeeper with him from the motherland. He spoke to his customers with conviction and strength in polite broken English.

"Only the *best*. Only the best for the madam. Say it like me, *beta*." Sagren would practise at night, opening his mouth and pronouncing each letter carefully. "O-n-l-y t-h-e b-e-s-t. F-r-e-s-h-a-n-d-c-r-i-s-p-y." As a result Sagren learnt to speak too strongly and he usually barked out words which sometimes made customers think he was shouting at them. But those, like Khadeejah, who understood him, knew he meant well.

"*Ja*, I need some, but I'm going to fight with you first. Why you gave me so bad mangoes last time? So hard and bitter. And you told me they nice," complained Khadeejah as she sat her dish on the floor and began inspecting a bunch of mint. "I nearly broke my thumbs cutting those things!"

"Oh, I didn't know, Khadeejah Bibi. HonestoGod. Those farmers told me it was nice. Sometimes they lie. I wouldn't have sold it to you if I knew they were so bad. You're my good customer." He hooked a leg on the foot of his vehicle and climbed up to the roof. At the top he bent down and shuffled through a few boxes before holding up a watermelon. "Look here, I got nice watermelon if you want. Very sweet. I had some myself."

"No, no," said Khadeejah as she picked up a plastic packet of green chillies. "How much for this?"

He put the watermelon down slowly. "Two rand. And you saw the cucumber. Very nice. Very good price." He climbed down. "Even strawberries. They in season now."

"No, I don't need them, Sagren. What you think, I got so much money to buy strawberries? Just give me one kilo onions. Nice ones, *neh*?"

"Surenoproblem," Sagren replied. He pulled out the ancient scales he used to weigh vegetables. As he busied himself with this, Colleen from next door popped by with a Checkers packet in her hand.

"Oh, good I caught you, uncle Sagren. I need some potatoes. You have good ones?"

"Good, verygood." He nodded his head. "I was just telling Khadeejah Bibi here, we got nice strawberries. Nice to make strawberries and cream," he added.

"Ooh, no." Coleen put a hand to her ample stomach that layered itself through her tight top. "I can't afford to eat anything rich. Just look at how fat I'm gone."

"*Ja*, Coleen, I was going to tell you, you putting on too much weight, man. How you going to find a nice husband if you fat?" Khadeejah asked.

Sagren weighed the onions and poured them into the bottom of Khadeejah's bucket. He left the women to their chat and went back to reading his newspaper. It was all part of the job description. Waiting, letting the customers chat. Putting them in an affable mood to buy more vegetables.

"So Colleen, howsit going with you? Long time I never see you outside."

"*Agh* man, aunty, I'm so busy. *Oupa's* sick. His chest is troubling him for few days now." She picked up an orange and threw it in her packet. "You know how it goes. Up and down. Plus," And she lowered her voice, "We heard Achmet knows we in Jo'burg. So *oupa's* worried."

"And you, Colleen, you not worried?"

Colleen looked around and then motioned for Khadeejah to come closer. She pulled open her small handbag for Khadeejah to look into. Laying at the bottom, amongst old sweet wrappers and squashed tissues, was a small gun. Nestled quietly like a baby mouse that shouldn't be disturbed. Colleen closed her bag quickly. "I got it from a Nigerian *ou* for quite cheap." She looked at Khadeejah's worried face. "Nobody can say I can't protect my family," she said fiercely.

"You can't carry that around with you everywhere, Colleen!" Khadeejah complained.

"Why not?"

Khadeejah agitatedly picked up some good apples and then threw them back in their box and began rifling through a pile of tomatoes. "Because it's – it's dangerous."

She couldn't explain to Colleen how she felt about seeing that gun sitting there. Quietly. Dangerously. Its eyes (blood speckled) watching everything each time the bag opened. Khadeejah feared the glint of its fat barrel and the heaviness of its cold metal. She remembered Haroon's gun; he kept it hidden on the top shelf of the blanket cupboard. Now and then he would take it out to wipe it and cock it. Sometimes she would catch him looking at it lovingly. Once in jest he had pointed it at her and laughed when she had cowered. Khadeejah had detested it – an instrument of so much pain and fear. The suicide confirmed her fears and intensified them to such a level that even toy guns made her fidgety. Even now in the sun, she shivered.

"It's okay, aunty K. I know how to use it."

"It's not safe to carry it around, Colleen! And it's not nice." Khadeejah looked away and added, "It's just not nice!"

Sagren returned to the two women. He sensed that Khadeejah was upset from the way she was tossing good tomatoes to one side.

Time for intervention.

"Did you'll hear about how I was nearly hijacked?"
"No! Oh my God, uncle. Were you hurt?" Colleen said, shocked.
"No, I wasn't, thanks to God. I was at Witbank and I was just finishing picking up some cauliflowers there. I was jumping back inside my truck when this man comes by my window. I didn't even see him. Don't know where he came from. He tells me to get out and he points a gun by my window." Khadeejah and Colleen gasped as he continued. "I tell you'll I was so scared. I never see a gun in my life and now I must see it for the first time in my face. But you know, I said God help me, but I can't lose this truck. Thistruckismylife. I just can't give it up. What will I do for money? My children are gone overseas. No one will help me besides me. So I tellyouwhatIdid. I made like I was jumping out the car. Then I took my car door I was opening and bang! I hit it in his chest. I don't know where I got the strength or the idea from. It just happened! Aye, that guy just went backward and before you know it I was gone! I didn't even close the door. He shot after me, you know." And Sagren led them to the back of his truck to show them where the bullet had grazed the rear.
"Oh my God, uncle Sagren. Did you tell the police?"
"I told them. But not like they can do anything. That fellow ran away. I was so scared after that, I couldn't work the whole week. Now I always check there's no suspicious characters around when I jump out. It's just not safe today."
"You must go live with your children in Ireland, uncle. That is safest," Colleen said.
"*Ja,* but – " And he mumbled something about children and put his hands in his pocket and looked down the street.
"*Ja*. Well," Khadeejah said quickly to break the silent expectancy that was building. "Things are just not safe these days." She glanced down her road. It was hard to feel scared in your own street on a sunny day with people around you.

But if you did.

If you did.

Then that must be the most fearful feeling of all.

SUMMAYA

Summaya sat at her desk and typed an email to a client. It was a 'thank you for showing interest' letter. She wrote brisk polite replies to potential clients until she knew whether they were serious or whether they were just gathering prices to compare with other travel agencies.

When anyone asked the young Summaya what she wanted to be when she grew up she would say, lawyer or writer or marine biologist. Or sometimes, dentist, (because teeth were important, her mother kept saying). She would have never said a travel agent in an office over Ming Lee's China Garden. And if someone had then taken her to the future to show her herself sitting at a little desk overlooking the busy street with its food smells and car noises with the telephone ringing and the papers piling next to her, she would have said, "An office job? That can't be me! I would have *never* taken an office job!"

But things have a Funny Way of turning out. Once she had been an ambitious person. With a Mind Of Her Own. With an opinion. Once she had been editor of the school paper and netball captain. Once she had proposed striking outside the dean's office for students who were not allowed to write exams because of outstanding fees. Because once she had said that she wanted to be an Active Social Humanitarian. She knew about politics and treaties and how third world countries were suffering at the hands of the rich. She planned to write articles and put an end to the ridiculous caste system in Muslim Indian South African societies… Memons indeed!

But things have a Funny Way of turning out. Sometimes all it took was a little mistake. And Things you never expected happened. And it wasn't what you *ever* planned for. The change affects you deeply; it shocks your very core. Your faith wavers. You become afraid of the future because you're suddenly *not in control*. Eventually you become quiet and accept the change. You let it seep into your life. Until you forget that this is not the way you wanted things to Be and start believing that this is the way it always was and always will be.

Until one day you take a moment to look at the pile of papers next to you, hear the telephone ringing, look at the fish shop on the road below. Until you come to a single moment when everything stops.

The sounds. The smells. The people.

And you stop breathing and say out aloud in a clear voice:

Who am I? *What am I doing here*?

And then the telephone rings and you take a deep breath and you carry on typing your email and the papers pile up and the man in the fish shop wraps up a hake for a customer.

And you forget.

That you didn't really want to be in a travel agency. That it wasn't even what you studied. That you had just taken the first job you had found in the paper after he left. You forgot those things. You forgot those things because you became so involved in writing emails and making phone calls.

But mainly, you forgot because you wanted to forget. Nobody wants to acknowledge that they are not living the life they wanted.

Everything had changed After.

She should have known better. She *had* known better. Once. But once was a long time ago. Once when she had known:

Everyone has a secret.

Everyone is hiding something. Hiding thoughts in their mind. Hiding smiles behind their hands. Hiding fear in their laughs. Hiding people in their backseats.

Everyone has a secret.

Everyone is scared of being discovered. The child with the smashed tea cup on the floor shivers when she hears someone approach. She pushes the mess behind an unused cupboard with the toe of her shoe. She believes no one will ever find it.

But cups are counted, shards get left behind, cupboards are moved. Light falls on everything, whether instantly or years later.

Married men meet their mistresses secretly on the terraces of expensive, quiet restaurants. They never take their wives there. They choose big white umbrellas to sit under with sunglasses and a newspaper to hide behind. They prefer the business section of the *Times*. They sip smooth cocktails whilst glancing at their watches. They fool themselves that no one will come to know.

Everyone comes to know.

They make phone calls in hushed voices in the middle of the night from their bathrooms. Their whispers bounce off the cold tiles. They bluff themselves that they are in love.

A secret love always sounds more romantic. The secrecy of it leads them to take long drives to far-out beaches. They are the men you see racing along deserted beach roads with a hint of a smile visible through their tinted panes. They are skilled at spotting a familiar face from a distance, tipping the brim of their sunhats low, grabbing a hand and making their way to the nearest exit.

They know where all the exits are.

The women too.

They know how to tie their ponytails in untidy knots so that no one will recognise them from behind. They wear hats with wide brims and change the colour of their nail polish. They lie with incredible skill.

But still, somehow, the women are easier to identify. Nervous energy.

A woman having an affair always wears something eye-catching. She can't help it really. A bright green scarf around her neck, perhaps a red bag or a pair of black satin pumps. Her excitement is unconsciously revealed in an extravagant accessory. A woman is better at keeping these secrets, but if you know how to look, she always gives herself away. Always.

Men don't mean it, of course: affairs. They're just stupid that way. The allure of an ankle, a naughty smile, the awareness of a woman's shifting thighs on the seat next to his at a meeting. Men are fickle. Most of the time they don't mean to hurt anyone. They just don't think.

Of course they regret it. When the woman begins to get clingy, when the passion begins to fade, when the secret's out. Of course they do. The ones that don't are the smug ones that drink rich coffee in the morning and like their eggs a tad underdone. The usual ones, however, are honestly shocked at their actions. They are ashamed and they spend nights rubbing a palm to the sandpaper of their cheeks as they wonder how they got themselves into such a mess.

The women?

Not so much.

Women think a lot. They plan. They regret very little, and those that honestly do are the ones to be worried about. Those are the ones that will confuse you, that will madden you. The ones that you will fall deeply in love with and who will kill all the happiness in your life.

You can hate the bitches.

You can't hate the ones that already hate themselves.

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah waited in a queue at Best Spice with her trolley of *ghee* buckets and packets of salt. She had begrudgingly added the overpriced *ghee* to her cart at the last minute. Even now, she frowned at the buckets and hoped Mr Haripersad would notice. Sometimes when she complained enough (and stooped a little lower), he would give her a discount. The owner who had recently moved from India to South Africa had opened his new and dusty little store with shelves packed high with spices, lentils and rice imported from India. A fine film of dust covered the shelves and floated in the air, where it mingled with Kashmiri chilli powder (which wasn't from Kashmir).

Khadeejah leaned forward to see why the line was taking so long to move. Ahead of her stood a white woman with two buckets of *ghee* under her arms. White people were becoming a common sight at these small Indian stores which offered a number of obscure ingredients (for their culinary experiments with Indian curries and Mexican salsas) at better prices than the big stores. The woman, noticing Khadeejah, turned to her and smiled. "They're taking a mighty long time, hey?"

Khadeejah tried smiling back at her, mumbled a reply and proceeded to fidget with a sticker on the handle of her trolley.

Because sometimes she was funny. (A funny little *Nani* who said black-people-only-know-how-to-dance.)

Khadeejah was wary of white people.

She was wary of the way they moved their hands. Always in extremes; gracefully or bluntly.

In her father's shop, when the *boere* came to buy things like light bulbs or cans of mixed fruit jam, they would point with their stubby fingers and speak to her slowly. "I –would-like-a-pocket-of-onions. O-n-i-o-n-s." and move their hands slowly to make the shape of an onion. As if her age somehow added to her racial incompetence. Their nails were short with a thin layer of earth dug into the rim.

Then there were the English whites. They had long fingers which would be used to elegantly explain a story. Khadeejah would stand next to the bags of *mielie meal* in a

dark corner of the shop and watch their hands. “Imagine that! I was horrified.” And their fingers would do a subtle bending along with the story. The long-fingered women from Johannesburg had long nails that were painted bright pink. Khadeejah hadn’t minded *those* long nails too much because she heard they were fake. It showed that those women had some sense if they couldn’t bear to grow their nails themselves.

And so she was wary of their hand movements. The *boere* hands with their small blunt gestures and the English long-fingered ones with their elegant movements.

Not the crude, fast hand language of her people. “Do you want some *bhaji*, aunty?” and a rough wave in the air. “Ey, what you looking at?” And a swing with a palm. Her people were hand people. They used their hands to pray with, eat with, mix food with. To decorate with henna before they married. To adorn with bangles. They used their fingers to rub oil in their hair, to rub soap into their armpits and to clean inside their ears.

But it was not just the white people’s hands that troubled her. It was the way they just *were.*

With her own people, she had all the answers. She could tell them what colour fried *samoosas* should be, how to rid a baby of wind and why you shouldn’t plant *pudhina* in winter. With *them*, however, she was tongue tied. She didn’t know anything that would help them. She became stupid. A quiet old Indian woman with rough thumb pads and an empty mouth.

They embarrassed her. She never knew where to look when they were around. She felt embarrassed for being embarrassed but she couldn’t control it. All that exposed flesh. Arms, legs and sometimes stomachs. She found thighs the most offensive. White and large like beached whales. How could they bear showing them out in public? Where did one look without feeling embarrassed? Even their eyes were so open. Brightly coloured jewels. She felt as if she were looking directly into some intimate part of their soul. Especially if they smiled at her. Then it just became uncomfortable. Smiling slit jewels open up the soul even more. So she looked away. Never spoke directly to them.

Even their coloured hair unsettled her. Sometimes the same colour as their face. Bland faces. With little veins working beneath the translucent skin.

She had been uneasy when Summaya brought her white friends home. Their whiteness seemed to stand out so much in her sitting room that Khadeejah had to look away. She cleaned her house extra well when she knew they were coming over. She polished her ornaments until the trophies would be gleaming globes and she used Mr Min on the glass windows so that years later Summaya's friends would always associate the smell of citrus with her house. Khadeejah served lemonade with little lemon slices floating in them and cupcakes with icing. And if they stayed over for lunch she wouldn't put chillies in the food. Her hearing also seemed to diminish slightly when they arrived. And then she would cock her head slightly and smile shyly, hoping that they wouldn't notice that she hadn't heard what they had said to her.

One day she had watched Summaya and her friend, Amy sit and talk outside the house. She watched as Amy asked a question accompanied by the deft hand movements she knew so well. But what scared her was the way Summaya had replied with small deft gestures of her own.

But most of all white people made her nervous.
They made her itch around her wrists.

Like husbands, there had been good ones and bad ones. She remembered mostly the bad ones. The ones that had chased her sister and her down Klein Street with their dogs. For fun. The ones that called them coelies. It wasn't so much the word. But it was the way it was said. With a pompous sort of sneer smeared across the lips. "*Coelie, kom hier*." She remembered feeling like nothing. Like a little piece of nothing that was forgotten lying between the grass on some field that had no name.

Why, even Piet from the van der Lindes' farm who came to the shop to buy bulk groceries every Saturday, didn't look at her. When they were six they used to play together outside the flats while her father served his mother inside the shop. They played marbles and charms. Barefoot and in overalls. They sat on the pavement and ate slap chips with tomato sauce from Baboo's café. But after a few months his mother began to call him sharply and in a stern quiet voice told him to wait in the *bakkie*. Eventually Piet didn't have to be called back anymore; he had learnt to wait in

the car. He even stopped watching enviously from the car window as she played charms on the pavement. Some years later when she was twelve and served him in the shop, she dared to glance in his eyes for a second. A quick peek into the jewelled soul. He had avoided her gaze and asked her for a packet of ten inch nails. *Mevrou* van der Linde called her a good coelie and had given her a toffee.

Perhaps the toffee made her feel less guilty.

Age, it seemed, brought out the colour of people's skins. Like bananas. That ripen from the usual dull greens into deep yellows, reds or browns. They were made to notice it all, the children of old Africa.

Brown. White. Black.

Fair. Dark. Medium.

Coelies. Kaffirs.

Words were just words, right?

(Even sneer-painted words?)

Her father always told them that no one was better than the other person. He said that Islam said every person was equal. She wanted to believe him but it was hard to do when all the evidence around you proved otherwise. Signs that read "whites only", white people who called her coelie (and who she *let* call her coelie). Why even her father had a separate entrance for black people. He said it was because the *wit mense* wouldn't come into his shop if he didn't.

But all this led to Khadeejah believing that she was indeed far below the white race. She could feel it in the air when they accidentally brushed against her or spoke to her. They were better than her. She still remembered walking into a huge *boer* in the supermarket. He had turned to look at her; skinny legged Indian. "*Kan jy nie sien waar jy loop nie*?" and when she had shaken her head slightly he had 'hmphed' in such a way that the fat around his neck had shuddered. He held her with his bright blue eyes behind his busy eyebrows. She later came to learn that the look was called contempt. She had heard Summaya once say that people who thought they were better than you looked at you with contempt. Khadeejah had stored the word in her little

cache of Collected Words. Difficult English words that described what she couldn't express. Contempt. Discrimination. Infatuation. And that lovely sounding 'Necessary'.

She associated white people with a regal sort of personality. A cleanliness that God had chosen to scrub into their skin. Of course, she knew it was wrong to think this and she knew people would tell her it was nonsense, so she didn't say anything.

But it came out in subtle ways. In pitchers of lemonade with floating lemons and small stutters of the tongue.

After paying Khadeejah pushed her trolley outside the store. She deliberately looked away from the white woman as she passed her.

Indian was still Indian, she thought, as she walked out of the store.

SUMMAYA

Summaya had been to India once.

Once had been enough. She felt she had learnt enough about her native culture on that month-long trip. The trip had jarred her. Made her feel incomplete as a human being. And at the same time made her feel more whole than she had ever felt.

Uncle Farouk, Khadeejah's younger brother, had paid partly for their trip and had acted as their *mahram*. It would have been a touching gesture if it weren't for the fact that he constantly made reference to his favour. Before the trip he would pat Summaya on her head and say, "Aren't you glad I'm taking you and your mother to India?" and after the trip he would pat Summaya on her head and say, "Aren't you glad I took you and your mother to India?"

Summaya had not been entirely grateful. Uncle Farouk was a nice man, but he was the type of nice that patted your head and asked you how school was. He was not the type who gave free plane tickets away. Khadeejah's sisters said there had to be another reason. Some of the family had said uncle Farouk had not given her mother (and the other sisters) their full share of inheritance from their father's property in India. Property issues became a hush-hush affair in their family with everyone whispering under their breath that they were sure they did not receive their full share of their inheritance. But what could they do? The sisters were scared of uncle Farook – with his twitchy eyes and loud voice and occasional deep brotherly love. The sisters huddled together and talked late into the night and sometimes they said they would say something to him. But they didn't.

Her mother had been thrilled. She had grabbed the nineteen year old Summaya's wrists and had described the visual delights of India with its colourful material, beautiful jewellery and piles of *ghararas* that they could buy for her future wedding. "The *ghararas,* Summaya! The *ghararas*! My mother said they only use pure silk in them. Just imagine! Not that mixed *katchra* they give us here. And the work! *Arre!* The bead work is out of this world! Nowhere you'll get like how you get in India! *Aur sub bohoth sastha hai.* We must get at least two *ghararas* for your *mendhi* so we can choose between a dark red or a light red. I heard even orange is in fashion.

Remember Najma *khala's* daughter wore that one for her *mendhi*? But, hmph! Who wears orange for a *mendhi*, tell me?"

"Ma, you do know I don't even have anybody to marry yet? That I don't even *want* to marry now."

"Hm," said Khadeejah whose head was still filled with thoughts of Summaya being the family envy in a red beaded *gharara* or a purple sequinned *punjabi*. Purple had always suited Summaya, Khadeejah thought. "*Arre,* don't worry the boys will come. Oh! And we mustn't forget a gold chain for your mother-in-law! Gold is cheaper in India. But I'm not sure about quality. I must ask Dilshaad *bhen* about that. She went India two times before, you know."

"Why don't we even get a pram for my future child while we're at it?"

"Hmm… I think we'll get one orange one just in case, *neh*?"

All Summaya saw when she landed at Mumbai airport was dirt and dust. The moment she stepped out of the plane she was smothered by a ball of hot-wet smelling air. It pushed into her ears and climbed into her nostrils and lodged itself there quietly. It smelled of strangeness dipped in oil, people's sweaty suits, old dresses and the dust from inside books at the Mayfair library. It was everywhere:

a. in the wet-floored airport toilets.
b. in the dim yellow-lit bare-walled baggage counter.
c. in the loud smoggy streets.
d. in the breakfast room in the hotel (toast, tea, eggs, jam – clinically boiled, cooked, spread and served).
e. in the hems of her pants (inside the stitching, even after she washed it with Sunlight soap when she went home).
f. particularly in small closed hotel rooms with ceiling fans that whirred restlessly.

There were people too. Lots and lots of Indian people. It overwhelmed her that there could be so many Indians in the world. All so similar.

In South Africa you could point out the Indians, the blacks and the whites. In India, you only saw a white person if you wandered into the air-conditioned foyer of an

expensive hotel. Perched on the arm of a huge cream sofa, sipping cool lemonade from a clear glass with a twist of lime on the top. And she only saw a black person once. And then too he turned out to be just a dark-skinned Indian. She found the lack of races strange. She missed the contrasting coloured skins. In India everybody was just brown. A mud coloured blur. She didn't feel like she was part of that – she felt like a puzzle piece that didn't fit.

Her feeling of estrangement was intensified by her family's behaviour. Uncle Farook and aunty Najma gushed about the flavour of the spices, placed their hands on dusty staircase banisters, laughed at the cows on the road, admired the noisy sounds and Strange-Smell and exclaimed how close they felt to their culture here in this magnificent land.

This land of their forefathers.

Summaya, on the other hand, watched men lean on carts with hitched pants that revealed hairy ankles folded over dusty feet. She watched them inspect their toes (and ears and noses and any other crevice the dust could get into) with the nail of one upturned baby finger. She visited her grandfather's village in Rander and watched goats wander through lanes littered with old newspapers. She watched people spit redness into street corners before selling diesel-smelling *samoosas* to passers-by. She learnt (to her horror) how to squat over the dark abyss of a 'low pan'. She learnt that she, too, was not immune to the dust in her nose and ears. When she washed her clothes in the hotel, the white tub was filled with murky brown water.

Brown. Brown. Brown. Dirty nondescript colour. Like grey.

Colours which lacked definition.

And as she watched her mother haggle over the price with an auto rickshaw driver she became extremely grateful for her grandfather's decision to 'see the great Africa'. Because India and Africa may seem the same to some people. To some people they could be the same place. Dry in parts and filled with too many brown people who were hungry.

But they were different.

She was increasingly worried on this trip. She could not link herself to these people. Her uncle, as South African bred as he was, would still hum *Thera juthe hai japaani,*

main pathloon Hindustani… and revel in the beauty of India as they travelled on a train from Hyderabad to Bangalore.

As if he had always lived there.

Summaya had looked at the dry moving land through the train window and was glad she didn't have to live there. As her uncle hummed to himself, Summaya watched a fat lady wrapped in a green sari climb down her bunk and wipe her face with a wet facecloth which she then proceeded to use to wipe her sagging underarms before offering it to her husband.

And she had nudged her mother in surprise one particularly cold morning when their bus had passed a man bathing in a stream on the side of the road. He hunched over the stream and soaped his armpits and scrubbed his hair. When Summaya voiced her surprise (and mild disgust), her uncle had said it was a beautiful sight – this man sitting on the stones enjoying his bath in the cold air of the morning. You could only see this in India, he had boasted, and had crossed his arms over his wide chest and nodded.

And Summaya had felt bad. Felt bad for feeling embarrassed for the bathing man. Felt bad for not feeling some sort of kinship with these people, with this land, with this culture.

Her culture.

She felt like a tourist. Like the French woman in their hotel, who blew kisses in the air and carried a little dog named Pierre under her arm

But she was Indian. She had brown skin and black hair. And a fondness for chillies. She did not have blonde hair and white teeth. Or a curiously-named Chihuahua tucked under her arm.

They also knew it. The people in the streets. They knew it from the shine of her shoes to the crispness of her pants. They knew it from the way she disgustedly shooed a goat away or touched door handles with the tips of her fingers. They knew it from the awkward way she looked back at them when they asked her a question in Urdu or Hindi.

"*Yeh Urdu bath nahien karsakthi hai?*"

"*Hum lo sikele hai Urdu baath. Yeh nahein sikaileenee hain*."
"*Afsose ye Urdu bath nahain sikhailee hai*."
"*Ha*."

She didn't like that. People discussing her loss of language. As if language made a person. Language was just words (even sneer-smeared ones). She had always maintained that the world was a big race of coloured people, all God's creation. The only variation was that people ate different food and wore different clothing. And sometimes fought with one another. But at the end of the day they were all similar. They all bled red and they all had to eat, drink and pray. People were all similar, no?

But when she went to India she could clearly see that they weren't. People followed Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainiam, Sikhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. People spoke Gujurati, Bengali, Kashmiri, Malayam, Punjabi, Nepali, Hindi, Telegu, Assamese and Urdu. People wore *dhotis, mundus*, *sarees, kurtas*, *kurtis*, *cholis, salwar kameezes, ghunghats* and *lungis*.

The world was complicated. People belonged to parts and pieces of it. Their differences mattered. Their differences were important. Her romantic image of one world culture was shattered. And Summaya wanted to belong. She wanted a piece to cling onto. To call her own. So one day in Hyderabad, Summaya made the decision to try out her rusty Urdu on someone. She approached a tea *wallah* and asked him for two teas in perfect Urdu. What she hadn't expected was a question from him (she later realised he had asked her how much sugar she wanted). She had shaken her head and muttered, "I don't speak Urdu." And the dratted man had shaken his head pityingly as if he couldn't understand for the life of him how these wannabe Indians were still allowed in the country. Summaya, ashamed, had given up trying to talk Urdu after that.

Words were just words.

But still, she felt as if her broken Urdu was damning proof that she had betrayed her culture in some awful way.

This one doesn't speak Urdu?

Why, even her fussy mother was relaxed here. Sure, she always had a small serviette in her handbag to wipe the restaurant plates before she ate off them. But after that she was fine. She would dig into the exotically scented rice, ask for more chillies, wipe more butter chicken into her *roti* and ask for hot *aloo parathas* with extra *ghee*. Summaya would meanwhile be agonising whether she hadn't just seen the waiter dig in his nose, whether the water in the jug came from the tap and why, oh why, did they all just stand there and watch them? Summaya hated the oily vinyl tables, the squeaky Indian music blaring from the dusty speakers, the dreaded plastic plates. But most of all she hated, no, detested, the fake red carnations placed lovingly in the middle of every table.

"This is the best cloth. The best. The best in the whole verld. I won't lie to you aunty. Go to Mumbai, you won't get anything like this. Look at this vork. There, there, just feel it aunty. Just feel it. See. Perfect. New style from *Kishen Kanhaiya*, just like Madhuri Dixit's. Perfectly same! Have a pepsi or maybe *chai*?" he snapped his fingers and a little boy appeared. "Go get two Pepsis for the aunty and her daughter. *Jaldi*!" Then he would turn back and give them a yellow-toothed smile as they sat on the cloth on the floor. The white sheet showed off the beauty of the material that had been spread open for them to inspect. The shopkeeper would smooth his oily hair back with a palm and continue, "Vhere vas I? Yes aunty, this vork is the latest style. Hand vork, look at the little detail. Look! This kind of vork you won't find anyvere and not with my prices. I guarantee you that! I promise! You are Indian, and I am Indian – I give you best price *yar*?" He would lower his voice at the last part as if he was indeed giving them a secret deal that no one else should hear about.

"You know I have family in Soufrica?"

They all had family in Soufrica. They all knew someone who knew someone who knew you. Which made them like your brothers. Which made you *owe* them one. Because they were family.

On and on they went. Relentless sellers who just never heard the word 'no'. Poor, destitute or perhaps just trying to save up for their next television set, the shop sellers were a force to be reckoned with. They stocked the *best* clothing, the *best* jewellery

and the *best* sandals at the best price in the whole wide world. They were your friends, your family and they would cheat you blind at the first opportunity they got.

These were her people? These conniving shopkeepers and sunburnt women with nose rings who squatted to sweep their front stairs with palm leaves? These sandy men who walked in rubber *champals* which showed their cracked heels and dusty toes?

These people?

If something happened in her own country (and people said it would) would she be able to come back and *live* here? She felt in her heart that she couldn't. That this was some strange, foreign land that she could *never* adapt to. Maybe England. But not India. And she thought that that must mean she was hardly Indian. And she wondered whether that was sad. Or even important.

She tried to voice it many times to her mother or her uncle. But the words didn't come out right and she couldn't put the thoughts in her head into words on her tongue, and they looked strangely at her. So she swallowed the unbaked words and just looked at the dry land around them.

But one day, while they were staying in the South of India, things changed. They had taken a boat cruise through the backwaters of Kerala. Sailing the river at sunset. They waded through the water wearing unnecessary thing like sunhats, mosquito repellents and nausea patches and doing typical tourist things like leaning over the side of the boat and exclaiming, "A fish, a fish, I'm sure I saw one right there". The water was dark and frothy and weedy at its banks. They sailed past expensive hotels with flat green golf courses and pools with women in yellow bikinis sipping from coconuts under palm trees. And as they moved deeper down the river, they saw small houses near its banks. Little wooden structures with crooked doors and shabby gardens. Clothes lines were strung up between bushes and naked children ran near the edge of the river. Some of them ignored the boats, others jumped excitedly and waved. In the twilight of the sinking sun when the world grew dark and moody she saw a woman sitting hunched at the edge of the river, scrubbing her washing. And Summaya thought, what was this place? This ethereal ancient poor place. This dark-

light place filled with wet earth and birds' screeches. This place with naked babies who sucked on wet rags behind golf courses with coconut-sipping ladies. Why was it still here? Hidden between cities and trees. Would it always be here?

And it was then that Summaya finally found some sort of affinity with India. Some sort of beauty that she felt tender toward. She finally felt *something*. Something that wasn't lack of interest or disgust.

Something that was understanding. You could be two things at once.

You could be and not be.

As she watched men canoe their way across the river with a net of fish in their boat, she felt a silent sob at the back of her throat.

No, she had thought that night as she lay in her bed. No, I am Indian. I am also Indian. How can I deny this?

You could be and not be.

And it was there in Kerala, with its deep buzz of insects and rotting wooden boards and long coconut palms that Summaya found her something.

Her how To Be.

And it was there in Kerala with its filthy waters that rose up in the darkness to smother her with its scummy silence that Summaya felt at ease.

She would sit and stare at the still water from the hotel dock next to the No Swimming sign, next to the American man who had come to India to 'free himself from worldly desires'. Who did yoga stretches and hacked at his chest and spat copious amounts of green phlegm into the river (that bubbled and added froth to the river bank). She ate lots of fruit and grew suntanned. She sat cross legged like the local Indians and she let her hair dry in the sun. The sun was different there. It was fiery and intense – it brought out the colour red in people's clothing and the colour yellow under their skins. It burnt silver pans of chillies that were left out to dry. And as she lay in the sun and let her skin cook and let the heat enter her hair and her eyes and her fingers, she felt at one with the earth. She thought hot, strange-smelling, black-burning thoughts. She felt whole somehow.

It was a long time before she felt that way again.

When Summaya had come back home to the dry land and the wide sky, she had felt odd for a few days. Almost longing for the bustle and noise of India's streets. Or for the sunlit muddy river.

Not this dry quiet cracked land in which people peeped at other people through the slit of their curtains or smiled at each uncertainly before going back to their shopping at Hypermarket. The colours were paler, the air had less electricity. People were formal and polite and said, "Oh, I'm sorry" if they accidentally banged into one another, whereas in India, they either told each other to watch where they were going or thought nothing of it and continued with their pushing.

As if they shouldn't be disturbed by bodies that were made of the same material as them.

ANEESA

Aneesa stared out the window on the way home from *Nani's*. Her mother was talking. Words with no meaning. Eggs without yolks… nothing but the runny slime left at the bottom of the shell.

Your mother found someone else to love.

We call it an affair.

An Is man. Not Was.

Sudden-Things are difficult to comprehend. Sudden-Love for someone. Or Sudden-Anger. But Sudden-Betrayal… Sudden-Betrayal was the worst. The shock cuts so deep, hits bone so fast that there's no going back. The world goes black, full of secrets and things that can never be trusted.

That afternoon Aneesa Ballim learnt her mother's lesson that her mother had learnt A Long Time Ago: everyone has a secret.

"Aneesa, did you hear me?"

Aneesa swam out from murky thoughts. "What?"

"I asked you how your day was?"

Aneesa looked at her mother. Her *your-mother's-very-pretty* mother who had torn her family apart. Aneesa swallowed a lump that held unspoken ugly words.

"My day was okay. *Nani* bought apples for us from the vegetable man."

And her anger grew because it couldn't get out. It grew into a big ball that rolled in her stomach and made her feel sick.

She wouldn't tell her mother she knew the truth. She would find her father. Her *your-father-was-very-hurt* father.

She would find him *and she would go and live with him.*

And then her mother would know. Then her mother would *really* hurt. Then her mother would have to admit that she had done something wrong.

SUMMAYA

Lost in her thoughts of forgetting A Long Time Ago, Summaya Ballim did not notice the murky thoughts swimming in the car around her. She did not notice the blackness in her daughter's head or the eels of iciness that brushed past her arms. Summaya Ballim had stopped noticing these things After.

Almost nine years ago, at the very end of Before and at the very beginning of After, Summaya had learnt there was something wrong.

Summaya had always maintained that 'I love you' should never expect a response. It should be said impulsively. Only when it was honestly felt and it should never, ever, anticipate any reply. It was one of those true beliefs that she held onto.

Until that day.

Just before After.

She was happy that sunny afternoon. Content in the knowledge of Knowing. The world was firm; beliefs were set, people preferred mangoes over onions, red was not a colour. Baby Aneesa had fallen asleep and Summaya had carried her to her cot. The sun was shining through the net curtains. One of those airy afternoons that seems to go one forever.

(And in a way that afternoon did go on forever.)

Summaya was walking leisurely around the flat in her pyjamas, enjoying the breeze coming in through the sitting room window when she glimpsed Faheem leaning in front of the couch. He was looking for the television remote that continuously got lost between the sofa cushions. She stared at his lean frame as his upper arms flexed slightly through his red T shirt. His jet black hair startling against the crimson. She sighed. God. He was a beautiful man.

And it popped out, just the way it was supposed to.

"I love you."

And then it happened. His shoulders, those lovely shoulders rose stiffly for one second – a flinch of sorts. His face intensified in apparent extreme concentration for

the remote and the hands hovered for just a second before the search renewed with vigour. He did not look at her.

And then it became the most important thing in the world that he reply.

She could not breathe. Her chest was a squashed accordion player that she couldn't straighten out. The clock reverberated loudly. Her left arm jerked unconsciously. Nervous sweat sank into her pyjama armpits. Summaya counted the seconds in her head.

One. Two. Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

And then, just as she was forming the nine in her mind, he said it. "I love you too," in such a quick, garbled way as if he too suddenly realised the depth of the silence. As if he too, suddenly realised what was happening and that if he said it fast enough he could make up for the eight missing seconds.

They both knew it could not.

And it was then that she knew. Eight unspoken seconds said it all. Eight seconds made her notice the changes in him. The irritation. The deep silences. The confusion in his eyes. Things she hadn't noticed before. And it was after that. After the eight second silence that things changed between them.

The beginning of After.

Because then she knew. Then she remembered.

Everyone has a secret.

Faheem had a secret.

A secret that lies in the chambers of the heart. The type that does not want to be acknowledged. It weaves itself into the muscle of the heart and waits there. Waits for a moment when the body accidentally overstretches itself so that the secret can tear with a bloody flourish and pour out.

Faheem would walk around their flat in long slow circles. He would glance nervously at her from the sides of his eyes, as if he wanted to say something. He would open his mouth and let out a ghost of a syllable, then stop and resume his circling. Summaya did not say anything. Saying anything might prompt him to speak and she was fairly certain she did not want to hear what he did not want to say.

Once, between his circling and sideways glancing, he had grabbed her suddenly and held on tightly. Not a hug but a sort of grab and grasp. They had stood like that a long time in the living room. She, slightly awkward, but attempting to be receptive. He, struggling as if drowning, holding on tight. Some wild attempt at soaking something back into his body. Then he had let go suddenly. And sighed.

Leaving her there to try to take the awkwardness out of her body.

Aneesa had gone to bed early. Summaya lay on her back on the sitting room carpet. She lay there and thought.

She was a beautiful woman. Grown from gangly and strange to elegant and mysterious. Her eyes were hurt and strong. They held deep wet secrets that treaded strange coloured waters.

You could be and you could not be.

Most women are beautiful – they just don't know it. Summaya knew it from the way her elegant fingers rested on polished wooden tables. She knew it from the way her hair bared her neck and the way her skin ran down her smooth breasts. She knew it from the way her waist flared over her hips and flowed down into brown thighs. She acknowledged that she was not conventionally beautiful. She knew her beauty lay in other things, like her fingertips and ankles and the ends of her hair.

She lay on her back and swam into thoughts. Slippery, flowing ones. Not icy eels trapped in a murky car. Her thoughts were Strange-Smelling and rustled like old leathery wings. She thought about her daughter sleeping behind the wall. Her daughter with the round eyes and big heart and small voice. Her beautiful daughter.

When Summaya had found out she was pregnant with Aneesa she had been terrified. She hadn't wanted a child then and she knew she wouldn't be a good mother.

People assured her it was okay to be scared. But people didn't *know* her. People just said what they thought she wanted to hear.

They didn't know she was a raw onion.

Hiding in a mango skin.

She believed she lacked the 'motherly' trait that every woman supposedly possessed. She was selfish and moody. She felt no inclination to comfort babies when they cried. In fact, if the truth be told, she recoiled from children with their spit and running noses and food-stained clothes. Their hands were always sticky and they cried far too loudly.

And there was the other problem. She was terribly possessive over Faheem. She couldn't explain it but she would fly into a rage if he so much as mentioned another woman. She would shake with the unreasonableness of it all and then explode at him when she could not longer hold the unreasonableness in. She felt that a baby so early in the marriage would stifle the energy of their relationship. She knew a baby was a beautiful thing, a message of God's greatness, but still she worried. She knew most husbands worried that their wives would ignore them and fawn over the new baby, but with her it was the other way around. A new life would fascinate Faheem. Passionate Faheem with the blackest of black hair and the strangest of gazes. He who admired the way the bark of a tree aged and who was so quick to catch the sun in her hair with his camera. How would a new life affect him?

While her stomach swelled, her worries grew. She would demand attention from Faheem, once even pulling his face by his cheeks so that he would look at her.

Do you love me?

I will always love you.

She became paranoid that she was ugly and that he didn't look at her the same way. She grew moody and restless and hated herself for being jealous of the child growing in her womb.

Her mother had been thrilled at the pregnancy. She had mumbled something about 'showing the people' that there was nothing wrong with her family, clearly, with such an early pregnancy.

The entire pregnancy was burdensome. She would sit big and heavy like an oil drop on a jar. She would think very little of the child growing within her. It upset her to think about it. This being moving and growing inside her with eyes that could see and fingernails that could claw at the walls of her womb. Alien almost. Invading her body and living off her. And when it kicked and made its presence known she would balk and pretend it hadn't happened. Toward the end she would sit outside on their front door mat, legs apart and wait for him to come home. When he came she would ask him if he would love the baby more than her. A pure, raw question heavy with trepidation. He had answered never, that he would always love her more. But still she wondered.

She shouldn't have worried though.

When the baby had come, there had been blood and screaming and sweat and plastic hands that grabbed her thighs.

A Kit-Kat pain. Break. In. Half.

They had taken that little puckered faced thing from inside her and put it in her arms. And she had said no and pushed it away. But the nurse, knowing things that only nurses seem to know, had insisted she hold the slimy thing. And when she had the child in her arms, Summaya had stopped. Stopped moaning, stopped perspiring, stopped breathing. The world stopped. While she stared at the tiny wrinkled baby. It blinked at her from beady eyes. And she had cried. Because then it was *real*. This piece of flesh growing inside her was real and breathing.

And beautiful.

And it amazed her that it had been growing *inside* her for so long. In between her muscles and organs a child had been forming. And she loved the thing. The cooing, clawing, little thing that relied on her, *on her*, for sustenance. She cried so much then. And she tried to talk between her sobs, to try and express the lightness in her heart. She opened and closed her mouth and made small noises at the back of her throat. The nurse shushed her and nodded knowingly. Knowing what nurses seemed to know. The baby grasped her finger tightly and Summaya named her Aneesa – the affectionate. Onion or mango – affectionate of all.

Summaya didn't let anyone but Faheem or her mother carry the baby in the early months. Faheem's mother had taken this as a personal affront, but Summaya hadn't cared.

The world was steady, there were no secrets and nothing was red. And life, for a time, had been perfect.

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah, Summaya and Aneesa were having supper together. Khadeejah set a plate of fat fried fish on the table. Silver, burnt black with crispy bits that made crunchy sounds in the mouth. Aneesa scooped out a fish and began breaking it with her fingers. Summaya watched her for a moment and then broke into her piece with a fork.

Khadeejah set a plate of golden fried *paaper* and wet *katchumbar* down before pulling a chair and sitting.

"Amina *khala* called today. She said her grandson, Yunus – you know the one from Canada? He's getting married." She paused to dish out some pickled onions into her plate. "White girl." She glanced at Summaya.

When Summaya didn't respond, Khadeejah continued. "Amina's going up that side to help. They wanted to know if we'll come for the wedding. I said even if we did have money to go all the way there, we wouldn't go, *neh*? They have such funny-funny weddings. *Jy weet* last time, they had a friend perform the *nikah*? *Taubah*! Imagine that, a common girl making the *nikah*! And they want to call it marriage. Hmph!"

Most of Khadeejah's family in Canada were married to white non-Muslims. Rumour had it that one cousin even had a child out of wedlock. No one ever seemed to convert in those marriages and the children had names like Samantha Ismail and Jason Ebrahim. English-Arabic names that were frowned upon by the orthodox of both parties. Raw onions and ripe mangoes just didn't mix.

Or so They said.

"Tsk," Khadeejah muttered over her fish. She looked suddenly at Aneesa across the table. "You heard, no white boys!"

"Yes, only black boys for you Aneesa dear," Summaya added. And she turned to look at her mother in the eyes. "*Nani* would *love* a black grandson. And Aneesa and him can dance and dance their whole life together, isn't ma?"

Khadeejah narrowed her eyes at her daughter. "Don't be smart!"

"But *Nani*," Aneesa interjected. "Why? Why can't we marry whites or blacks?"

Summaya smiled at her fish.

Khadeejah looked perplexed. "Because we just can't."

"But why?"

Khadeejah turned to Summaya who looked back at her with an expression that said, this is your issue, you deal with it.

Khadeejah turned back to her grand-daughter and began, "*Kyk hier*, Aneesa, Indians have their own Ways. Whites have their own Ways. It's very – difficult to join them. It's hard to keep trying to – to adjust. Especially for marriage." Khadeejah turned to look at Summaya. "You think we old people talk nonsense, but we Know. We just don't want your lives to be hard. And if two people think differently it will be hard. We are saving you'll – you'll – what's that word?… yes – *unnecessary* pains."

"Hoosen said he'll marry a black girl. He doesn't care. He said he'll even marry a Chinese girl, as long as she knows how to cook."

Summaya laughed.

"Hoosen is *dom*," Khadeejah said as she tapped out some kumquat *achar* on the side of her plate. The sticky orange liquid ran into her plate. "You know, I'm hearing lot-lot about this Hoosen."

"So?" Aneesa looked at her grandmother.

"So? *Dit lyk asof hy van jou hou*."

"How ma, leave her alone," Summaya said.

"It's okay if he likes her how." Khadeejah pulled her grand-daughter's cheeks. "So pretty girl, he can't help himself."

"We're just friends." Aneesa pulled away from her grandmother's grasp and wiped her cheeks. "All you people do is worry about marriage." She turned to her mother. "Well, except you."

Summaya lifted her eyebrows in surprise but before she could say anything, Khadeejah interrupted. "Marriage! *Kya?* Who said anything about marriage?"

"No one, but I know that's what you trying to say, *Nani*."

"I didn't say anything about marriage. *Ya Rabb*! All I said was I think that boy likes you."

"But he doesn't! We both just like each other as friends."

"The boys and the girls can never just be friends," Khadeejah said matter-of-factly. When no one looked impressed with this statement, she turned to her daughter. "Isn't it true, Summaya? You also say this, I know."

Summaya paused. "Well, it does seem to be true, Aneesa. One always seems to fall for the other at some point."

"Not us."

"She's too small anyway," added Summaya. "So leave her alone, ma."

"Okay," Khadeejah said quickly. Summaya was surprised at how readily her mother complied until she heard the next words. "And plus my grand-daughter is going to marry a doctor."

"Oh ma! Not that again. C'mon!"

"How. She knows I'm teasing." Khadeejah paused to pick some fish bones out of her mouth. "But you know it would be nice if you married one." She looked at Aneesa. "You'd be set for life."

"Who said Hoosen is not going to become a doctor?" Aneesa argued.

"Aha! *Ek het dit geweet!* You are interested in that boy! Well, is he planning to become a doctor?"

"I'm just saying who said he's not? And no, I'm not interested in him!"

"He doesn't look it," Khadeejah pondered as she leant her head against her wrist with two oily fingers poised in the air. "Doesn't have the hands for it," she finally concluded.

"What so you mean, *Nani*?"

"Ma, leave her alone. Don't listen to *Nani*," Summaya interrupted.

"Surgeon's hands," Khadeejah replied.

"That's not fair," complained Aneesa. "You can't judge what someone's going to be by their hands."

"Of course you can. Look at my hands, I always knew they were meant for cooking." Khadeejah proudly displayed her wrinkled veined hands in the air. "Anyway," she said before she could be interrupted, "all I'm saying is boy and girl can never be friends. It's just the truth of the world."

Khadeejah had been friends with Khaled for as long as she could remember. She would claim she even remembered playing together when they were babies. That she honestly remembered the ice cream T-shirt that hung over his nappy and the fat dimples in his knees as they crawled under the kitchen table.

Khaled was the son of Khadeejah's father's friend who also lived in the flats. From the time they could walk it was always Khaled, Khadeejah and her sister, Amina. They did nearly everything together, although Amina complained when they went into the *veld* behind the flats. Everyone had told them not to play there. It was a grassy place where people dumped their junk, like rolls of waterlogged carpets, rotting cupboards and empty paint cans. It was where snakes lurked between scratchy brown grass and birds nested in empty broken trees. A river had run through it previously but now all that was left of it was a squelchy marsh that hid under the long dandelions. If you didn't know which places to avoid you could easily end up ankle-high in mud. Tall trees loomed at its periphery and an old train station for carrying coal could be seen on a hill in the distance.

All the children would gather in aunty Maimoona's flat to see the train when it went past at six o' clock. Her flat provided the clearest view of the coal train as it chugged across the hill. The flat children would always stomp into her flat and run into the bedroom. Whenever this happened Maimoona's husband would have a fit. Especially when, as they were running in, they bumped into his chair as he was about to tuck into his mutton curry.

They would pile up on the bed and lean over the headboard to see the train. The smaller ones would squish the toes of their shoes into the pillows so that they could peer over the headboard. When Maimoona's husband found scuff marks on his pillows Maimoona calmed him down and told him they were just children.

The flat children never really bothered about suppertime. It was only when the adults' calling voices started delivering threats that they scampered each to their own flat to eat. Or sometimes they ate at other people's flats. Not really distinguishing where they were eating, as long as they were full enough to continue playing. Sometimes they used this to their advantage and told their mothers they had eaten at

another flat. This would leave the confused mothers trying to confirm with each other whether the child had indeed eaten.

Every flat was for running in and out of. Doors did not exist, merely entrances.

Somehow Amina always managed to step in the *veld* mud. Then she would have to wash her socks in the crumbling washing trough and hang them on the guava tree to dry. The three of them spent a lot of time in the back. Vacant spaces with streams, trees, and big empty skies to hold thoughts are a children's paradise. The three of them dug holes in the ground to look for the centre of the earth, they climbed low trees with knotted branches and they had races. (Khaled always beat Khadeejah but only by a bit.) In the *veld* time stood still.

Khaled had found an old bathtub that had been thrown out from someone's flat window and that had started to rust in the grass. They had turned the tarnished tub over and would sit in it while they ate guavas. Propped in the tub while spitting the hard seeds onto the ground.

Sometimes when she cut guavas Khadeejah could still see the image of Khaled's worn-out red *takkies*, her own blue sandals with her brown toes and Amina's mud-caked toes all propped on the white rim in front of them. She could see the sun setting in the trees between their shoes.

Khaled had shapely big toes like a spoon with a slight hollow on one side. He kept them still, hardly ever moving them. Khaddejah had long toes that stuck out over the bathtub rim and that occasionally swayed up and down or clutched the rim like a chameleon on a branch. Amina had short fat toes that caught bits of sand so that she constantly wriggled them. They wouldn't talk much, just sit and watch the trees and distant hills while listening to the stillness that hovers in the air of all farm towns. A forlorn-bird sort of silence.

But as they grew older things Changed. Time just pretended to stand still. Meanwhile the branches grew brittle, the river dried up and the train station was closed and then abandoned.

Khaled's family embraced the new South African landscape and emerging American culture. The latest American jazz tunes would pour constantly out of their flat. Meanwhile Khadeejah's father would crank up the volume on his gramophone playing the latest *kawalis* from India. He fought valiantly against what he called the 'evilness' of the West.

"Never – I never forget what they are doing to our people! Never will I forget their persecutions! And we want to be like them? Never!" Ameer Rahim Mia roared at his daughters.

As they grew older Khadeejah still wore the cotton dresses and *punjabis* her mother sewed while Khaled greased his hair back in a ducktail, pulled up the collar of his black leather jacket and quoted from his favourite Western, *High Noon*: "This is just a dirty little village in the middle of nowhere. Nothing that happens here is really important."

Then he would smirk and stroll away with his hands in his pockets.

For a long time Khadeejah only thought of Khaled as her best friend who was perhaps handsome and a tad conceited.

But the stuck-in-the-middle-age brings along with it great ponderings under the sun. (And the sun shone very brightly in Bronkhorstspruit.) And without meaning to, Khadeejah began to like Khaled. It happened suddenly one day while they sitting together. She had looked at his hands. Properly. They were beautiful, slim and delicate. And then she knew.

She loved him.

She didn't think it would change anything between them. After all, it had always been there. Now she just acknowledged it.

But things did change. She became awkward around him. She twitched if their knees accidentally banged in the tub. She couldn't look him in his eyes anymore. Instead she stared at his lower eyelashes. Black and long, like graceful spiders. She suddenly noticed that he was much slimmer and harder than her. She began to notice their differences and she felt slightly guilty. *Abba* didn't approve of her "running around with the modern boy". Although *ummy* always argued they were still small.

(Although her socks didn't pull up to her knees and she couldn't look Khaled in his eyes anymore.)

Khaled noticed nothing. He was completely oblivious to the way Khadeejah had become clumsy and flustered. He still grabbed her hand in that frantic childish way when he wanted to show her something. A rabbit. Or mating flies. He still tousled her hair and ran away. He didn't notice her pause and smile. He never saw her in that Way. Boys were just like that. They never saw something until you pointed it out to them.

Like the wasp nest in the guava tree.

It had happened the week Khaled was moving to Johannesburg. His father was moving his business out of Bronkhorstspruit and into the city. They were climbing trees the day before he had to leave. She had seen the nest between the leaves while he climbed nearby. She had screamed suddenly as he was about to place his hand on the nest. He had jerked his hand back too quickly and lost his balance. He fell with a dull thud.

They sat in the bathtub while she tried to locate any wounds on his head. It was just the beginning of winter and the setting sun cast a dark light on them. She was looking at his eyelashes and his freckled cheeks and the glint of the sunset in his eyes. And she kissed him very softly on his lips. A childish kiss. A curious peck. And he had turned to look at her in surprise. He touched his lips, the tip of his finger hanging off his bottom lip. The next morning when he left for Johannesburg he had waved at her and said he would write. She couldn't read his eyes or his smile. She didn't see him for a long time after that.

And when she finally did he had Changed. He laughed loudly now. He didn't look at her in that secret forlorn-bird silent way. He had new friends. He had new records. They lived in a big house with four bathrooms. He didn't ask her about their bathtub in the grass, which sat forlornly now, alone. And she watched him with his fancy shoes and friends and she didn't feel she had anything worthwhile to say to him. What were birds and insects and rusting bathtubs in comparison to the latest Elvis Presley record? She felt dull. The *meisie* from the farm.

"What happened to you?" she once plucked up the courage to ask him.

"Me? Nothing. What do you mean?" He seemed genuinely surprised.
"You… oh, it's nothing."
He didn't press her. They hardly spoke after that.
Because people Change. Inside and out.

He was nice to Khadeejah. Polite even. And Khadeejah resented him for it. He wanted more out of life. He wanted to be more popular, more interesting, more fun. And she hated herself for still wanting him.

He said he would only marry when he was twenty-eight and that his wife would be as gorgeous as Rita Hayworth, 'who had a Coca Cola figure'. Khadeejah had worked a long time on her body after that. Running up and down the stairs of the flat. Skipping with the other children. Hoping he would notice the changes in her body. The earrings in her ears. The longing in her voice. But he never did. And no matter how much she skipped she could never get a figure like Rita. Khadeejah told him that twenty-eight was too old to get married but in her mind she thought she might wait. Maybe. But she saw him less and less. He was never at home when they occasionally went to visit. He was too busy doing things like fishing, playing soccer, playing cricket and going to the bioscope.

In the end he married a girl with horsy teeth and a laugh to match. He was nineteen years old. Khadeejah wore a pink dress with hard frills that she tugged at as she watched him smiling on the stage next to his wife.

Khadeejah saw him once or twice later. He hadn't aged well, but he was a jolly person. His wife was a friendly woman who never lost her high-pitched laugh.

Sometimes Khadeejah wondered if he remembered the tub in the grass at the back of the flats. And she felt the small ache in her heart that she had buried a long time ago.

Khadeejah looked at Aneesa.
"Boys and the girls can never just be friends. It's just the Way of the world," she said as she set the *falooda* down and it wobbled like a fat lady's bum.

SUMMAYA

When she thought back to it. When she thought back to how it happened, where it happened, the absurd simplicity of it surprised her. Each and every time.

A normal Saturday. A normal kitchen. A normal family.

When Faheem told her, she could hear the hooting of taxis outside. None of them stopped. Nobody paused in their lives to have a moment of silence for the dismantling of a union. Nobody wept bitter tears into their hands for her.

She blamed films.

There was no moment of shock with dramatic music on cue. No trumpets or thunder. No scene of her fleeing down the street in a thunderstorm with a sari trailing wetly behind her. No moment of her clutching his collar and shaking as she sank to the ground at his feet.

A normal Saturday.

A normal kitchen.

A normal family.

The world did not stop.

Nothing.

Just Faheem telling her that and looking at her with his eyes and she looking back at him with her heart. The taxis hooted and the neighbours' children laughed and a distant car started up and she picked up his socks from the floor and walked to the washing basket and didn't turn back until she heard the front door shut.

Simple.

She rinsed the dishes and she switched on the washing machine and she began to set the ironing board up. But it hadn't wanted to open. It stuck no matter how hard she tried pulling it. She had shaken it and banged it against the wall. Then she dropped it to the floor and began kicking it. She had crumpled to the ground. He found her like that when he came back. He had tried to hug her and say he was sorry. But she didn't want to listen. She pushed him away and went out into the night to hang up the wet clothes. He stood in the lit doorway watching her before coming out to help her. Picking up their heavy clothes from the washing basket and pegging them

up with her. Silently the two of them pulled apart shoulders and spread open waists and pinned them up on a line they had to feel for in the dark.

It was the last thing they did together.

And so Faheem left. And Summaya was alone.

She found it easier to simply pretend that he did not exist. That Faheem Seedat had never been real.

It was a hard thing to do.

People that are forced to be forgotten are the hardest people to forget.

There are always little reminders. Socks. Photos. Favourite cereals. Smells. Stains. The phrase, '*Wouldn't you know?*' That reveal themselves with small gasps of hurt surprise when a button is found in the crevice of a sofa or when a song plays over the radio.

Or when someone mentions that, yes, he does exist – he was seen playing with a puppy in a park.

Where? Where was he seen? What was he doing? Who gave him the puppy? Did he look happy?

I don't want to know! Why have you told me! I don't want to know!

But… did he look happy?

But most of all it's the memories that hurt. It is a very hard thing to suppress a memory – there is no real control over it. No way of removing the thoughts from your head, the emotions they trigger. You can fight it, you can try and flood your mind with other things. Try and keep busy. But in the end all you do is try. So Summaya Ballim kept busy and tried to ignore the fact that she had loved that man, that once that man had loved her.

He was a distant memory. A distant memory floating on a boat in a swollen river. Half sunk. She had accepted that a long time ago. The I-love-yous had been buried. Fermented. The bones had disintegrated into dust. Nothing of it remained.

Nothing.

Except perhaps.

Perhaps the whisper of 'I will always love you' in the wind.

She stopped asking mutual friends about him. She even cut contact with them altogether. She avoided areas she heard he had been seen in. Stopped looking at the faces of dog owners. Altered memories with him in them. Altered them so that Aneesa fell off a bicycle on their driveway instead of burned her leg on a heater.

Her mother, strangely, understood this. Stood by her through this. Understood that he must not exist.

He must be washed away by waves that never find him.

Her mother surprised her that way.

"We have to end this," Faheem had said.

And she had stood there.

"We have to end this now, before we drag each other any further."

And she had stood there.

Believing if she didn't say anything, if she just stood there then maybe she could just pretend he hadn't said anything.

"Summaya, are you listening to me? This is important."

"I know."

And she had stood there and tried to look like she was talking about *something important*. (How do you look when you are discussing something important? Stick out your chest? Stand taller? Make a serious expression.)

She tried not to let her lip quiver (because quivering lips didn't make you look like you were discussing something i-m-p-o-r-t-a-n-t).

She finally found the courage to ask *why*. Why he wanted to end it. Because he had said it. He had said he wanted to leave. And now that he had said it, the worst was over.

And now there was nothing more to it but to ask why and pack up her things. Little things like that.

With a stiff upper lip.

"*I don't love you anymore. I don't know when it happened. Or why. I wish I could stop it. But I just can't be with someone I don't love. There's no one else. I just can't do this anymore. I'm so sorry*."

ANEESA

Hoosen sat in Aneesa's sitting room and looked around.

The flat was clean. Hollow-like. There were few necessary things. Brightly coloured plastic chairs (none red). A two-tiered silver rack filled with onions and one potato. A marble patterned counter with chipped edges that revealed the wood board underneath. A fridge (not too expensive, not too cheap) covered with a number of paintings and poems by Aneesa. One long sofa sitting on white tiles. A bare house. He was sure that that was how Summaya liked it.

Bare like the holes in her ear lobes.

Aneesa came out of the kitchen with a box in her hands. She sat next to Hoosen and carefully opened the box. Then she sifted through the papers and objects inside before producing a photo.

"This is what he looks like." And she handed the photo to Hoosen.

He studied the photo, not clearly seeing the link that Aneesa described as being so apparent between them.

"He looks like me, isn't?"

"Er – yes."

"Except the nose. I don't have his nose."

"Yes," he said honestly agreeing.

She stared at the photo and muttered, "I can't believe her."

"But, Aneesa," Hoosen started then paused. Not sure where to start and where to stop with such a sensitive subject. He began again. "Maybe – maybe… your aunty is bluffing."

"No. She's not."

"Aneesa…"

"Why would she lie like that?"

"I don't know. People are funny sometimes. And you said your mother didn't like her."

"Yes! Because Fareeda *khala* knew what she did."

"Well, so does your *Nani* then. But your *Nani* doesn't hate your mother."

"She does. Everybody does. And – and anyway even if she doesn't, it's just because it's a rule that mothers can't hate their daughters."

"So now it's a rule?"

"Maybe."

Hoosen sighed. Aneesa turned to look at him. "Oh wait, I forgot. Everyone except you hates her."

"I'm not saying she's right. I'm just saying, Aneesa, you should find out for yourself."

Aneesa looked moodily away. He leaned in close until his head touched hers. "I promised to help you look for him, and I will."

They sat quietly side by side and Hoosen reached out and held her hand lightly. They sat for some time like that until Aneesa said, "Do you want to know what his name is?"

Is, *not Was.*

"Yes."

"Faheem. That's his name."

"Who told you?"

"Fareeda *khala*."

"It's a nice name."

"I know."

"But Aneesa," he said slowly, "if you know his name then maybe this can help us." And he pulled the lavender box from her lap and fished out the address book.

They found it in the end. After much frantic page turning and scrutinising.

Faheem Seedat: 011 4056621

A normal little number.

Sitting between *Amy der Villiers* and *Farhana Moola.*

Sitting between the pages. Waiting to be found. Waiting to be copied down on a scrap of paper. Blinking at the sudden light. Breathing in fresh air. And then closed up again. To shut back into the darkness.

Hoosen gave her the phone. She picked it up. Then put it down. Scared suddenly.

Wondering exactly what had happened to make her mother so different from the twirling yellow-polka-dotted woman in the photograph.

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah had hated baby Aneesa.

She had hated that sweaty, smelly child who sucked on her cushions. Her fat, sticky hands always found spoons, important documents, recipe books, and when she climbed up on a chair… oh, Khadeejah's beloved ornaments!

Feeding time was an especially messy affair. The squashy butternut would be entangled in Aneesa's curls, in the crevices of her ears and dripping out of her nose. There would be smears on the carpet and across the sofa.

And as Khadeejah would scrub the floor with an old cloth, Aneesa would kick her plump legs and giggle.

When Khadeejah read *namaaz* and Aneesa ventured toward some object she wasn't supposed to touch, Khadeejah would clear her throat loudly and baby Aneesa would turn quickly, her eyes wide, to see where the noise had come from. Then she would smile and toddle over to Khadeejah's prayer mat and spread herself across it so she could look at Khadeejah. Khadeejah would have to prostrate herself on one side of the *musallah* because Aneesa refused to move, even after she repeatedly cleared her throat.

It was too much for Khadeejah. She had to see to her daughter who refused to eat, her grandchild who refused to stay clean and customers who refused to cut her some slack. And she was not as strong as she used to be. Physically as well as emotionally. She didn't have to defend her actions as much as she had to when she was younger. She had earned a certain amount of respect. And so Khadeejah Bibi Ballim had grown a bit soft around the edges. A plasticine sort of soft. She *felt* her age. And her sadness for her daughter made her feel a little older.

Sometimes she considered picking up the phone and telling that man that he was a coward for leaving his wife. Yes, sometimes marriage was complicated. And, yes, sometimes Summaya was difficult. But wasn't everyone? Didn't everyone have some irritating trait or the other? Hadn't Khadeejah put up with Haroon? What was this new love-love notion? Once you were married that was it. *Khallas!* You agreed to stay with that person for the rest of your life. Only continuous beating or cheating

was a good reason to end it. She felt if you could love each other once then you owed responsibility to the magnitude of that emotion. How could you leave, just like that? What nonsense! You stuck by what you said. It was the right thing to do.

Sometimes, when Summaya waved her away – a sort of helpless wave – Khadeejah would shed a small tear. She knew what lost dreams were about. She of all people.

So when Summaya shouted at her to leave the curtain closed, after a while she did. She stopped trying to force food down her daughter's throat and she stopped taking Aneesa into the stuffy room that made her cry. She told the family it was not a *djinn*. She shooed away their phone numbers of good *aleems* and *hakeems*. She told them that Summaya was just sad because her husband and her had decided to end things.

But –

But, the people said, if *they* decided to end things then *she* wouldn't be so sad and so sick. So *he* must have ended things. And if he ended things it meant that she must have done *something*. And they speculated over phones and meals and behind closed doors.

Why do you think?

Isn't it obvious? The sneakier ones would snigger. What? What? The others would cry (but they knew, because wasn't it obvious?).

Affair.

The word was whispered around with a tantalising breathy air.

AffHair.

And some would say no! She wasn't that type of girl to have an *affHair* (they repeated the scandalous word, deriving some sort of sensual pleasure as it passed over their tongues).

But wasn't she always the strange one? Yes… she must have had the *affHair*. Yes! That's why he left her and she's gone mad with grief. That's why she keeps crying in the dark. (In her pyjamas too!) He seemed like a nice boy. Good family. *She* must have been the one. That's what happened when you came from a broken family.

But… maybe, some of them whispered, we shouldn't assume.

What! Facts are facts the others shouted. She was always the strange one and why, why did Khadeejah keep it all hush-hush? If *he* was having the *affHair* they would have told everyone a long time ago. They all nodded their heads and agreed over the phones. She was always the strange one.

Raw onion pretending be a mango.

Running after the wrong train.

It was her fault and that was that.

Khadeejah was unaware of the rumours. Such a nice woman, they said (well, maybe she was a little cheeky), but she shouldn't be punished for what her daughter did. So they said nothing in front of her.

Meanwhile Khadeejah prayed for Summaya. She cried and prayed and cooked. Her sisters helped her. (Old as creaking doors that couldn't be fixed.) They gathered in her little house and surveyed the situation. They bathed Aneesa when Khadeejah's back was too sore to bend over the tub. They plaited Khadeejah's hair for her. They rolled white *rotis* and tried to coax Summaya to eat. They phoned and asked her how she was. And when they couldn't be there to help her, they thought about her as they cooked food for their children.

One time during the Dark Days Faheem *had* phoned.

He asked Khadeejah how Summaya was. He apologised and said he hadn't wanted it to come to this. That her daughter always had a special place in his heart. That he was sorry. And that he had really liked Khadeejah.

He didn't ask about Aneesa.

While he was talking, a strange feeling overcame Khadeejah. She reacted impulsively. She put the phone down on him. It came to her naturally. One minute the phone was in her hand and the next she had moved it slowly to its cradle as the small voice went on.

She immediately felt bad. But she didn't call him back. She just stared at the phone for a minute and then went into the kitchen to continue stirring her *gadra* beans.

She never told Summaya about the call.

The pineapples, she believed, were a gift from God. God had answered her desperate prayers. After Summaya had walked away with the pineapple in her mouth, Khadeejah had gone into the garden and cried. An uncontrollable sort of cry. That's only meant for empty gardens to hear.

(And little grandchildren crouched under washing troughs.)

ANEESA

Ring-Ring. Ring-Ring. Ring-Ring. Ring –

"Hello."

"Uh"

"Hello?"

"H – hello. Can I speak to – to Faheem please?"

"Who?"

"F – Faheem. Faheem Seedat."

"Faheem? I think you have the wrong number. There's no one living here by that name."

"Oh. I'm – "

Stifled sounds in the background. "Wait – hold on."

Someone held their hand over the receiver. Muttering. "Wants to speak to some Faheem."

Then a new voice. "Hello? You looking for Faheem Seedat?

"Yes."

"He doesn't live here anymore. He moved a long time ago."

"Oh. So he's… gone?"

"He moved to Sandton."

"Where?"

"Sandton. Spring Meows or something. I forget."

"Oh."

"Who's calling?"

Silence

"Who's calling?

Click.

SUMMAYA

People of the world are split into two parts. Those who are broken hearted. And those who are not.

Broken hearted people remember:

a. *What happened when the heart broke*: The smell in the air. The background noises. What colours were visible that day. The taste in their mouth.
b. *How the heart broke*: The intake of breath. The small stumble. The pain in the chest that feels like a warm cloth being pushed into the chambers of the heart.
c. *How to keep the heart from breaking again*: Tread. Move. Don't tell people how you feel.

And years after it happened, they still remember. Until they disappear into themselves and seem like ghosts to other people. Quiet, withdrawn and weak.

During those Dark Days when Faheem left, Summaya's heart was bleeding. It was being squashed until it could not breathe, until it was a heaving pulp of bloody muscle, until it felt like her chest would explode and splatter the walls with the pain inside.

How funny it was; that the metaphorical heart could be so physically linked to the real heart. How the actual heart ached, when in reality it was just pumping blood and living its life quietly. The brain should be feeling it! She reasoned. The brain should be feeling the pain – that's where memories are kept, where emotions are triggered, where nerves are stored. Her head should have the painful suffocating ache, not her heart.

It could not be happening, how do these things happen? How do people just forget the ones they proclaim their undying love for? How can you be a real human being, a *normal* human being if you can just forget?

What kind of human being does that make you?

ANEESA

It didn't take them long to figure it out. After a small search they found a Spring *Mews* in Sandton. Hoosen had an aunt who had a neighbour who had a brother who lived there.

Nearly every weekend Hoosen and Aneesa took a bus to Sandton and trudged through the leafy suburb. And they waited.

It was a lovely building. The type that Up and Coming young people lived in. With their Up and Coming children who went to private schools. Where boys wore stiff blazers and girls wore underwear that matched their school hats. Apartments with Up and Coming granite counters and glass sinks that rested on pedestals. Showers had glass walls and the carpets in the bedrooms were *Birds' Eye Blue*.

Aneesa watched from across the road. Good cars drove up into the driveway. Up and Coming cars – aspiring cars that were not quite There, but that were *nearly* There.

There was a security guard at the gate who smiled and chatted to the residents. He tipped his cap at the people and his shoes shone with tiny pond-ripple circles. Not like Jabu, the caretaker, who lived in the old outhouse of Aneesa's building. He was the security guard, the repairman, caretaker and he was never around when you needed him. He wore a dirty green jacket and his big toe stuck out from his right Converse *takkie*. Sometimes it wriggled when someone was talking to him. He could be seen on the outskirts of the building stooping to pick up beer cans or dirty Spar packets that had caught in the fence. (This was mainly if he thought anyone from the building was watching him). Most of the times he was drunk and the people in the flat often heard him and his girlfriend arguing late at night. Jabu was not Up and Coming.

This security guard looked like he had a good wife who cooked stew for him every night. Or at the very least chicken curry.

Aneesa stood there a long time leaning against a big tree across the road. An Up and Coming tree with big green leaves that shaded the road with dappled sunlight. Not like the trees in Mayfair. Weak and stifled. These trees had healthy thick branches with broad juicy leaves. These were *aspirant* trees.

They did this for a number of days, until one Saturday morning a black car drove into the driveway. A smart car. A snazzy car. An Is man sort of car. And out hopped a man. With dark wavy hair and not-a-button nose. He stopped outside his car boot and opened it. He had sunglasses on and a sky blue crisp shirt. He was an Up and Coming Aneesa-less man. Aneesa held onto the Up and Coming tree. The bored boy next to her looked up.

An overwhelming urge to run across the street overcame her. There he was!

The Is man man from the cream and red stocking memory. Right there! She wanted to grab him and say, "It's Me!" He would know who she was immediately and he would hug her and swing her around. He would. He would see their matching eyes and disregard their unlike nose and he would grab her and love, love, love her. He would say, "I knew you'd find me. I knew *you* loved me." Then he would take her for ice cream and to the park. He wouldn't want to ever take his eyes off her. Ever. And even as she made to run toward him, she stopped.

A small part held her back.

Because people didn't act the way they acted in dreams. People acted strange and nervous. They didn't understand and she didn't think Faheem would understand if he saw her there today.

The man greeted the security guard and began pulling out things from the boot. The security guard helped him and went inside the building carrying packets. The man shut the boot and called out to someone in the car.

A little boy with red sneakers hopped out of the passenger side of the car. He jumped down with a toy car in his hand and ran after the man.

The boy standing with the girl by the tree suddenly tugged his companion's hand.

"We should go."

"Yes." But she didn't really hear him.

The man stood for a moment and watched the street across. Sure that he had just seen a girl on the other side of the road. He shivered slightly and walked to his apartment. He stuck a hand out to the small boy.

"C'mon, son."

SUMMAYA

Summaya drove home from work. As she stopped at a traffic light she pulled her car visor down to prevent the setting sun from hitting her eyes. A new black BMW pulled up beside her.

Summaya had the habit of making up stories for the drivers next to her. It kept her busy during the idleness of waiting for a robot to change colour. She would glance into their cars, their little moving spaces that contained their lives. She watched women fiddle with lipstick and men sweat profusely behind rolled up windows. There were beaten up cars with fat drivers who chewed things that stretched their jaw muscles. Thin taxi drivers that rushed in and out of traffic and braked suddenly. Pompous drivers with shiny four by fours and dull eyes.

In the car next to Summaya were a man and young woman. Immediately Summaya assumed four things about the woman.

a. She was happily married.
b. She had at least one child (a son perhaps, with the bluest eyes).
c. She had once wanted to be a chef.
d. The man beside her was not her husband.

She assumed three things about the man:

a. He took pleasure in clipping his fingernails.
b. By the next month the man would fall in love again.
c. He would never know that the young woman beside him once wanted to become a chef.

The man behind her hooted and Summaya was abruptly thrown out of her thoughts. The light had changed. She waved an apology and drove forward. Real Life was waiting.

ANEESA

Aneesa sat cross-legged on the pantry floor. Fiddling with packets of two minute noodles and soups sachets. She could taste salty tears in her mouth but her eyes were dry.

She should have known. She should have prepared herself. If she had been prepared it wouldn't have hurt so much to have seen it.

It had been nine years after all. Nine years was A Long Time. But still. She didn't think nine years was supposed to be A Long Time for adults. For children, yes. But for adults it was supposed to be the just the beginning of A Long Time.

Daddy. Abba. Even saying it in her mind sounded foreign. A strange little word that she felt like shaking out through her ears. *Abba*. It was too intimate. Too caressing. So she said, "father" in her mind. There. Formal. Distant.

Her father.

And somebody else's.

"Aneesa," Summaya called. "Come and set the table. It's getting late, honey."

Then Aneesa felt angry. Angry with 'honey' and angry with 'come set the table'. "No," she whispered to herself and she got up and left the noodles on the floor and went to the table. But she set it with her angry face (that her mother couldn't see because she was facing the other way). Her mother went into the pantry for a can of beans. She returned almost immediately.

"Aneesa?"

"What?" And finally her mother heard her angry voice.

"Did you make that mess in the pantry?"

"Maybe."

"Why? There's open packets all over the floor." She walked to Aneesa and looked into her angry face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

But there's so much wrong.

Her eyes must have said it; her eyes must have formed the words because her mother sat down on a kitchen chair and pulled a chair aside for Aneesa. “Aneesa, what’s going on?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Aneesa.” And it was a soft word. A motherly word. And Aneesa felt she might cry so she sucked in her breath and looked up at the ceiling so the tears that were suddenly forming in the cups of her eyes would go back inside. And then she got angry with herself for wanting to cry. Fine, her mother wanted her to talk. She would talk. About everything her mother *didn’t* want to talk about.

“I know he’s not dead.”

Her mother gripped the bottom edge of the chair. “Who’s not dead?”

“Stop acting. You know who I’m talking about.” She turned from facing the ceiling to look angrily at her mother and the tears, without consent, came sliding down her face.

“I know! I know! My father’s not dead. How can you keep telling me lies?”

“You know?” Her mother sounded hoarse.

“Yes! I know everything. How you found someone else and how *my* father found out and left!”

“What? What? Who told you that?”

“It doesn’t matter. I know!”

“Tell me!”

“No!” A pause. A watery pause bloated with so many bursty salty things to say. “And it wasn’t *Nani*!”

“Of course it wasn’t *Nani*! *Nani* knows better! *Nani* knows the truth! She wouldn’t make up such a – a horrible lie.” Her mother’s eyes were flashing like tiny pebbles on the sea shore.

“It’s not a lie!”

“You think – ” Her mother paused to swallow. “You think I’m such a terrible person, Aneesa? My own daughter? My own – ” And her voice broke and she also looked like she would cry. But she was past the stuck-in-the-middle-age. She was Changed. She took a deep breath and swallowed the helplessness and said, “You think I would hurt him like that? You think that it was *my* fault?”

"Yes! Yes! Because you're selfish!" Aneesa spat.

"Aneesa."

"No! Don't tell me any more lies! I won't hear it! I won't!" And Aneesa felt smaller than the stuck-in-the-middle age. She felt like falling to the floor and kicking her legs and arms and pushing her fingers in her ears and blocking out the whole world.

"Aneesa." There it was again. The motherly voice. The one that made tears swim in Aneesa's eyes. "I am *so* sorry I lied to you that he was dead. I am. I didn't want to. I – I didn't plan to."

"Then why did you?!"

"It's… complicated." And her voice shook as she searched for the words to try and explain.

"Tell me."

"It's *so* hard to explain." Her mother seemed terrified. She swept non-existent hair behind her ears and swallowed before continuing. "*He* left us. He left *us*. And I couldn't deal with that. He said – he said he just didn't love me any more. And – and I didn't want you thinking that was any of our faults. Because, Aneesa, it wasn't. It was none of our faults." She stopped. Looked down at her fingers. "And also – also I hated him *so* much for what he did. *So much* – you must understand. That – that I just wanted to pretend he was dead. Because really, he wasn't coming back. So I tried – I tried to make it easier for you. And for me. Can't you understand?"

"No! No! I can't. You're just lying! He went away because of you!"

"Who told you that, Aneesa? They lied to you. A horrible, hurtful lie."

"My father loves me!"

Her mother looked sad. She opened her mouth to say something. And then thought better of it. Then finally she said with a weary understanding, "You would rather hate me than him."

"You're a liar."

Her mother's eyes suddenly flashed. She sat up straight. "Let me tell you something. I did not suffer all these years for you – for *you* to tell *me* this. Now you listen to me. He left *us*! Do you know how much that hurts me to tell you? That you're fighting for a father who doesn't even want you!"

“I don’t believe you! He LOVES me!” The bloated salty bubble burst. Its vile liquid swept into her throat and filled her lungs. “I hate you! I *hate* you! Why’d you have to tell me? Why! You didn’t have to tell me!”

“And let you hate me?” Summaya’s voice almost broke.

“Yes!”

Her mother sat silent for a moment and then said softly, “Aneesa. You should not look for excuses to love him. Or to hate me. I didn’t take your father away from you.”

“I know that!” Aneesa was crying fully now. Betweens her sobs she managed, “Don’t you think I know? I know it wasn’t good he left me… I know he was wrong! But now, now you’re saying it … ” She wiped her nose with her hand and the snot smeared across her cheeks. “I hate you for saying it.” And then she walked to the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

“You’re wrong. And you’re unfair,” her mother called after her. “It wasn’t my fault!”

SUMMAYA

But it was not true.

It *was* her fault.

It was her fault that Aneesa had never seen her father again.

When Faheem had left, he had left Forever. He came one day and fetched his things. She on another. The divorce papers had come and gone. There was nothing left between them (besides one heartache and one button-nosed child).

She suffered and she survived.

Then nearly one year later there had been a phone call. And she had known when it rang, the way she had known when she had opened her father's bedroom door what was on the other side. It was a shrill ring – a jarring warning that suddenly snapped her out of the quiet afternoon. She had just connected a phone in their flat. In their new flat where their new life was to start.

And it was him. And he said hello, how are you and it's been a while. And she said okay, I am fine and how are you? And then he said he wanted to see his daughter. He said he was sorry (as he always seemed to be saying) for not being there for her in the last year. That it was complicated but he did want to see her.

And that's when Summaya had lost it. Her carefully constructed walls of sanity had crumbled. She had screamed. Opened her mouth and released every hurt, angry feeling that had been swimming in her belly since he went away.

Didn't he know? Didn't he know what he had done to her? Was he *so* stupid? Did he think he could just waltz out of their lives because he felt like it and then waltz back in? She was screaming at the top of her lungs and she didn't even know. Did he think that he could come back and see *her* daughter?! She, who looked after their daughter all this time. And now he just wanted to come back and see her like it was normal? No way, she had screamed. No *fucking* way! She had laughed and screamed in a strangely pitched voice. She had fallen to the floor and cried. Held onto her mouth while her body shook with sobs. In her head he wanted to *steal* her daughter. (Years later when Aneesa visited a neighbour in the flat, Summaya believed that he *had*

come to quietly take her away. She had phoned the police that day.) How could he talk to her as if *nothing* had happened?

As if they had never loved each other.

And he, the fool, had just been quiet on the other side. Quiet thoughtful Faheem. With the blackest of hair and the no-smell smell. And he had said okay. And he repeated that he was sorry. And he had put the phone down. And Summaya had stared at the phone, a blackness spreading through her like ink in the sea.

When Summaya told her mother what happened Khadeejah had said that if Faheem was serious about seeing his daughter he would have fought. He would have fought to be with his daughter. Because that's what fathers do.

But Summaya couldn't help but feel bad. Feel that if she hadn't been so hysterical on the phone and scared him away, Aneesa might have still had a father around today. And no matter what her mother said Summaya felt she *was* at fault. For the truth was Summaya had been angry with him but she had also been afraid. Afraid of having him around. Of feeling that hurt each time she saw him if he came to pick up his daughter. *Their* daughter. If she could not have him for herself, she did not want him around her.

Because even though the I-love-yous were buried and fermented… there was still something in the air. Some indistinct whisper of long forgotten words.

Summaya climbed quietly into the bed next to Aneesa.

"Aneesa?"

There was no reply.

"Aneesa, I'm sorry."

Still nothing.

Summaya sighed and put her head down on the pillow.

Both their eyes were open in the dark.

KHADEEJAH

Ring-Ring. Ring-Ring. Ring-Ring. Ring-

"*Slamlaikum.*"

"*Wa'alaikumsalaam*, ma."

"Summaya?"

"You were right, ma."

"*Kya*? It's 2 o' clock – what's wrong? What I'm right about?"

"I should have done medicine."

"*Kyu*?"

"Then I wouldn't have met him. Then I wouldn't have got myself into this mess. They always say you should listen to your mother. I'm sorry."

"*Arre*, what you talking? I only told you to become doctor so you can make money."

"I know. But you were right."

"You okay, Summaya?"

"I have to go now, ma."

"Summaya?"

"I wish life wasn't so hard."

"Why don't you come today?"

"I have to go." A pause. "And ma – "

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Just."

ANEESA

Life continued.

As it must. As her mother knew it would. Life did not stop. Nothing big had happened in Life's eyes. The rain came and went. New *dhania* pushed through the ground. Winter came around.

Aneesa and her mother's relationship had come to an angry, quiet understanding. Aneesa was still surly around her mother, but it was an understood surliness. She didn't answer her mother's questions properly; her mother didn't repeat them. She slammed things whenever the opportunity presented itself. Doors. Glasses of water on tabletops. Teacups on saucers. Her schoolbag. She jabbed at the television remote control and she stamped her feet extra hard on the mat outside their flat. She took out her frustration in little ways. Sometimes she would suddenly pinch Hoosen hard. He always looked surprised and hurt, but he never said anything. And one day when he made a joke about the maths teacher she looked at him and felt the urge to slap him. Hard across his face. Leave a red stain on the pillow of his cheek. He must have sensed it too because he suddenly looked taken aback and became quiet.

She didn't hate her mother. (Mostly). She didn't know what she hated. Perhaps herself, for her dull big eyes and coarse hair. Her clumsy fingers and stupid button nose. She felt tight. As if her limbs had knotted together and stayed that way. She hated him (she could not say "father" anymore, not even in her mind) for leaving. Sometimes she woke up in the middle of the night in a fine sweat. Her thoughts jumbled and confused. She felt as if something was coming. *Change.* Something was going to happen. Something big. Something important. Things would not longer be as they were. Change was around the corner. Waiting for the right moment to pounce upon them. She couldn't explain it and she was scared.

In the first few weeks her mother and her worked around each other. They spoke only if necessary. They didn't fight. Aneesa grudgingly allowed herself a little pity for what her mother must have gone through.

She had come to the kitchen to find her mother washing dishes. She was scrubbing a plate and sniffing. Every few minutes she paused to use the back of her hand to

wipe her eyes. Her mother had suddenly stopped and seemed to sense that someone was behind her. She continued washing and didn't turn around but she stopped sniffing. After that Aneesa didn't slam things so much anymore.

At parents' evening Aneesa sat beside her mother and picked at the fluff from inside the side of her chair. Hoosen and his mother came to say hello to them. Later as they walked toward the car Summaya said, "I'm very proud of you, Aneesa. You did so well. Hoosen's mummy seemed a bit disappointed that he didn't do as well."
"He doesn't really like to study."
"I think his mother was hoping you would be an influence on him."
"We don't really talk about school."
"Well," said Summaya as she opened the car door and sat inside, "he seems like a lovely boy."
"He knows the most interesting things. Like how camels have two pairs of eyelids. One is see-through so that they can look through sand storms."
Summaya glanced at her. It was the first time Aneesa was engaging with her properly after a long time.
"I didn't know that."
Aneesa nodded. "Yeah."
Her mother started the car. She glanced at the duffel bag on the backseat floor. "You still want to go by *Nani's* tonight? Or you want to go home with me?" A normal question. With another question weaved into its letters. *Do you want to start again?*
Aneesa paused. "*Nani* is waiting for me. I should go there."
"Okay. Let's go."
"But I don't want to stay the whole weekend. You can come pick me up tomorrow."
At *Nani's* door her mother hugged her and she thought she heard her say under her breath, "I love you". When her mother drove off Aneesa waved from the window.

Nani and Aneesa stood above the sink brushing their teeth. Khadeejah, with the ones in her hand and Aneesa with the ones in her mouth. Khadeejah wore a flower printed zip-up gown and Aneesa wore a warm pink gown that tied around her waist.

They gargled and spat into the basin and Aneesa laughed when Khadeejah plopped her teeth into a glass of water. Khadeejah insisted on wiping Aneesa's feet with a wet facecloth before she got into bed.

"But *Nani*, my mummy doesn't do that anymore. I'm big now."

"Then why your feet so dirty? You not going in my spare bed with those feet."

"Tell me a story."

"*Maar*, I thought you so big now."

"That doesn't mean I can't stop listening to stories."

"I don't know how to tell stories."

"Yes you do! You tell stories all the time to everyone. About making *achar* and what you did in the day and what happened to you when you were small."

"*Ja*, *maar* that's different. That's not proper story-stories. *You* tell me a story." Khadeejah plaited her hair and climbed slowly into bed. "Come, you like stories – tell me."

Aneesa sat on her bed and the words began on their own accord. As if they were waiting in her mouth, waiting for a little nudge to begin their journey out into the room.

"Once upon a time there was boy who lived… in a forest with his mother. They were very happy. The mother cooked chickens in the yard and the boy chopped firewood for fire. One day the boy was climbing a tree and he fell down and broke his leg. It hurt very, very much. The boy was so angry that his mother wasn't there to catch him when he fell. He screamed and screamed at her and she was very sad."

"But – it wasn't *her* fault," interrupted Khadeejah.

"He knew it wasn't her fault. But he was angry about his leg, *Nani*." Aneesa hugged her chest. "He was angry about his leg – don't you see? And so one day when his leg got better, he ran away from home. He was cold and tired and he cried every day because he missed his mother. But he didn't go home. Years later his mother died while she was trying to cut firewood. The boy didn't know." Aneesa turned to her grandmother and whispered, "Because he was angry about his leg, *Nani*."

Nani's face was unreadable in the dim yellow light of the bed lamp. "What a sad story," she muttered sleepily. Then when Aneesa didn't reply, she said, "What happened next?"

"Nothing."

"How can nothing happen? It's a story – it's not finished."

"That's how it ends," Aneesa whispered.

Khadeejah mumbled back a reply and soon her snores filled the room. Aneesa switched off the lamp and burrowed under her pillow. The snores became a muffled sound in the background. Underneath her pillow Aneesa was finding it difficult to breathe. Murky dark wet-hot thoughts crawled into her head until she poked a nose out into the cold air. The uneasiness came to her again. She stared into the deep darkness of the room, tracing the unfamiliar shape of once familiar objects. It was a habit of hers to stare into the dark until sleep overcame her and one darkness merged into another. Her mother, who often turned in her sleep to find Aneesa's eyes open, would berate her; saying that staring in the dark only encouraged the imagination to make shapes that were not there. But Aneesa didn't see scary shapes. Just dream-like ones that shifted around the room. Glassy vials of perfume that moved unsteadily across the dressing table. The coat rack in the corner which tilted and twisted like an old tree. Clothing on hangers that danced with invisible legs and arms. And then there was the smell.

The smell of darkness. Quiet, crouching and cold. It climbed into her nose and plugged it with a vague sense of unease. Like a cloudy headache. Food smells caught in the ceiling. And burn smells. And soft duvet smells. And in winter, a cold smell that hurt the insides of her nostrils.

She pushed herself against the wall and finally closed her eyes to let the darkness overcome her.

Oblivious to the fact that this was the night that Change had decided to announce itself. Change had come looking for her with its long scabby fingers. This was when everything would change. Forever.

(And perhaps even longer than that.)

KHADEEJAH

At exactly 12.15 that night, Khadeejah Bibi Ballim knew something was wrong. Her eyes were still closed but she could sense a change in the room. After a tense moment she realised what it was – she couldn't breathe.

Her face felt warm and there was the smell of tobacco – but that didn't make sense because her husband had been dead for years… and then Khadeejah Bibi Ballim made her second discovery for the night.

There was a hand on her face.

Khadeejah struggled for a moment and opened her eyes. A strange face stared back at her in the darkness.

It is in those half-asleep, half-awake moments that one hopes one is still dreaming. That night Khadeejah hoped she was dreaming. Like when she dreamt Summaya had been hijacked and her body had been left to rot on the side of a highway. Khadeejah had sat in front of the decaying corpse begging people to stop but no one had paid her any attention. She kept yelling, "She's my daughter!" But nobody could hear her because no sound came out from her throat except a hoarse wheezing.

But this was not a dream. Khadeejah was quickly coming to terms with that. The man removed his hand from Khadeejah's mouth and raised a finger to his lips and whispered, "Sshh." He broke into a smile that revealed jagged yellow teeth.

Her sluggish stupor banished, Khadeejah was awake now. Where had the man come from? Where was her grand-daughter? Khadeejah quickly scanned the corner of the room where Aneesa's sleeping figure was vaguely visible beneath her blanket. Khadeejah held her breath. Had he noticed her? As her eyes adjusted to the gloom she became aware of another figure in the room. He was rummaging through her cupboards.

The man in front of her roughly forced her to stand up. He pushed her by her shoulders out the door. The balls of his eyes flashed in the dim light coming from the passage. At the door she refused to move. She refused to abandon her concealed grand-daughter. He muttered something inaudible and then she felt it.

Cold and pointed, pressing through the cotton into her waist.

A gun.

She trembled then. Like the old woman with weak knees that she was. Fear like a thin snake stirred in the pit of her stomach. It raised its heavy head and began to uncoil as she slowly walked out the door.

The weak moonlight that filtered through the glass panes on either side of the front door threw masks of light and shadow on the intruders. Their normal features were distorted, elongated and stretched into wicked faces. *Djinns!*

The moon receded and the moment passed. The masks fell away and there were normal men standing in her hallway. Men who walked the street and bought bread from the corner shop (and twisted knives into the stomachs of shopkeepers).

One was scrawny with a tattered cap. The man with the gun was muscular; he wore Converse sneakers and a vest. An appearance calculated to look cool and experienced. A look Khadeejah mistook for poverty. He saw this in her eyes and in her shoulders. Her mistake irritated him.

The man with the cap stepped forward and pushed Khadeejah into the spare room. She was made to sit on the bed while he began opening cupboards. He began pulling out drawers and throwing all her neatly packed clothes onto the floor. He was incredibly quiet.

A lifetime of stealing from homes had trained them into experts. They could lift a hundred rand note from a man's wallet while he slept and in the morning he wouldn't even know someone had been in his room. They conversed with each other in liquid gestures and rapid eye movements. It was as much part of their growing up as playing soccer on the dusty township streets. They had no fathers. Their mothers were too busy cleaning other people's houses, so they formed gangs to keep themselves entertained. At first, they stole in small quantities from their own people but as they grew older they discovered the outside world where people drove BMWs and Audis, where people slept on soft beds with wallets full of crumpled cash in their pants. They had wide roads that were paved with tar. Not with dust, foot prints and bent Coke cans. A bitterness grew in their hearts that they needed to sweeten. They bought small guns and dirty knives and ran up to windows of cars with people who trembled inside. They screamed and punched people until their knuckles were covered in a glistening

red. They grabbed women by their hair and pulled open their dresses and pushed and pushed until the sobs and muffled cries didn't matter anymore. They gorged themselves on the soothing sweetness of fear until it seemed their bellies would burst.

Khadeejah sat on the bed. The darkness crouched, quiet. Watched her from uncertain eyes. Suddenly there was a noise in the other room. A low voice and a scuffle. Khadeejah froze. The thin man stood up and looked into the passage. A child's muffled scream of, "*Nani*!" was cut short.

Khadeejah stood up. She didn't care what happened to her. At that moment her heart was on fire. She could kill this man – she could do it. She yelled her grand-daughter's name and ran toward the door. The thin man moved just as quickly.

It is at moments like *these*.

These moments of *utter* helplessness that you can only turn to some greater power. At that moment, *at that moment*, you realise how helpless you really are.

Khadeejah prayed.

"*Ha meem la*…What was it? What did one read for protection? Khadeejah couldn't think! Every day she passed that gold sticker with the *dua* on her front door.

Oh God help me and my Aneesa. Please! Keep us safe…

Khadeejah pushed the man at the door wildly. Rammed herself against him. He seemed surprise at her strength for a second. Then he shoved her and punched her in her face. As she reeled backward, he pulled out a knife from his belt. Shiny, long and cold, it stared at her. Distorted eyes of its own, a twisted mouth, and a scream etched upon its lips. She watched in fascination as her terrified reflection grew larger and larger and then blurry as the blade sprang toward her chest.

She closed her eyes and stuck her arms out in front of her. She felt a hot liquid pain sink in. When she fell to the floor he kicked her repeatedly in the stomach.

In the darkness that threatened to overcome her, Khadeejah remembered the beginning of *ayatul kursi,* the *dua* for protection from evils. *Allahulaa illaha illahu alhayilkayum*…

Then everything went black.

SUMMAYA

At 12.20 that night, Summaya Ballim sat up in her bed and discovered that despite the cold, she was perspiring. As she wiped away a film of sweat from her upper lip she glanced at the empty space next to her. For some reason she couldn't explain, she was shivering.

After a few minutes she filled herself a glass of water, swallowed a panado and went back to sleep.

KHADEEJAH

At first, she couldn't see anything.

Then slowly she began making out fuzzy shapes. Boxes, the dressing table and the doorway. Her face throbbed and there was something wet and sticky running down her arm. When she reached out to touch it, she heard a noise next to her. Muffled hysterical crying. She tried to look but her body would not respond.

Finally she managed to turn her neck a little; her grand-daughter sat on the floor next to her. Khadeejah stiffly reached over and tried to touch her. The act made her cough, deep raspy coughs from inside. Aneesa screamed hysterically.

"Aneesa," Khadeejah whispered in a cracked voice.

Her grand-daughter stared at her for a full shocked moment and then grabbed her roughly around the neck and started bawling in her chest. Khadeejah winced and looked at her own shoulder – there was a deep bloody patch soaking through her gown.

The child cried violently in her arms and her small body shook. And although Khadeejah felt like she was going to pass out again she held her grand-daughter tightly.

There was a metallic taste in her mouth and a thick lump in her throat. She tried to swallow.

"They gone?" Khadeejah managed.

Aneesa cried more.

"Darling, listen to me, *are they gone*?"

Aneesa nodded.

"Did they hurt you?"

No reply.

"Aneesa, *did they hurt you*?"

Aneesa nodded again. And she clutched onto Khadeejah and began crying again.

"It's going to be okay. We're going to be okay."

It seemed like the two of them sat on that carpet forever. Then slowly (unwillingly but knowing they must) they pushed themselves up and crept out together. Hand in hand they tip-toed out onto the carpeted passage. They squinted in the dark and an unbidden blink-in-the-dark memory rose out of the shadows. But it was not camphor scented. This was fear scented. Like metal railings at public bus stops. They were too afraid to switch the lights on. A sudden fear of throwing light into the dark corners.

Because now they *knew*.

The dark *did* hide things.

The deep freezer in the passage had been emptied. Plastic packets of frozen meat lay in little pools of red water. Packets, blocks of butter and *ghee* containers were thrown haphazardly to the floor. Some of the buckets had been opened; the masking tape ripped off to confirm the contents. Rich gold oil leaked out and seeped into the carpet. Several of the buckets were fully opened to reveal cascading colours of sticky fruit and vegetables. Semi frozen chunks of masalaed mangos littered the entrance to the sitting room. They looked strangely beautiful there. Scattered pieces of icy flesh.

The pair stumbled through the passage and into the sitting room. Khadeejah felt for the phone but couldn't find it. The sitting room watched them silently. Did nothing to help them.

Khadeejah stepped over broken glass ornaments and around dining room chairs. She peered into the kitchen. A cold wind blew in from the open back door. So that was where the outside broke in.

She found the phone on the floor. It was dead. A cut cord hung from it sadly. It too betrayed her. The whole house had let her down.

She pulled Aneesa's arm toward the front door. "We have to go outside, okay?"

Her grand-daughter looked terrified.

"We have to." And she pulled her shoulders up and grasped Aneesa's hand more firmly. What difference did it make? thought Khadeejah. The outside, the cold outside, had broken a hole into the warm interior. Everything evil from outside had already crept in. Chewed up what it could and spat out the remains.

The inside *was* the outside.

They walked stiffly; their knees locked with weary fear. As they walked they accidentally banged into one another and then leant together; grateful for the feel of another body. Khadeejah opened the door to the quiet street. The icy air and the long dark street were haunting.

But nothing could hurt them now. Everything had already happened.

In their slow, sad gait. Aneesa clung to the side of Khadeejah. Together they looked like an abnormally shaped person hunching down the moonlit street.

The moon was bright in the sky, a frozen face watching over them. The cold air blew down the collars of their pyjamas and under their gowns. Little puffs of smoke escaped their chattering teeth. Khadeejah swung open the front gate. It squeaked sadly in the silent night. The gravel of the cold tar burned their feet. A lone dog barked in the distance.

Where to go?

Where to go in your own street?

The houses had high walls and no one wanted to open when they rang the bells. The people inside were afraid of the outside. They sat huddled in their bedrooms underneath blankets and pretended not to hear, hoping it was their imagination.

The two of them peered over their shoulders, pulled their pyjamas tighter and moved onto the next house. The child stumbled and leaned heavily upon her grandmother. As if she wished to be a part of her, hidden inside her, away from the glare of the moon. The grandmother did not falter.

They went further down the road.

Finally someone opened for them.

Mr Haffajee from number fourteen opened his door in his shorts and vest with a shotgun in his hand. He had inherited the shotgun from his grandfather who used to go hunting for buck down in Dundee. Mr Haffajee didn't even know if the thing worked but he kept it in the linen cupboard on the highest shelf for nights like these. (When the moon shone bright and the dark whispered words.)

"Who's there?" he demanded.

And Khadeejah suddenly found she couldn't talk, that there was a huge ball in her throat that she couldn't swallow. And then she started to cry. She collapsed on the curb outside his gate and made no attempt to stifle her sobs.

"Its aunty Khadeejah from number ten," a voice sliced quietly through the darkness.

It was Aneesa who spoke.

SUMMAYA

When they had phoned her, when they had phoned her to tell her the thing that had changed them forever, she had been very quiet.

It took a long time for Mr Haffajee to form the words when he was talking. He paused after each word and cleared his throat. Sometimes he cupped a hand over the mouthpiece and spoke to someone in the room.

Summaya put the phone down. She bent over with her hands on her knees. She tried to breathe. Then she took her keys off the hook and drove to the house. To the outside-is-inside house.

The house that had betrayed them.

The one that had changed them forever.

(And perhaps even longer than that.)

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah sat in her kitchen. The open windows allowed the sunlight to spill onto the table. Birds were chattering outside.

Deceptive.

This sense of security. These firm walls and the carefree birds and the sunlight.

She had returned (after the thing that had changed them forever). Returned after going to the police. After filing reports. After the hospital. After stitching and tests and more reports. After all those seemingly necessary things one must do after events like That.

Khadeejah had slept at her daughter's flat. For the first time.

Summaya had slept on the floor and Khadeejah and Aneesa had been on the bed. And none of them had slept. They had all just looked at the ceiling (lying very still and keeping their breathing regular).

Aneesa had insisted they keep the light switched on. After a while Summaya had got up from the floor and crept next to Aneesa. She held her daughter close. Sniffed her hair and hugged her small soft body. In the morning they pretended to wake up; they peeked at the clock and wondered whether seven o' clock or seven-thirty was the right time to begin shuffling. They walked past each other slowly. They washed their faces to clear the sleep they didn't get. They went to the toilet and emptied dry bowels. They made toast and tea and pretended to sip and nibble.

And then Khadeejah went home. And she was reminded of the time Haroon had committed suicide. When she had to come home and clean the mess. Of course people had helped her. The strong ones. Ambulance people and neighbourhood people and kind relatives. But they went away after a while. And she had to stay there and wonder if they had got everything.

Got everything.

A few weeks after his death she had found a small red and yellow stain under one of the pillow cases. (Perhaps a bit of his brain – an obscure thought or haughty opinion stained into her pillowcase for eternity.) She had run to the bathroom with

empty retches in her stomach. She had thrown up a sweet clear liquid that left a bitter taste at the back of her mouth.

Khadeejah returned home to find much of the mess cleared up. The strong people had found out what happened and had cleaned up as best they could. The only evidence of the frozen fruit and vegetables were yellow stains in the carpet. The broken ornaments were swept up and now stuck out from odd angles in her bin.

An opera with no house.

A plate with no fish.

A cup with no tea.

A paper with no news.

A bride with no smile.

Blankets were repacked in wrong cupboards. Clothes on the wrong shelves.

Kindly repacked clothes.

Vests folded into neat little piles. Scarves folded into the smallest chiffon triangles. As if the folder believed that the neater she folded, the stronger were her condolences to Khadeejah. The fridge door was wiped in the front (but not at the sides). A little reminder that nothing ever disappears.

When Khadeejah came back she found Colleen mopping a small patch at the backdoor. Colleen put down the mop and gave Khadeejah a big hug. Those comforting ones that only women of that size can give.

"Where's the girls?"

She knew not to ask how are you? There were no answers for questions like that.

"Doctor's appointment. What happened here?" Khadeejah pointed to the *stoep* that Colleen had just scrubbed.

"The cat."

"The cat?"

"They killed it."

"*Maar* – why?"

"*Ek weet nie*." She squeezed the mop into the bucket.

They stayed quiet for a moment. A breeze ruffled the stiff ends of Colleen's hair.

Then Colleen gave the *stoep* one last swipe with her mop. "I would have done this sooner. But I was busy with your freezer. And no one else really wanted to do this." Then she laughed softly. "Really Aunty K, you Indian people sure keep a lot of food!"

Khadeejah looked at the stair. There was a faint red stain on it. A memory rose within her of Khaled's father reading *Macbeth* to them in his loud voice.

Out, damned spot! Out, I say! . . .

Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh! Oh!

Colleen picked up the mop and bucket and went into the house.

"C'mon aunty K. I'll make some tea. Oh – two of your sisters phoned by my place. Amina and… I forget. I wrote down their names here somewhere." She paused at the door. "Aren't you coming in?"

"Just a moment."

Khadeejah stood at the backdoor and crossed her arms. She stared at her garden for a while. Then she turned around and went inside.

She didn't close the door behind her.

Doorways did not exist, merely entrances.

How quickly meanings changed.

ANEESA

There are times when a thousand words cannot express what the eye can say.
A flutter of the eyelash.
A watery glance.
A deep stare that stretches the pupil.
The outside was inside now.

Something had broken within her. Snapped. A tiny little thread. Change had come for Aneesa and she was no longer a stuck-in-the-middle child. It seemed a lifetime ago that she was at school. That she had played with dolls. And eaten scrambled eggs. Everything seemed distant. She heard voices as if from far away.

"Are-you-okay?"

That's all people asked her. And in her head it all became one word.
AreyouokayAreyouokayAreyouokay.

What was okay? Because okay was a lot of things to different people. A long time ago (because everything seemed like a long time ago now) when her mother asked her how school was, she said an I-am-tired-and-don't-want-to-talk-about-it okay. But when her mother asked her how the excursion was, where Nasmeera Dangor had pushed her into the mud, Aneesa had replied with an it-did-not-go-well-and-I-hate-Nasmeera-Dangor okay.

Each okay was different. (Another rule for the rule book.)

Hoosen came to visit her. He didn't say anything. Just sat on the bed. She had flinched and then moved her hand away when he had tried to take it. Finally he said, "Aneesa?"
No answer. No eye-words.
Not even for me?
Not even for you.

Her eyes were big glossy pools. Brown with pulsing fins. Like the underside of mushrooms.

"Aneesa. I'm sorry… about what happened. You must have been scared."

She turned to him then. "I was."

"Are you okay?"

She looked at him strangely. "No."

He sat there for a while.

"I love you." He said it simply. Truly. Straight from his heart into his mouth.

(For the rest of her life Aneesa would search for someone to say it just like that. Just like that in a low voice in the dim light with a heart full of earnestness. She would find something close, but never quite like that.)

There was a flicker of light in her eyes. Like a lighter that's almost caught flame, but then instantly dies.

"Bye, Aneesa."

"Bye, Hoosen."

He walked out the door and gave her one last look before leaving. Then he shut the door behind him.

I love you too.

Sometimes she would catch visitors in the house looking strangely at her. She didn't care. They meant nothing in her life. Something was happening in her mind, a turmoil, a black deepness that she couldn't escape. People reached out their hands to her, but they couldn't find her in the dark. She felt worse around sunset. That inexplicable time when sick children's fevers grow, when their noses clog and they mumble strange things. Only in Aneesa's case her nightmares grew closer. Sometimes she could still feel their shapes in the dark. Taste their smell in the air around her. She became very quiet. Still almost.

Every once in a while an image would suddenly, violently, engulf her. A man shaking her from her sleep. Strange eyes in the dark. A scream that began in her throat and was silenced by a blunt slap that shook her head and made the room spin.

Grabbing, dragging, and then a dull thud as she was flung off the bed. Her frantic struggle between legs as she tried to run out of the room. The sudden stench of tobacco. The loud swearing, the snap of her head as her hair was yanked backward. Being roughly tossed into the spare room. Her horrified gasp as she caught sight of her grandmother's bloody body . . .

And then those whispered words before they slunk off.

We will come back for you.

Then the quiet shivering crouching.

When these thoughts played in her mind, she shuddered ever so slightly. And then her mother would bring her a blanket and cover her up. It seemed the only one who really understood what she was going through was her mother.

She didn't know that once, too, her mother had been a tsk-shame girl.

SUMMAYA

Summaya put the phone down.

It had to be done. It was the right thing to do. She pushed her hair behind her ears and stood up. She walked to Aneesa's door and pushed it open.

There she was. As she always was. Small and sitting as still as a stone.

Summaya stood at the doorway and watched her for a moment.

"Your father's coming to see you tomorrow." She paused. Paused as if to say something. Then suddenly turned and left.

FAHEEM

The girl looks just like her mother, he thought.

But softer. Where her mother's edges were sharp, the girl's were round. More full and fresh. She had his eyes. Just like when he was a boy. But there was something in her eyes that he couldn't quite place.

Her grandmother had brought her into the sitting room where he was waiting. He had been nervous, sitting on his hands and bouncing his knee. Practising in his head again and again what he was going to say when he saw her. He had looked around at the ornaments and noticed there were many missing. The room looked haggard since the last time he saw it. As if recovering from some serious illness. He thought he had forgotten but as he sat in the citrus-scented sitting room he remembered all those other times. That other life.

He thought he had forgotten.

Khadeejah led her in by the shoulders and nodded at him before disappearing into the kitchen. He knew she would stand close to the entrance and listen to everything they said (or didn't).

She was a beautiful girl. Much older than he imagined. In his head he had imagined her to be a toddler. Some photo of a young girl he had seen in a magazine once had stayed with him. He had always wanted a daughter. But somehow along the way he had forgotten he had one here. He *let* himself forget. He looked guiltily at the carpet. The girl, Aneesa, looked down at her socks and curled her toes awkwardly inside them. It was an endearing thing to do and he suddenly felt sad. An old stream of love gushed open in his heart. For this little girl, and for her mother. Something he had clogged up with stones a long time ago. He felt strange sitting there. This had been his family once. And now he felt like a stranger.

He opened his mouth to say something, but no words come out. The dust on words unsaid choked him. He remembered nothing of the words that he prepared. He swallowed and cleared his throat and swallowed again. The clearing noise seemed to explode in the small sitting room.

The girl kept curling and uncurling her toes.

He waited a moment. Swallowed again.

Then in a deep voice he said. “I – You’re so big. So big. I always pictured you as a little girl this high.” And he indicated with his hand.

She was quiet.

He rubbed his cheeks and took a breath. “God, I don’t even know where to start,” he muttered. Then he began again. “I can’t even – I can’t even begin to – to understand what you went through. And – and I’m sorry for not being here for you. This will change…” He looked perplexed. He stopped short suddenly. “There is nothing I can say to justify what I did to you.” And then, “Your mother told me what happened.”

She continued looking away. Then she said quietly with her head still turned toward the glass. “I thought about you every day and you didn’t think of me. I don’t know you. I don’t know anything about you. You’re sitting there and I don’t know who you are. I don’t even know what to call you.”

He exhaled. “You can learn… I can learn,” he said softly.

She ran her toes against the carpet.

“Why didn’t you love me enough?”

“No… I loved you. I did… I do. *So* much. But I was scared.” He looked pained. “I was scared, Aneesa. When you were born I loved you *so* much. I always wanted a daughter. And then… something happened with your mother. Something bad – I can’t explain it even to myself – I couldn’t – didn’t want to be with her anymore. In the beginning I was scared of what I’d done so I stayed away. Then time grew and I knew I should phone. And I did… but I didn’t do enough – I was a coward. Your mother’s pain was so… much. And then you were old enough to understand I was gone and I – I got more scared. What kind of father misses out on his daughter’s birthdays? The time stretched on so fast. *So fast.* Nine years went just like that! It was easier to pretend it hadn’t happened. And – it’s not your mother’s fault – but she made it *so* easy for me to pretend.”

She turned to the floor and ran her toes over the carpet.

He followed them. Then he looked up at her. “Do you… hate me?” When she paused he looked down at his hands. “It’s okay if you hate me. You have the right to.”

"But I can't."

"Why not?"

"It's just the rule."

"What is?"

And he thought he heard her mutter under her breath, "That girls can't hate their fathers." But he could have been wrong. And he was too scared to ask her to repeat it.

"You've grown so much."

"I do that."

He couldn't help but smile. Such a quiet clever girl. She'll never have my nose, he thought. He thought of something, but didn't know whether to say it. He paused, then said it anyway, "You have a brother, you know. Two in fact. One's still a baby. Ziyaad and Feroz."

The girl looked surprised at this.

"I never – I never thought of them as that."

"You know about them?"

"I saw him. The big one. By your building."

Faheem paused. "So it was you."

"Yes. I was there," she said softly. "I was always there."

"I'm sorry." He swallowed. "They are your family." He repeated it firmly. "They're your family. I'll take you to visit them. If you want." He made no mention of the boys' mother.

"No." Aneesa looked up at him suddenly and he was struck by how fierce she could look. "They're *not* my family. My family is here."

Faheem thought he heard a choke in the kitchen.

"And Hoosen. He's also my family," she added.

Faheem seemed to shrink just a little. "You're right. You're right, Aneesa. Relationships must be earned." He sighed. "I – I loved your mother. But I couldn't make it work." He bent down in front of her and looked into her big eyes. "But you must know this. You were born out of deep love."

She didn't answer him. He took this as his cue to leave. He stood up.

"Can I come visit again? Maybe… we can get to know each other better."

“If you want to.”

“Aneesa.”

“Yes?”

“I *did* think about you. Every single day.”

And with that he let himself out.

As he opened his car door he glanced at the house. There was a rustle at the curtain in one of the bedroom windows. Then it went still.

He started his engine and drove off.

KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah Bibi Ballim was never the same.

People said she was quieter. Smaller. They looked for the loud, cheeky aunty they once knew and found only a shadow. She took to hunching as if holding her body closer to her would protect her somehow. In supermarket and hospital queues she kept her chin tucked to her chest and flinched if a stranger accidentally brushed against her.

She never slept alone after that day. If for some reason her daughter or granddaughter were not at home she would go to sleep by one of her sisters. Some nights she woke up with a burning thirst in her throat and a pain in her chest. She began wetting her bed. She woke up early and washed the sheet in the bathroom sink with the material trailing on the floor. She sat and watched the white sheets flap on the line.

She thought about Bronkhorstspruit. About a hot small girl sitting in a bathtub in the grass. It seemed so long ago. So unreal.

The worst had happened. And she had not been prepared. After she had not been prepared for what Haroon did to himself she had vowed to always be ready for anything. The worst could hit you anytime and anywhere. And yet, she had not been prepared. She had failed herself. Again.

When she thought back to that night (when the moon shone bright and the dark whispered words) it all seemed like an unclear dream.

Very much like an old memory that one pushes into a cupboard. And when the cupboard is opened and the memory falls out, there are little pieces missing where moths and mice have nibbled. And so the memory is vague and it has missing parts that the moths have carried away and that the mice have hidden in their holes. A skeleton of a memory.

But. There are times when a memory can suddenly fall out of the cupboard as fresh and whole as the day it was stored. It happened to Khadeejah sometimes.

On certain winter nights when she walked to the bathroom and the cold tap burned the bones in her fingers. Or when the backdoor was left open and a gust of wind

suddenly fluttered the paintings on her fridge. Or when a shadow fell on the floor and she once again saw the dark blood stain on her step. Then. Then the skeleton was suddenly flesh and skin and muscle. It walked and yowled and hissed at her.

And it didn't matter how long that memory was stored in the cupboard, because with the right tug every detail came tumbling out.

Naeem had phoned. He asked her to come to live with him. But he said it softly and she heard other things in his words. When she had said no, it would be difficult for them to have her, he hadn't said anything, just made a 'hmm' noise. And she felt a small hurt tear into her motherly heart. The Australian government was also making it difficult for older people to enter the country. Twice before she had applied to visit her son but they had refused her application. They thought she wanted to die there in their great country. Khadeejah wanted to tell them that she had already died. That she was just bones and skin now.

Nothing more.

Where had her father brought them? Why had he brought them to Africa? It was like leaving a child to explore a room only to shut the door and turn the lock. Why didn't he leave them there where God put them? Didn't he know they would slowly spread like water stains under paper?

Had he had any apprehensions before he sailed on the ship? Did he have a moment of hesitation as he folded his vests into his suitcase? Did he pause to wonder what would happen to his unborn children? Did he turn to his wife in the dim light of their room and say, "*Jaan*, are we doing the right thing?"

And then she remembered his words, *Maybe we were better off with our own people.*

Oh *abba*, Khadeejah thought. Oh *abba.*

What did you do?

SUMMAYA

Summaya stood at the top of a hill leaning on her knees and breathing hard. Her ribs hurt and her T-shirt clung to her with sweat. She felt a hot flush creep from her cheeks into the roots of her hair.

She had recently started jogging. It had started after that night – she had taken a walk to clear her mind. Clear away the silent bat droppings and dust the thoughts bottled on hidden shelves. Because yes, things did not disappear, but they could Change. Leak out of their pickling bottles and drip into glossy pools to take up new forms. She walked past flickering blue windowed houses, past the oily dry shops, past weak-Summaya's cosy corner. She revelled in the stretch of her calves and the sweat down her back. The sky was wide and empty and opened its mouth in a broad embrace. The world was different – no longer lonely, sad and dark. It was now quietly buzzing with anticipation. Soon she was donning running shoes early every morning. She was at one with the world when she was in motion. As if her energy and the earth's energy had finally found a way to balance.

She took a deep breath and sat down at the top of a hill. Life had slowed down. Life had Changed. Change stretched the human spirit. Pulled it taut until she realised what was significant and what wasn't. The train carrying everyone Somewhere wasn't important. She stood up and stretched her arms.

Another jogger, a young man, came into view and smiled at her. He saw her golden eyes and her sad shoulders and he felt the urge to touch her to make sure she was real.

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KHADEEJAH

Khadeejah Bibi Ballim did not like dirt. But now she did not pick rice grains immediately from the carpet and she even let a fingerprint linger on the glass cabinet.

Khadeejah sat in her kitchen and broke apart garlic cloves and peeled off their skin. She added the pieces to a jar of peppercorns soaking in oil. She tasted the mixture with the tip of her pinkie and added more salt. Then she wiped the bottle with a dishcloth and set it down.

She looked out the window into the garden. The *pudhina* was flourishing now. She went outside and bent low to break a sprig. She sniffed its mint scent and sat for a moment like that. The wind ruffled her fine hair.

ANEESA

Aneesa sat at the window in her new room. Her new room with new carpets and off-white walls. She leaned close to the wall next to the window and breathed in the scent of new paint turning old; like rose petals drying out. She let the scent enter her head and her eyes and then exhaled it through her nose slowly. She leaned the warm fat of her cheek against the cold rough wall and watched the driveway through the window. She stayed like that until she heard the twin bed on the other side of the room squeak. She knew her mother was watching her.

"Come with me today, Aneesa."

She lay still. Her cheek still pressed against the wall.

Every day her mother went for walks. And every day she asked Aneesa to join her. But Aneesa always shook her head in a vague sort of way and her mother didn't ask again until the next morning.

Aneesa ran a finger across the glass and drew a circle in the early morning mist of the window.

"Okay."

They walked up the hard road. Past driveways and houses with high walls. The air was still and quiet, only broken occasionally by the sound of a car starting up somewhere. A taxi passed them. Slowly as if not to disturb the fragile quiet of the morning. The road ahead lightened with each step they took.

And then her mother was saying, "Race you to the blue car parked there!" And the next minute Aneesa was running. She fought against the cold air and the stiffness that had taken over her body. Her mother was ahead of her. Aneesa pushed her legs harder and felt them burn, she gasped for breath. And then she was nearing her mother. She didn't look at her as she passed. She bent her head low, realising that *she* could move so fast; that she was making the air around her whistle and blur. She slammed her hands onto the car, red in the face and panting hard. Her mother came up and leaned against the hood with her. They stood together clutching their sides.

Aneesa looked down the road. Her eyes shone.

SUMMAYA

Summaya handed in her resignation letter and walked out for the last time from The Queen Jewel of the East Travel and Tours. She passed the fish shop and the noodle shop and she breathed in their distinct scents.

One day, many years later, at the supper table, her adult daughter (who was writing a story) would ask her how it felt to leave and she would reply that it had felt natural. That the next stage of her life was waiting.

Summaya Ballim didn't know where she was walking to that day. But she walked. She walked for a long time and saw many things. Men emptying rubbish bins. Sweetmeat shops rolling up their doors to stain the early morning air with the scent of sugar and *ghee*. The clomp of a lady's shoes hurrying past her on the pavement. Summaya was overwhelmed by a sudden longing for the beach. She wanted to dig her toes into the sand and watch the waves lap the shore.

Someone's white balloon from an office party or child's birthday was stuck below the window ledge of a building. It bobbed there futilely before suddenly springing free into the blue sky. Laila would have said it was a sign. Summaya crossed the street.

There were many different trains in life. Not one.

The End.